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# CULTURAL PREPONDERANCE OR SEMANTIC DUE DILIGENCE: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN WITH A CONCEPTUAL TWIST

*Abstract: Just as every culture is autonomous in the creation of its social values, it is likewise self-governing in the creation of customs and beliefs that define it. Some of those self-defining creeds are strongly entrenched in the use of language and communication. When an American executive places his/her feet on the desk, the message of authority and relaxation that is being sent is readily understood, while the same gesture in an Arabic country would have a totally different implication, one of disdain and insult. Such implications can be culture specific or culture ubiquitous. To better illustrate the dichotomy, it would be useful to recall Grice's views on the efficiency of communication as being dependent on adherence to four maxims. In his portentous article 'Logic and Conversation' (1975), he shows that prudence and intellect empower human kind in an obliging way to successfully generate and construe messages that are sent via conversational implicatures. This paper aims to explore the fine line that balances these two facets within the realm culture and translation.*

*Keywords: culture, conceptualisation, social values, dichotomies, ubiquity, cognition*

## 1. Converging the differences

It takes a certain amount of coincidence to occur in order for two phraseological or metaphorical expressions to match both lexically and semantically in two

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genealogically divergent languages. More frequently though, translators are intermediaries in negotiations between expressiveness and literalness. In order for a translator to boldly pursue the expressiveness path, he or she must be genuinely positive that they have considered all the implications and implicatures that such a ploy carries along. Translating *rakija* as *brandy* is not a perfect match, but at least no one will be offended. Translating *It's all Greek to me* as *To su za mene španska sela* again seems not to give rise to any cultural offence. Translating *When in Rome do as the Romans do* as *Kud svi Turci, tud i mali Mujo*, however, cannot be viewed through the same optics as there is a potential for cultural implicature depending on the history of the TL culture. In a culture which had a conflict with the Ottoman empire, such a rendering might invoke a negative connotation. In other cultures, however, which had no historic antagonism with it, such a translatorial substitution might be regarded as connotation-free and, as such, perfectly acceptable. This reinforces the notion of the need for translators' absolute confidence in their familiarity with both cultures before they embark on a meaning compensation strategy.

With metaphorical meaning however, the translator needs to become an inherent insider in the source language culture, which would enable him or her to parse expressions correctly within its own culture, and then subsequently function as an insider in the target language culture to make it possible for him or her to offset the metaphorical value. Here, one must wonder what happens to the culture-based element which operates as an important semantic feature in the source language.

## 2. Preserving the innuendo

In order to preserve the ingenuity and aesthetics of the source text, it is not enough to convey the implicatures unequivocally whereby an infringement of any of Paul Grice's maxims is altered into compliance with a conversational norm. In this respect, one should distinguish between implicit information and implicit meaning (Larson, 1984), which in a conventionalised speech may converge or diverge between languages. Likewise, utmost attention should be paid to the choice between a semantic and a pragmatic representation of the text. In other words, when they diverge, they may advance themselves to both a semantic and a pragmatic handling of the subject to their potential pellucidity and adequacy in the target language. In the case of the two languages this paper juxtaposes, an appropriate treatment of conversational acts between English and Serbian is an essential aspect of translation activity. While a semantic handling of a text necessitates imaginative solutions to safeguard adequacy and potential acceptability in the target text, every

pragmatic method ought to rely on thorough knowledge of conventionalised conversational norms in the target language to ensure suitability.

Similarly essential is the translator's attentiveness upon encountering the maxim of quantity in which the text is deliberately shaped to be underinformative or overinformative for communicative reasons. The use of customs of different cultures does not typically afford itself to literal translation, except where a serendipitous coincidence arises between the source language culture (SLC) and the target language culture (TLC). In certain instances, forsaking the maxim of quantity is such an easy and attractive way out from a semantic conundrum, that the translator unconsciously embraces literalness at the expense of conversational implicature in the TT. Sometimes, however, the use of literal translation would fall short of achieving the intended metaphorical interpretation and would remain within the constraints of literalness. Take for example the expression "It's water off a duck's back" meaning that "one is not affected by a certain event or unfolding of a situation" and the impossibility to translate it literally in Serbian.

