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Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

"WE/THEY" OPPOSITION WITHIN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The archetypal binary "we-they" opposition correlates with the antinomic pairs "own-alien" and "self-other" which formally correspond to the semantic units "selfness" – "otherness". The oppositions are based on the egocentric nature of Homo Cogitare, and their significance is determined by deeply rooted psychophysiological processes. The dominant factor for the "we/they" opposition is a group-integrating one. Among the most significant reasons contributing to the society integration, the political system and cultural community should be named. The verbal actualization of the "we-they" opposition is an essential part of a linguistic picture of the world. The opposition is embodied in language forms and synchronized with the philosophical categories of good/evil, good/bad. The main research question of the paper is what the contextual usage of the opposition "we-they" can tell the audience and the readers about the speaker`s intentions and attitudes to the problem of the individual`s perception of other people, representatives of alien communities. The content analysis of the empirical material that is comprised of the manuscripts provided by the participants of the international conference "Intercultural dialogue as a basis for peace and sustainable development in Europe and its neighbouring regions" was tackled from the point of "we/they" opposition realization. The analysis emphasized the trend towards convergence and consolidation of communities into larger unions.

Keywords: Communication, culture, dialogue, identity, mentality, "we-they".

1. Introduction

The study of some universal concepts, no matter how detailed and/or monumental it might be, cannot be reduced to their linguistic interpretation. The "we-they" binary opposition belongs to the most significant universal concepts. It correlates with the oppositions "own-alien" and "self-other" that correspond to the semantic units "selfness" – "otherness".

The dual nature of language (the humboldtian dichotomy "langue" – "parole") necessitates the involvement of a multidisciplinary research method which integrates cognitive-discursive principles as well as psychological and philosophical postulates in the study of linguistic units which reflect humans` interpretation of reality.

2. Problem Statement

Multidisciplinary potential of the binary oppositions "we-they", "own-alien" and "self-other". The divergence of "I" and "you/other" originates in the earliest childhood, when a child goes through the process of self-determination and "separates" itself from the mother and other people. The invasion of the oppositional pair "we-they" in a child`s consciousness is gradually formed in everyday life during the "pre-linguistic" period of an individual's development. It divides the world into several parts: "I", "my feelings", on the one hand, and "not me", "other people" – the things and phenomena that a child wants to get, explore and understand.

The term "pre-linguistic" in the paper shouldn't be confused with the homonymous term, introduced by Vygotsky (2005), denoting the initial stage of an adult's thought formation that leads to the production of internal and external speech.

In this paper, we understand "pre-linguistic" as a deep subjective period of child development (Cromer, 1974), when a child has not yet mastered the patterns of the native language but tries to interact with the world under adults' supervision. These synesthetic experiences in the period of child development are connected with "our physical interaction with the world" (Cytowic, 2002, p. 24). They are fixed in the depths of the human psyche before they get verbal forms and are inextricably linked to individual psychophysiological processes.

3. Research Questions

The opposition "we-they" is an integral part of the linguistic picture of the world of a certain linguistic society. It is reflected in the language and speech and synchronized with the philosophical categories of good/evil, good/bad, etc. Predominantly, "good" is associated with "own" while "bad" correlates with "alien". The opposition is shown, firstly, as the outcome of the world categorization and, secondly, as the product of conceptualization – the formation of basic ideas embodied in the concepts. Thus, the "we-they" opposition, which regulates social interaction and reflects knowledge about the world, belongs to the scope of questions cognitive linguistic is interested in. Cognitive scientists explore the mechanisms of this opposition and its influence on an individual's consciousness as well as the entire linguistic society's mentality.

The main research question of the paper is what the contextual usage of the opposition "we-they" can tell the audience/readers about the speaker`s intentions and attitudes to the problem of the individual`s perception of other people, representatives of different communities. The issue is not far-fetched; it was repeatedly raised in various interdisciplinary research works. P. Hodkinson, for example, wrote of "Anti-immigration rhetoric centered upon the encroachment of essentially different "others" onto British territory" (Hodkinson, 2020, p. 251). Modern political discourse offers many examples exploiting the theme of "we-them" opposition in various forms (language units and constructions). Thus, the relevance of the study of the "we-they" opposition is determined by its significance for the linguistic societies, for the interaction in various communities at the global level. The research on the functioning of the "we-they" opposition is being conducted in the framework of various academic fields, as well as in many aspects within the same academic sphere.

Philosophy interprets the archetypical binary "we-they" opposition as one of the ways of language categorization. It is associated with the categories of space, time, ethical and aesthetic representations of the world, which in their turn correlate with the oppositions "near-far", "good-bad", "beautiful-ugly".

Philosophical anthropology as an integrative science through the prism of "we-they" opposition focuses on people ability to create their own world based on the personal worldview. The set of such worlds within a single linguistic society creates a specific cultural space. Mutual recognition and acceptance (or mutual rejection) may occur during a cross-cultural dialogue.

In the field of psychology, the "we/they" opposition is considered to be an archetypal representation that is fixed in an individual's consciousness. The criterion for determining the relevance of the identified subject or object is a particular personal mindset, a system of ideas, his/her system of values and stereotypes.

From a socio-psychological point of view, the "we-they" opposition is the result of "transition" from an individual stage of the person`s development to a collective one.

Thus, "we" is the consequence of person's socialization and (self)attribution to a certain group on account of various criteria: ethnic, religious, political, professional, cultural, etc. The dominant factor in the "we-they" opposition is a group-integrating one. At the same time, we should name political and cultural identity among the most significant factors that contribute to social unity.

The linguocultural studies of the "we-they" opposition make it possible to determine the degree of cultural knowledge actualized and represented in the language. The cultural-specific nature of this opposition affects the relationships within different nationalities and ethnicities. It is fixed in the language in the form of lexical, phraseological and paremiological units "preserving" the cultural code and a particular set of ideas about the world.

The cultural peculiarities of the "we-they" opposition can be seen, for example, in different inner forms of the names of the same phenomena. If a text is written in a foreign language that a Russian person does not understand, the latter refers to this text as "Chinese language book". The analogous text which doesn't make any sense for an Englishman will be "Greek" (It's all Greek to me) or "Double Dutch".

The linguistic research of the "we-they" opposition is due to analyze multilevel language units, their associative fields and various types of texts that represent particular types of discourse (Alieva, 2008; Kaftanov, 2017; Molodychenko, 2019; Van Dijk, 2015).

The study of the "we-they" opposition realization makes up a identifiable part of ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and other interdisciplinary sciences. There are some reasons, which caused the "we-they" antinomy to remain for a long time a relevant subject of research within the framework of a set of disciplines:

it reflects the result of an non-scientific way of addressing the world;

it exists in the mind of a person and manifests itself through his/her emotions, impressions and assessments;

it is embedded in cultural realia and stereotypes of a certain linguistic society;

it is fixed in multi-level language units;

it allows to latently influencing people's minds with a manipulative purpose.

This opposition is implemented within a single cultural space e.g. family relationships (husband vs. wife, parents vs. children), work (executives vs. subordinates), education (teachers vs. students) and at a cross-cultural level.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to explore the linguistic representation of the "we-they" category as the reflection of the static and dynamic features of modern society's mentality.

5. Research Methods

The research supposes an analysis of the empirical material that comprised the manuscripts of the participants of the international conference "Intercultural dialogue as a basis for peace and sustainable development in Europe and its neighbouring regions" (ID, 2010) which was tackled from the point of "we-they" opposition realization. The conference held in Baku brought together representatives of Culture Departments from forty-eight countries responsible for cross-cultural cooperation. We define the participants of this conference as actors of the cross-cultural dialogue. It should be noted that, we do not consider a "dialogue" in its narrow meaning as a literary method or a theatrical form of communication between two or more people. We understand it as a form of communication in which partners in conversation (representatives of different class, ethnic, political, religious groups) are guided by mutual respect and the principles of equality which help them to achieve compromises by taking into account each other's interests and values (Freire & Macedo, 1995).

While selecting the empirical material, we kept in mind that the participants' contributions were focused on cross-cultural interaction as well as mutually beneficial cooperation. The second reason that prompted collecting and further analyses of the material was the status of the communicators. It determined the proactive implementation of the resolution signed at that conference. The content analysis is seen in the paper as the key research method (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2016; Talhadas, Mamede, & Baptista, 2016). The subject of the research is the text of the conference proceedings. Overall, it includes 55 reports (both plenary and sectional), as well as appendices in the form of normative documents and declarations. The total volume is 262 pages, 104677 words.

