The Problem of Mutual Understanding across Regional Varieties of English

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The present paper is aimed at discussing the language-culture interdependences from the perspective of transformations that the culture component may bring forth in language vocabularies. The analysis is conducted within the frames of the vocabulary units of English and its regional varieties.

Nowadays the on-going changes in the structure of English and its varieties attract an increasing number of specialists. The latter constantly sound the alarm that traditional general English is gradually disappearing, giving way to a simplified means of global communication. On the other hand, specialists accentuate that all the regional varieties of English grow more and more different and distant from general English. It is roughly estimated that some 30-50 years later nations officially speaking English will be in a sore need of an interpreter-translator in order to reach mutual understanding even on common topics.

The reason for such a drastic turn of the situation is quite understandable. Having spread all over the world, English has undergone deep changes which primarily affected the semantic layer of the language. In fact the vocabulary of any language is the most sensitive to external changes. If viewed from the culture perspective, the core of the problem obtains tangibility to a certain degree.

One can no longer reject the fact that the specific way of perceiving the world by a man and his role in it account for the way the world itself finds its reflection in man's consciousness. Perception of the objective reality varies from nation to nation, being conditioned by a wide range of factors, among which culture plays the key role.

Presently, interdisciplinary investigations in Language and Culture are based on the assumption that Language is closely related to Culture, moreover, it is developed within and expressed through culture itself. On this, I remembered a TV debate between the British Prime Minister and the American Secretary of State over the situation in the Middle East. In the course of the debates the talks were becoming hotter and hotter, and the journalist appealed to them to come to *a compromise*. The talk show really ended in a compromise, with the British Prime smiling at the cameras and congratulating his American Colleague and the American Secretary, by the way, with a broad smile on his face, refusing to give any comment concerning the outcomes of the debates. So, is the reaction of the two people just the result of mere satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the results of the debates, or can the reactions be traced back to the mental and cultural identity of the two people involved? Evidently, the answer is not on the surface.

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English the word *compromise* is defined as *an agreement between two people or groups in which each side gives up some of things they want, so that sides are happy at the end*. If so, why is the American dissatisfied with *the idea of compromise*? The explanation of the word meaning proves to be inefficient in terms of clear understanding of the problem and asks for consulting a considerable

amount of knowledge supported by anthropological, psychological and cultural data.

To overcome the barrier, it is worth consulting the American anthropologist John M. Townsend's renowned chart of the most explicit traits of American character compared with those of other nationalities. If generalized, most typical traits of the American character can be represented as follows:

> *Reality* – mechanical, rational;
> *Values* – material;
> *Life* – a problem that should be solved;
> *Man* – rules nature;
> *Time* – is money;
> *Time orientation* – future is most important;
> *Friends, people* – relationships are on the surface; first "I", then the rest;
> *Life expectations* – immediate reward.

As a consequence, the concentration of self-orientation and egocentrism in the American character can be highlighted nearly in all the aspects of life. Accordingly, a self-oriented nation will surely be unwilling to share anything with others unless there is no more choice left.

In spite of the fact that the British and the Americans share the same language, their notion of the objective reality is diverse. Moreover, perceptions of their role in the world economics, politics, culture, etc., coincide but only partially. Thus, the aforementioned example proves to be rather a weighty one making us adhere to the standpoint that language does not influence the world outlook of people, but just the contrary takes place.

As far as the word *compromise* is concerned, let us generalize at this point that the British are quite reserved, tolerant and peace-loving by nature, which well accounts for a neutral, or more or less positive connotation of the word in the British English, in contrast to the negative associations in its Trans-Atlantic variant.