In this case, ignoring the maxim of manner can be utterly perplexing in translation as there can hardly be any situation in which jousting or vagueness in the method of articulating a message would concur between languages, particularly in genealogically divergent groups of Indo-European languages such as Serbian and English. If the translator opts to insert a different phraseologism, it will give rise to competing conversational implicatures as they might mislead the reader into a different train of thought. The translator, however, might opt to use an expression that to some extent deviates from literary norms and shape the translation into "Šta se to mene tiče" or "To se mene ne dotiče" etc, which, truth be told, do not sound perfectly literal in Serbian, and as such do carry a certain expressive load, but still fall short of deploying a metaphor.

### 3. Capitalising on the aesthetic value

It would be impossible to convey the message in the example above without capitalising on the wordplay. The translator would thus have to render the message autonomously, notwithstanding the violation of the maxim of manner chosen by the text originator to enhance the effect of their product. Thus, sometimes, in their attempt to limit the forfeiture of the manner maxim, translators reluctantly accept a blurred version of disjointed literalness. This may sound like creating a polar opposition between foreignising and domesticating cultures which need to be reconciled in a way that ensures unambiguousness while not undermining the

imbedded cultural elements or, to go back to English and Serbian phraseologisms, coming up with a solution in which “the wolf does not die and the sheep do not perish” translated as “I vuk sit, i ovce na broju”.

No language is immune to violating the maxim of quality by invoking the faculty of metaphor, thus conversationally involving the matrimonial interpretation. Some of the more prominent translators, such as Hutchins, Kenny, Seleskovic and Gutt (1991), respectively have put forth different strategies. While the first two hold that translation ought to retain the conversational implicature by using the same metaphor, the second two see metaphor as mere communicative device, and the translator should be allowed to substitute a transferred meaning with a literal one. If we take into consideration Katan’s (2014:p.26) views, in which he describes culture as a ‘shared mental model or map’ for interpreting reality and organising world experience, we might find a match in the seemingly divergent concepts. His view in the ‘cultural considerations and translation model of the world’, imply that it is a ‘system of congruent and interrelated beliefs, values, strategies and cognitive environments which guide the shared basis of behaviour’. The rest of the cited authors maintain that translation would have been more effective if it had preserved the conversational implicature by deploying the same metaphor in English.

During a common parlance, the text originator may want to utter only a segment of the message, leaving it up to the translator, to approach ‘the network of conceptual relations which underlie the surface text’ (Baker, 1992:p.218), in which case, it will be the recipient’s erudition that will serve as the amalgam in filling the absent parts of the message. Take for example certain formulaic expressions existing in English and Serbian. The question “What’s up?” or its similar version in Serbian “Šta ima?” do not really beg for a true and pertinent answer. Jargon users in both languages will know better than to take them literally. In such a situation, it does not refer to worldly processes or ongoing events, rather it is a form of a streetwise greeting, in which case successful translators need to be insiders in both cultures. In other words, they need to possess deep and intimate knowledge of the cultural experience in the SL, and be insiders in the target culture. Only then will they be able to resonate the corresponding cultural experience in the TL. According to Blakemore’s (2002:p.71) observation, the fatic function, that is, conversational implicature, can only manifest itself when translators ‘go further than what is explicitly written, and metarepresent the ST thoughts about what he would think as relevant enough’.

#### 4. Delving into the Cognitive Realms

The lodestone of this analytical probe into the inextricability between language and literature hails from the cognitivist provenance of intellectual thought and research methodology. It could be contended that the notion of conceptuality rests at the heart of human capacity for generative, creative, and deconstructive feats reflected in day-to-day communication with a relative magnitude of efficacy and admissible level of expediency (Muhić, 2013). This is a small-scale study of how language is used in literature so as to instantiate the underlying system and occasion a back-loop transfer of the in-use discourse into the system matrix. The lexical accrual of a language is best echoed in the realm of organic use.

Although literature is hardly unrehearsed, it does resonate language in its resplendent array of resources. Text as defined in Systemic-Functional Linguistics stands for underlying scaffolding emerging as a spontaneous corollary of a meaning-propelled raft of usage-based practices. It is a cyclically causal concatenation of instances in which the system is both engendered and reaffirmed through the materialisation of a hypothesised linguistic and communicative foundation.

A multitude of linguists have thus far made bold attempts at the recalibration of the basic premise of linguistic study of the unique human enterprise (Muhić, 2018). The Chomskyan approach to this phenomenon primarily centered around grammatical structure rather than use, and by extension, meaning. Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik spearheaded the avant-garde of redefined linguistic priorities averring that ‘a new kind of grammar is needed’, which could provide an answer to a long-standing question “How can I use grammar to communicate?” (Leech & Svartvik, 1975). Having enumerated the manifest of variegated components constituting the aggregate of a grammatical system, significant weight was attached to the notion of “grammar in use”, whereby different types of meaning and different ways of organising meaning were systematically discussed. It signalled an epoch-making departure from employing exclusively a structural but rather communicative approach. This also meant that grammar could no longer be defined as ‘a set of rules that allow us to combine words in our language into larger units’ (Greenbaum and Nelson, 2002) or a syntactic framework describing admissible confluences to form ranking groupings i.e. syntagmata, clauses and discursive stretches<sup>2</sup>. Grammar is by no means a source of arcane rules that cause mortification. It is a system of meaningfulness. This assertion is corroborated in at least two regards.

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<sup>2</sup>The verb *describe* is purposely used here for it serves the role of distinction between the prescriptive tradition which stipulated acceptable norms and vehemently rejected *inadmissible* forms as ultimately incorrect thus precluding the organic progression and development of language.

The lexical system contains entries steeped in meaning. Those meanings rule delineated semantic domains in their own right and by means of grammar they are conveniently combined into a higher-ranking linguistic strata of organisation such as syntagmatic and clausal complexes allowing us to construct more elaborate instantiations of meaning. Grammar is a crucial expedient in the overall conceptual apparatus enabling us to access and actively engage the world (Langacker, 2008).

Traditional levels of grammatical, or more specifically, syntactic analysis are not to be roundly dismissed. For instance, the structure of a simple sentence conventionally referred to as a clause, dissecting a lexical caucus into phonological, syntactic semantic/conceptual domains, each of which has a distinct blueprint is a useful method of explication as to how linguistic rank-promotion and relegation transpires in natural communication. The structure of a given clausal construct is not a mere total of the above-mentioned levels of parsing. It is paramount to encode the relationships amongst them (Jackendoff, 2002). The extent of overlapping and interplay has to be ascertained, and in that manner a line of descent and merger will be traced paving the way for the apposite placement of structure in relation to the conceptual underpinnings.

Cognitive semantics is the mainstay of a usage-based, meta-functionally-oriented and conceptually-anchored cognitive school of linguistic thought, which emerged in the early 1970s as a herald of disapprobation and vexation at the dominant formal schools of linguistics at the time. Conceptualisation resides at the heart of human thinking and categorisation of extraneous stimuli. Cognitive linguistics is often seen as an open-ended and pliable framework since no traces of a uniform theory have as of yet been detected. Instead, a bracket of guiding precepts forming common viewpoints and assumptions came to be accepted engendering a gamut of complementary theoretical systems. As Evans and Green proposed, a “character sketch” of this scientific enterprise unifies approaches concerned with semanticity (Evans & Green, 2006) and organicism of applicability.

The precedence of conceptualisation notwithstanding, structure still bulks large in the overarching framework. The idea behind conceptualisation is best echoed in the elucidation stating that language reflects patterns of thought and insights into the organisational nature of thoughts are adequately provided by a dint of heuristic endeavours thus reaching the window into human cognitive faculties matchlessly belied in their instantiated form. As previously stated, text is functionally defined as data conveyed via written or spoken mechanisms, which in turn assume the role of embodiments of conceptual rudiments. Text is an immanent system surging towards the surface of recognisability. This is a highly theorised perspective but its merits are decidedly identified in everyday life (Kesić & Muhić, 2019).

## 5. Reaching for the Exophoric and Exoteric

To substantiate a concept to be held up as a genuine exemplary article such as the *Nation as a Family* conceptual scenario, use was made of the State of the Union Address by President Barack Obama delivered in televised coverage on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, 2012. This was President Obama's fourth State of the Union speech. The speech is excerpted for the purposes of brevity and succinctness underscoring the conceptual highlights to be remarked upon in the conclusion. Key words are italicised. The transcript of the address is recoverable in its entirety at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>.

*'We gather tonight knowing that this generation of heroes has made the United States safer and more respected around the world.*

These achievements are a testament to the courage, selflessness, and teamwork of *America's* Armed Forces. At a time when too many of our institutions have let *us* down, they exceed all expectations. They're not consumed with personal ambition. They don't obsess over their differences. They focus on the mission at hand. They work together.

Imagine what *we could accomplish* if we followed their example. Think about the *America within our reach: a country that leads the world in educating its people; an America that attracts a new generation of high-tech manufacturing and high-paying jobs; a future where we're in control of our own energy and our security and prosperity aren't so tied to unstable parts of the world; an economy built to last, where hard work pays off and responsibility is rewarded.*

*They understood they were part of something larger, that they were contributing to a story of success that every American had a chance to share, the basic American promise that if you worked hard, you could do well enough to raise a family, own a home, send your kids to college, and put a little away for retirement.*

*The defining issue of our time is how to keep that promise alive. No challenge is more urgent.*

*The state of our Union is getting stronger. And we've come too far to turn back now. We bet on American workers. We bet on American ingenuity. And tonight, the American auto industry is back.*

Let's also remember that hundreds of thousands of talented, hard-working students in this country face another challenge: the fact that they aren't yet American citizens. Many were brought here as small children, are American through and through, yet they live every day with the threat of deportation.

Others came more recently, to study business and science and engineering, but as soon as they get their degree, we send them home to invent new products and create new jobs somewhere else. That doesn't make sense.

And nowhere is the promise of innovation greater than in American-made energy.

Building this new energy future should be just one part of a broader agenda to repair America's infrastructure. So much of *America* needs to be rebuilt. We've got crumbling roads and bridges, a power grid that wastes too much energy, an incomplete high-speed broadband network that prevents a small-business owner in rural *America* from selling her products all over the world.

Now, a return to *the American values* of fair play and shared responsibility will help protect our people and our economy. But it should also guide us as we look to pay down our debt and invest in our future.

The greatest blow to our confidence in *our economy* last year didn't come from events beyond our control. It came from a debate in Washington over whether the *United States* would pay its bills or not. Who benefited from that fiasco?

Now, some of this has to do with the corrosive influence of money in politics. So together, let's take some steps to fix that. Send me a bill that bans insider trading by Members of Congress. I will sign it tomorrow. Let's limit any elected official from owning stocks in industries they impact. Let's make sure people who bundle campaign contributions for Congress can't lobby Congress and vice versa, an idea that has bipartisan support, at least outside of Washington.

I'm a Democrat, but I believe what Republican Abraham Lincoln believed: That Government should do for *people* only what they cannot do better by themselves and no more. That's why my education reform offers more competition and more control for schools and States. That's why we're getting rid of regulations that don't work. That's why our health care law relies on a reformed private market, not a Government programme.

Because when *we act together*, *there's nothing the United States of America can't achieve*.

*That's the lesson we've learned from our actions abroad over the last few years. Ending the Iraq war has allowed us to strike decisive blows against our enemies. From Pakistan to Yemen, the Al Qaida operatives who remain are scrambling, knowing that they can't escape the reach of the United States of America.*



*We've made it clear that America is a Pacific power, and a new beginning in Burma has lit a new hope. From the coalitions we've built to secure nuclear materials, to the missions we've led against hunger and disease, from the blows we've dealt to our enemies, to the enduring power of our moral example, America is back. Anyone who tells you otherwise, anyone who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about. That's not the message we get from leaders around the world who are eager to work with us. That's not how people feel from Tokyo to Berlin, from Cape Town to Rio, where opinions of America are higher than they've been in years. Yes, the world is changing. No, we can't control every event. But America remains the one indispensable nation in world affairs, and as long as I'm President, I intend to keep it that way.*

Which brings me back to where I began. Those of us who've been sent here to serve can learn a thing or two from the service of our troops. *When you put on that uniform, it doesn't matter if you're Black or White, Asian, Latino, Native American; conservative, liberal; rich, poor; gay, straight. When you're marching into battle, you look out for the person next to you or the mission fails. When you're in the thick of the fight, you rise or fall as one unit, serving one nation, leaving no one behind.*

Each time I look at that flag, I'm reminded that *our destiny is stitched together* like those 50 stars and those 13 stripes. *No one built this country on their own. This Nation is great because we built it together. This Nation is great because we worked as a team. This Nation is great because we get each other's backs. And if we hold fast to that truth, in this moment of trial, there is no challenge too great, no mission too hard. As long as we are joined in common purpose, as long as we maintain our common resolve, our journey moves forward, and our future is hopeful, and the state of our Union will always be strong.*

*Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.'*

## 6. Reaching for the ubiquity

The exemplificatory passages above corroborate several underlying conceptual strategies in the generation of meaning in the United States of America cognitive community and its political arena. The marked usage of the unifying pronoun *we* as a hallmark of the inextricable nature of the American state of affairs. The reiteration of the syntagmatic concatenations *America*, the *United States* and the *United States*

of *America* as another discursively cohesive mechanism. The possessive determiner *our* is recurrent and equally indicative of the nation as a family conceptual scenario as well as a stratagem of asserting the American value system. The United States is seen as a family whose values revolve around concept of rectitude and fair-handedness derived from American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. Consequently, being a member of the conceptual United States family is both a privilege and a duty to impart the ingrained ideational constituents onto other prospective members within the family and friends of the family i.e. allies and cooperative nations around the globe (Kesić & Muhić, 2015).

The terms ‘fatic’ or ‘insider’ can stand in opposition to the term ‘outsider’ which was first introduced by the linguist Kenneth Pike (1957). Other terms, such as ‘etic’, derived from phonetic, and ‘emic’, derived from phonemic, and similar derivations, came into being as a response to the ‘need to include nonverbal behaviour in linguistic description’ (Pike, 1957:p.18). In 2003, Anderson (p.391) underlined the importance of taking into consideration both the ‘etics’ - the superficial level of the language - and ‘emics’ - the symbolic level of the language - while dealing with the text at hand.<sup>3</sup>

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## KULTUROLOŠKA NADMOĆ ILI SEMANTIČKA REVNOSNOST: DVIJE STRANE ISTE MEDALJE UZ KONCEPTUALNI OBRT

### *Rezime*

Kulturološke i konceptualno-semantičke zajednice su u svojevrsnoj orbiti autonomije u stvaranju vlastitih društvenih vrijednosti, no one su podjednako nesputane u stvaranju običaja i vjerovanja koji ih definišu u intertekstualnoj relacijskoj poveznici koristeći, veoma često i subliminalno, sveopšti civilizacijski repozitorijum.

Uvjerena, vjerovanja i metanarativi snažno su ukorijenjeni u svakodnevici jezičke upotrebe, upotrebljivosti i komunikacijskih obrazaca. Kada američki

rukovodilac stavi noge na sto, poruka autoriteta i opuštenosti koja se šalje lako se razumije, dok bi isti gest u arapskoj zemlji imao potpuno drugačije implikacije, naime – prezir i uvredu. Takve implikacije mogu biti specifične ili sveprisutne za kulturu. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da istraži tanku liniju koja balansira ova dva aspekta u domenu kulture i prevođenja, kao i da sagleda kognitivno-kulturološke metanarative koji neprekidno stvaraju nove i potvrđuju već ustaljene semantičke trase.

► *Ključne riječi:* konceptualno-kulturološke zajednice, intertekstualne relacije, dihotomija, univerzalni sistem povezanosti, metanarativi, kognicija.

Preuzeto: 30. 3. 2023.  
Korekcije: 31. 5. 2023.  
Prihvaćeno: 12. 6. 2023.