The object of the research is the contents of the English-language conference proceedings in the light of implementing the "we-they" opposition within the framework of cross-cultural dialogue. The units of this analysis are represented by the members of the "we-they" opposition group as well as by the corresponding antinomic pairs "own-alien", "self-other" and "us-them" (Alieva, 2017). The main focus of attention is the attitude to oneself in the "I/We" frame and to others in the "They/Strangers" frame.

6.   Findings

The analysis of the conference proceedings title: Intercultural dialogue as a basis for peaceful and sustainable development in Europe and its neighbouring regions (ID, 2010, p. 29) proclaims the importance of a cross-cultural dialogue for peaceful and stable development of Europe and the neighboring countries. At the same time, the syntactical pattern of the title shows certain subdivision on Europe, on the one hand, and neighbouring regions, on the other. This differentiation is eliminated purposefully further on in the reports by the dominant use of the pronoun «we» compared to other pronouns of the oppositions under study.

In the introductory reference document prepared by the organizing committee it is noted that the term "intercultural dialogue" has undergone a significant semantic shift in comparison to the previously used terms "dialogue between cultures" or "dialogue of civilizations". The authors claim, that the latter two could be interpreted as a form of mediation of some "representatives" excluding direct contacts of the interested parties (ID, 2010, p. 13). For a successful dialogue it is necessary to set up direct communication of citizens, belonging to the scientific, cultural and creative elite as "art and culture have a special role in intercultural dialogue because they question prejudices and stereotypes, break taboos, trigger curiosity, play with images and words, inspire and connect» (ID, 2010, p. 14).

It is obvious that achievement of such goals will require a change of people's mindsets: "Changes in power are the result of changes in the public conciseness" (Gushchina et al., 2019, p. 267). The famous Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk admits that the problem "of the 'other', the 'stranger', the 'enemy' that resides inside each of our heads" must be solved. One of the options of solving this problem is an attempt of mental contextual replacement of "other" to "us". This transformation ("to describe other people's lives as if they were our own" (ID, 2010, p.14)) makes possible "to alter the boundaries of our own identities" (ID, 2010, p.14). In our opinion such controlled and repeatable code-switching of the pronouns in everyday discourse shows the real concern to the discussed problem and will lead to changes in "other" perception.

The following leitmotivs have been found in the participants' welcoming speeches in terms of intercultural dialogue realization:

- «Intercultural dialogue would be accelerated through concrete mechanisms» (ID, 2010, p. 14).

- «Intercultural dialogue was an "antidote to intolerance, division, and violence",…» (ID, 2010, p. 68).

- «Intercultural dialogue was about promoting social and cultural cohesion» (ID, 2010, p. 15).

Bousnina, admitted that the best way to achieve effective dialogue is to change the image of "other" in the minds of representatives of a particular language and culture groups and to foster "the spirit of self-criticism in order to eliminate the inherited and unfortunate tendency to overrate oneself and look down on the other" (as cited in ID, 2010, p. 30).

Consistent use of the pronoun "other" in numerous significant contexts has led to its conceptualization and substantialization: «…communal leaders manipulating fears of the "other"» (ID, 2010, p. 16).

Statistical processing of the conference proceedings has shown that there are 260 uses of the word "other" in different collocations within the document of 262 pages («common ground between the "self" and the "other"» (ID, 2010, p. 16), «manipulating fears of the other» (ID, 2010, p. 16), «to encourage the exposure to other societies and cultures» (ID, 2010, p. 17), «disarming the antipathy between "self" and "other"», etc. (ID, 2010, p. 24).

Moreover, the plural form of "other" has been used 56 times («the exclusion of others» (ID, 2010, p. 15), «the human dignity of others» (ID, 2010, p. 17), «in contact with others» (ID, 2010, p. 57), «to engage in dialog with others», etc. (ID, 2010, p. 95).

The use of the lexeme "otherness" in the conference proceedings is very indicative. The contexts of its operation are focused either on the existing problem or on the ways to address the problem: «"otherness" more in focus than exchange or co-operation» (ID, 2010, p.35), «the exclusion or welcoming of "otherness"» (ID, 2010, p. 81), «to develop curiosity and openness to "otherness"» (ID, 2010, p. 256), «enhancing the respect of "otherness"», etc. (ID, 2010, p. 260).

The content analysis targeted at the contextual occurrence of the lexeme another showed a number of cases when it acquires a generalized meaning of "otherness" («members of different communities relate to one another» (ID, 2010, p. 93), «the East and West have discussed with one another …» (ID, 2010, p. 127), «we need to learn to love one another» (ID, 2010, p. 171), «learning about one another», etc. (ID, 2010, p. 273). As it is seen from the examples the meaning of the lexeme "another" is actualized in combination with the pronoun "one" ("another one"). The samples have shown 15 examples in the studied texts.

The analysis of compatibility with the previous members of the syntagma has allowed selecting the following constructions as dominant V/N/G + Prep. (with/from/about/to) + one another: engage(ment) with one another (3), accept(ing) one another (2), differ from one another, learn(ing) from/about one another, develop one another, make peoples closer to one another, humiliate one another, relate to one another, have discussed with one another, know one another, love one another.

There are 627 cases of using the plural form of the personal pronoun "we" in the conference proceedings. This result is quite illustrative because it is twice as much as in another group of the studied pronouns with the biggest number of uses ("other" – 316 cases). The socio-psychological relevance of this fact indicates the speakers' desire to identify themselves with the group delegated them to the conference or to show that they share the opinion and views of those present at the event.

There are 155 cases of using the pronoun "they", 116 cases of using the pronoun "us", 77 cases of using the pronoun "them", 57 cases of using the pronoun "own", 20 cases of using the pronoun "self" in the texts under analysis. The results are presented in Table 01:

Table 01. The quantitative ratio of the pronouns corresponding to the meaning "selfness" and "otherness" in the proceedings of the Conference (ID)

The pronouns corresponding to the semantic unit "selfness"	Number of uses	The pronouns corresponding to the semantic unit "otherness"	Number of uses
self	20	other	260(sing.)+56 (pl.)=316
us	116	them	77
we	627	they	155
own	57	another	15
Total	820		563

The pronoun "other" (316 cases of the use) does not just perform a demonstrative-signifying function, it emphasizes something strange and unusual, something people are not accustomed to, and thus considered as abnormal, and inspiring mistrust.

Summarizing the consideration of "we-they" opposition functioning in the sphere of intercultural dialogue we can acknowledge that in the modern globalized society there is an advance towards transition from the level of theoretical reflections on the problems of "selfness" and "otherness" to searching for practical solutions within the framework of intercultural dialogue.

The issue has grown more urgent over the past decade due to the multiple increases in migration processes and the changes in the field of mass media which have contributed to the expansion of communication opportunities between people, communities and states. Croteau and Hoynes (2020), exploring the interrelation of globalization and media, argued that the development of modern technologies provide hope that one day people will "share information and culture to promote greater understanding" though in present time it is just "a dream of a global village" (p. 205).

At the same time, a lot of pressing issues have appeared, for example, the question of defining the boundaries of "own" and "alien", searching for a possible degree of their "blurring" in order to establish a successful dialogue.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the language material, observations, and interpretations of semantic and compatibility features of units performing the linguistic representation of the "we-they" opposition allows us to conclude that:

- there are still tensions between ethnic and cultural communities and the communities are growing larger as a result of globalization. These are no longer separate countries or republics but, for example, Europe and the world around it;

- a specific mechanism that contributes to the development of intercultural dialogue is the practice of mental "mechanistic" transferring yourself into the place of "alien/other", developing a spirit of critical self-esteem in order to destroy negative stereotypes;

- creating an open platform for direct communication, which allows to get to know each other better, activates the process of intercultural dialogue;

- the quantitative ratio of the pronouns corresponding to the meaning "selfness" and "otherness" in the conference proceedings has shown that at this stage there is a tendency to unification into large geopolitical communities, to develop common norms and standards that allow these communities to function successfully and spread the zone of their influence to the neighbouring states;

- the compatibility models have demonstrated that the majority of the synthagms including the "other/another" components have a positive connotation;

- the English language pronouns corresponding to the semantic unit "selfness" are 1.5 times more frequent than those corresponding to the semantic unit "otherness". The trend demonstrates the desire to search for possible ways of getting closer to each other thus avoiding the situations of intolerance or mutual reproaches.

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