English is not the official language of the British Isles and the USA only. Among others, it is the official language of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. Alongside with common cultural knowledge among people inhabiting all the English speaking countries, there exists specific knowledge correlated with particular geography, history, flora and fauna, economy, social life, etc. Meanwhile, the world outlook of every nation has brought some typical spices into the regional variants, creating new words and phrases on the one hand, and has enriched the meanings of existing words with overtones and connotations tracing back to peoples' cultural identity. In fact, it is these imposed overtones and connotations that result in gaps in terms of adequate mutual understanding. Here it is expedient to cite A. Wierzbicka's famous statement on the problem: *"The Vocabulary units with marked cultural component serve as a special ideological tool reflecting the nation's experience in all the spheres of life."*(Wierzbicka:1997).

Now, with the view to specifying the above-mentioned statement in terms of English and its regional varieties, let me switch to the analysis of several typical words and idioms, the origins and connotative meanings of which can be well explored in the cultural context.

In New Zealand and Australia in families of lower-middle-class it is a usual practice

to invite people to social gatherings asking them to bring a plate. *To bring a plate* is a phraseological unit which constitutes the request to people attending to arrive with a plate full of food because catering will not be provided. Many new arrivals to New Zealand have been bamboozled by the instruction and turned up with an empty plate. Hence, an Englishman, moreover any other person with a fair knowledge of English might do the same, because such invitations are usual practice in New Zealand and a declining one in Australia. Accordingly, *to bring a plate* is a typical idiom, the metonymic meaning of which is confined only to regional varieties of English.

Turning to the Australian reality, one can easily explore a wide range of culture-based changes in semantic structures, among which the most prominent role can be attached to national symbols. So, *koala*, a slow-moving Australian arboreal marsupial, is the national symbol of Australia, the preservation of which is under state's control. It is this very factor that contributed to enriching the word meaning with extra connotations. In the Australian variant the word now stands for anything that enjoys state attention. E.g. cars with state initials are also referred to as Koalas. Hence, the utterance *There is a koala running along the street* may give the impression that the animal itself is running. Meanwhile *koala* is the car which has diplomatic ID numbers and can violate the traffic laws without punishment.

Proceeding with the topic of animalistic symbols in Australia, let us dwell upon the less exotic, but nevertheless a more important one – "His majesty - the Sheep".

It goes without saying that sheep has made a considerable contribution into the state's economy. Of course it is not a sacred animal and is not worshiped like the Hinduism "cow" in India, nor it can be compared with any aggressive symbols of nationalism, but still it is respected for the indisputable contribution to the country's economic growth and the welfare of the Australian people.

Now let us observe what were the after-effects of the "sheep-based" economy in the Australian variant of English.

The "sheep-based" economy gave birth to a new idiom - *riding on sheep's back*, which actually symbolizes the flourishing period of the Australian economy. It remains only to conclude that the idiom is unique both in its structure and meaning as far as it is closely related to a certain period of Australia's history.

English has to pay her homage to sheep, since sheep-breeding and all the technology connected with the process have enriched the language with many terms covering sheep hairdo, wool classification, sheep breed, etc.

While analyzing the English vocabulary, one cannot but notice the huge amount of idiomatic units that each variant of English abounds in. Idioms undoubtedly remain the sphere of the vocabulary which bears and reflects the national mentality more explicitly than any other language unit. Let me bring several idioms from informal Australian (Aussie) and New Zealand, which struck me as most explicit in terms of concentrating cultural and national elements:

Queen street farmer, widely used in New Zealand, stands for as a pejorative term for *an investor in rural land with no knowledge of land use*;
up the Puhoi, which means *far from civilization*, or simply a faraway point, originating from the river named "Puhoi" passing just the north of Auchland;

little Aussie battle, which stands for a person who works hard to make ends meet, someone who is doing it tough and does not whinge, originating from Henry Lawson's story, where the author categorizes people into 3 classes: the rich, the poor, the battlers);

miserable as a bandicoot, stands for an extremely unhappy person, originating from the Australian long-faced marsupial bandicoot, which has been given a role in Australian English in similes that suggest unhappiness or some kind of depreciation;

Buckley's chance, equivalent to "No chance at all", originating from the name of the convict William Buckley, who escaped from Port Phillip in 1803 and lived for 32 years among the aborigines in South Victoria;

Clayton's job, low quality imitation; not the real thing; e.g. a hasty, temporary repair may be only a Clayton's solution to the problem, originating from the brand-name of an Australian non-alcoholic whisky-flavored beverage.

