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LANGUAGE AND THINKING: A CONTRASTIVE CHARACTERIZATION OF ENGLISH, FRENCH, GERMAN AND RUSSIAN, WITH ITS APPLICATION TO LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract. *This paper seeks to give in a concise manner a holistic characterization of English, French, German and Russian, revealing at the same time the types of thinking (or thought patterns) involving these languages. The four languages are characterized respectively as being experiential/pragmatic, rational/dualistic, idealistic, and antithetical. Based on these observations, some suggestions as to the pedagogy of foreign languages are also made.*

Keywords: *language and thinking, construal, English, French, German, Russian, translation, language pedagogy*

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As is often realized by careful observers of different languages, what appears to be the “same” states of affairs may be construed differently by individual languages. Such differences in construal can be identified by observing what Whorf called “fashions of speaking”:

“Concepts of ‘time’ and ‘space’... do not depend so much upon ANY ONE SYSTEM (e.g. tense, or nouns) as upon the ways of analyzing and reporting experience which have become fixed in the language as integrated ‘fashions of speaking’ and which cut across the typical grammatical classifications, so that such a ‘fashion’ may include lexical, morphological, syntactic, and otherwise systemically diverse means coordinated in a certain frame of consistency” [15, p. 158].

My research, as presented in [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], and [9], is an attempt to give a holistic characterization of several languages (in particular English, French and German), based upon the analysis of such “fashions of speaking” as observed in these languages. It involves “typology oriented towards

individual languages,” as proposed by Ikegami [1]. The characteristics of a language can be empirically identified by contrasting texts written in the language and their translations into other languages. If some common “orientations” (basic inclinations or biases) are constantly observed in diverse translations to and from a language (e.g. from English to French and from French to English), they could be interpreted as reflecting the underlying characteristics of the language, the theoretical characterization of which is to be confirmed or falsified by further investigation. The following characterizations have been obtained as the result of such contrastive studies conducted under the name of “conceptual typology”.

English captures concrete, individual facts and situations (that change every moment) in a physical manner, i.e. in terms of time and space, in particular. It is experiential, empirical and pragmatic (practical). It gives weight to purposes and the necessary means to achieve them. While it exhibits physical monism and thus makes a precise description of facts, it dispenses with details unless they are empirically or pragmatically significant.

French does not pursue thoroughly either experiences or ideas but analyses objects into their parts and elements, and captures relationships between them, clearly distinguishing each from one another. It exhibits rational dualism that seeks to attain a balance between binary oppositions. At the same time, a mechanistic inclination is characteristic of the French language and thought.

German reorganizes facts and experiences in terms of abstract categories, such as ordering, quantity and cause-and-effect relationships, instead of purely describing them. It exhibits idealistic pluralism, characterized by a grand systematization with thoroughness (*Gründlichkeit*).

The above characteristics of the three languages can be observed also in the types of thinking conducted by philosophers and mathematicians who developed their theories in their respective languages. Mathematical thinking or the type of thinking used in mathematical theorization, is of particular importance in that linguistic thinking in its “pure” form may be said to be observed there. For instance, even though Newton and Leibniz treated the same problem of what is called “calculus”, they adopted different approaches towards it. Newton started with the problem of movement by observation, and developed the “Method of Fluxions” for the purpose of its solution: an experiential approach. In contrast, Leibniz started with an algebraic problem, giving consideration to it in conceptual terms, and developed the method of calculus: an idealistic approach. On the other hand, although France did not produce a mathematician who thought of a method of calculus, we can find Descartes as a representative mathematician of the country who lived in an era close to that of Newton and Leibniz. Descartes unified geometry and algebra by introducing the coordinate system: a dualistic approach. Cartesian geometry is static and lacks the perspective of movement, characteristic of Newtonian physics.

Let us give another set of examples in modern mathematics. British mathematics may be described as being subsidiary to physics. Both Hamilton’s operators, applicable to physics as they are, and Turing’s theoretical model of the computer are very practical. David Hilbert, one of the greatest German mathematicians, made an attempt at systematization, in the form of a complete axiomatization of Euclidian geometry. Nicolas Bourbaki, a group of mainly French mathematicians, based their mathematics on sets on the one hand and functions working upon them on the other: a dualistic approach. Thought patterns of each language can be clearly observed in the works of these mathematicians.

Let us turn our attention back to the characterization of the three languages, as well as that of Russian. As far as this Slavic language is concerned, even though we have not conducted large-scale research based on contrastive studies of translations to and from other languages, we have identified the following typical set of instances, which differentiates Russian from the above three languages. In fact, each one of these four languages is differentiated, by means of the features concerned, from all the other three languages.

The case to be treated here concerns the description of “boa constrictors” given by Saint-Exupéry [10] and its translations into other languages. The following sentence in the French original is placed just after the statement that boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing it.

The original French text: “Ensuite ils ne peuvent plus bouger et ils dorment pendant **les six mois de leur digestion**” [10, p. 9]. (Literally this would be translated as: “Then they can no longer move and they sleep during **the six months of their digestion**.”) Note that there is no mention of “necessity” or “pur-

pose” here, unlike in the case of the English translation quoted below. Action without necessity or purpose is just what should be called “mechanistic”: one of the characteristic aspects of French.

The English translation is as follows: “After that they are not able to move, and they sleep through the six months that they **need for** digestion” [11, p. 5]. English explicitly mentions both “necessity” (*need*) and “purpose” (*for*). Action driven by necessity and with purpose in mind is both experiential and pragmatic.

And the German translation is this: “Daraufhin können sie sich nicht mehr rühren und schlafen sechs Monate, **um zu** verdauen” [12, p. 1]. (Literally, “As a result, they cannot move and sleep six months **in order to** digest.”) German explicitly mentions “purpose” (*um zu*), but not “necessity”. Action is possible as long as there is purpose, even if there is no necessity. The type of thought observed here is not pragmatic at all but quite idealistic.

And finally, the Russian translation is this: “После этого он уже не может шевельнуться и спит полгода **подряд**, пока **не** переварит пищу” [13, p. 4]. (Literally, “After that, he can no longer move and sleeps six months **in a row**, until he (not) digests food.”) What is noteworthy of Russian is that it mentions both the process (*подряд*: in a row) and the result (*пока не*: during the time that X does not do Y, i.e. until X does Y). Even though *не* may be considered as being an expletive here, it carries a significant meaning with it, far from being devoid of content. Unlike the three Western-European languages, Russian focuses on the process and the result. Furthermore, it indicates the existence of the process even if there is no result. This characteristic of Russian may be described as being “antithetical” to English, French and German and their thought patterns.

To summarize, analysis of the above typical set of instances has revealed that French exhibits a mechanistic inclination, lacking both necessity and purpose; English, experientialism and pragmatism, explicitly stating both necessity and purpose; and German, idealistic teleology, stating only purpose devoid of necessity. In contrast, Russian expresses neither necessity nor purpose but explicitly states process, which involves negation, as well as its result. In this respect at least, Russian can be described as being antithetical to all these Western-European languages. We should not conclude, however, that Russian can only be negatively defined against these languages, for it finds values even in doing nothing, one of the deep aspects of boundless self-growth, as can be observed in the rich world of Russian literature.

Though the influence of language upon thought and behaviour is not deterministic, it is undeniable that there exist grooves [14, p. 5] or patterns easy for thinkers or language-users to follow. Using the simple method employed here of comparing and contrasting original texts and their translations in other languages, we can not only identify possible characteristic features of each language under examination but also either confirm or falsify the alleged characteristics thus proposed.

As regards language pedagogy, this research can provide both teachers and learners with the overall picture of an individual language, which should give them those organizing principles lying behind individual phenomena that would facilitate the teaching and learning of a foreign language. It can also give them the great pleasure of discovering hidden patterns by themselves, instead of mere memorization of words and phrases. In terms of the method of teaching, it also re-evaluates the role of translation, especially literal translation, as well as that of grammar, which is the essential foundation of thinking based upon language. It is hoped that this study provides both researchers and teachers/learners with a perspective that is both theoretically and practically significant.

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