Among different vocabulary units which demonstrate a highest potential of concentrating cultural data proper names stand apart, embracing geographical names, names of real people, legendary or historic personages, and names of famous people. The problem of adequate understanding comes to the front line when proper names stop to function in their primary denotational meaning and obtain the status of a common noun, as is the case with the word *bradman* (a promising golf player) which has originated from the famous Australian cricket player Donald Bradman's name, or *ned kelly* (a brave heart, especially common in "as game as Ned Kelly"), originating from Ned Kelly – a historic figure who is considered to be Robin Hood's Australian counterpart.

Of course, while considering vocabulary enrichments of the regional varieties, I am not inclined to underestimate the role of the process which, for convenience, I would term "transculturation" of language units. In a wider sense, I would define this process as a mutual enrichment of language varieties due to trans-cultural penetrations.

To specify the aforementioned, let us observe the essence of this phenomenon, analyzing the semantic structure of the unit *walkabout*.

In Aussie English the word *walkabout* stands for *the periodical wanderings of aborigines*, which is quite typical of their traditional lifestyle. When used in an ordinary speech in a sentence like *He is in his usual walkabouts* the speaker expresses his contempt toward the subject's aimlessness and inclination to waste time.

Somehow, *walkabout* has lately penetrated into British English and has obtained the status of a "stylish" word. It is frequently used in reference to the Queen, members of the Royal family or politicians, in situations when they deliberately show informality speaking to common people in streets trying to create the false impression of equality.

The aforementioned can be treated as one of the many cases convincing us that English and its regional varieties are not altogether isolated from each other. The process of mutual enrichments and transformations is an on-going one, taking place regardless of time and distance.

Nowadays, with the view to getting a deeper understanding of the essence of culture-based transformations, their origin, nature and after-effects in general English, linguists

widely investigate the spheres of human life which are most likely to generate cultural-ly and nationally marked words. It is assumed that this kind of knowledge will help to keep the process of semantic transformations under control and handle communicative acts successfully. However, as the preliminary survey shows, there cannot be found any unanimous answer as to the spheres, since the objective reality is changing rapidly and man's attitude toward the realia change at nearly the same pace.

Hence, adequacy of communication widely depends on enlarging people's knowledge in culture, history, geography or other relevant spheres of the regional variety. The process of teaching English nowadays seeks for compiling one integrated course of language and culture with the maximum inclusion of the cultural component.

Effective communication is realizable on the condition that the participants possess a certain amount of shared knowledge, since interpretation is carried out through the prism of categories which constitutes the frames of our consciousness.

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Փոխհասկացման խնդիրը անգլերենի տարածաշրջանային տարբերակներում

Վերջին տարիներին լեզվաբանններին խիստ մտահոգում է այն փաստը, որ անգլե-րենի տարածաշրջանային տարբերակները աստիճանաբար հեռանում են միմյան-ցից: Կգա մի ժամանակ, երբ նույնիսկ առօրյա թեմաների շուրջ լիարժեք հաղորդակ-ցություն իրականացնելու համար բոլոր անգլախոսները կարիք կունենան դիմելու թարգմանչի օգնության: Հոդվածում նպատակ է դրվել լուսաբանելու բառիմաստի զարգացման որոշ առանձնահատկություններ, որոնք առկա են անգլերենի տարա-ծաշրջանային տարբերակների բառապոնդում: Փաստական նյութի վերլուծությամբ ցույց է տրվում, որ դրանք մեծ մասամբ պայմանավորված են տվյալ լեզուն կրող ժո-ղովրդի որոշակի մշակութային համակարգի պատկանելության գործոնով: