

# **A Taxonomy of Cross-cultural Differences in Slavic Languages**

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is twofold: a. to present interim results of the project called cross-cultural Slavic Studies, conducted at the AMU Slavic Department since 1994 using primarily Polish and Serbo-Croatian evidence, b. to point at possible generalization of these results using an approach rooted in the field where pragmatics overlaps with cognitive as well as cross-cultural linguistics and psychology..

## 2. A conceptual map

Cross-cultural and cognitive-linguistic approaches have been used as a general framework for analysis in this paper. That is, I have adopted the view that: "In natural language meaning consists in human interpretation of the world. It is subjective, it is anthropocentric, it reflects predominant cultural concerns and culture-specific modes of social interaction as much as any objective features of the world 'as such'" (Wierzbicka, 1988:2). Furthermore, the analysis will use the etic:emic distinction and the set of ideas behind it, recently discussed in Pike (1996). This strain of thought is, as we know, rooted both in the tradition of anthropological linguistics (From Humboldt to Whorf) and cross-cultural psychology (from Wundt to Osgood and Triandis).

Two other adopted propositions stem from cognitive linguistics. I assume that: 1) language is primarily symbolic in its nature, and 2) that grammatical structures cannot be looked upon as autonomous from lexicon, or as Langacker (1991:1) puts it: „Grammatical structures do not constitute an autonomous formal system or level of representation: they are claimed instead to be inherently symbolic, providing for the structuring and conventional symbolization of conceptual content. Lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum of symbolic units, divided only arbitrarily into separate components...”

### 3. Emerging Questions

If we apply the claim that there are links between language and culture to a comparison of the two Slavic languages in question, then this means at least two things: a. the differences of two cultural codes are mirrored in these two languages, b. linguistic differences contribute to the differences in the sphere of culture.

Let us use the following two examples. Writing about the war in the former Yugoslavia Polish journalist Dawid Warszawski describes the situation where a woman from Croatia addresses Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a former Polish prime minister:

- *Gdyby pan premier, będąc w Vukovarze, mógł o niego zapytać tamtejsze władze...*

‘Mr. prime minister if you could, when you are Vukovar, ask local authorities about him’

(Warszawski, 1995)

The Serbo-Croatian equivalent of this sentence (that is the source sentence) is:

- *Da li biste, kad budete u Vukovaru, mogli za njega pitati tamošnje vlasti*

‘If you could, when you are in Vukovar, ask local authorities about him’

As we can see, the reporter has changed the original utterance by introducing the way Poles address each other in formal manner. This is a part of a wider cultural scheme, where practically everybody has to be addressed (in formal situations) by her title (*magister, doktor, profesor, dziekan, rektor, mecenas, redaktor, kierownik, prezes...*), where one uses a higher title (as in using *dziekanie* ‘dean’ to address a *prodziekan* ‘vice dean’) and where one uses such a title to address those who do not perform the function in question any more (as we can see from the example with Mr. Mazowiecki). Moreover Polish form of address includes phrases like *klaniam się* ‘I bow down (to you)’ when greeting somebody or *szuję pomocą* ‘I serve you with my help’ when expressing one’s willingness to help. Finally, one points to herself using the phrase *moja osoba* ‘my person’ and expressing her will by phrases like *pragnę powiedzieć* ‘I would like to say, literally I am craving to say’. All this is not common in Serbo-Croatian, and this is a clear case where two languages reflect two different cultural patterns. The higher importance of formal address in Polish than in Serbo-Croatian or Russian can also be seen from the fact that Polish has five different items used in formal address (*Pan/Pani/Panowie/Panie/Państwo*) where Serbo-Croatian and Russian have only one (*Vi/Вы*). Similar to this are instances of so-called culture-bound lexemes, numerous examples of which can be found in Kaliszewska, 1997.

On the other hand there are numerous examples where relations of cultures and languages are not so transparent, as we have in Šipka (1998a):

<i>Tamo je tobogan vodeni. Moći ću da sa nje koristim.</i>	sentence with Polish interference
<i>Tamo je vodeni tobogan. Moći ću da ga koristim.</i>	standard Serbo-Croatian
Tam jest zjeżdźalnia wodna. Będę mógł z niej korzystać.	standard Polish
There is a water tobogan over there. I will be able to use it.	translation

There are two differences in this example: a. the word order (in Polish it is Noun-modifier and in Serbo-Croatian modifier-Noun), b. verbal valence (*korzystać z + Gen* in Polish versus *koristiti + Acc* in Serbo-Croatian). It is not clear if one conceptualizes the modifier differently if it precedes as opposed to following after it nor it is clear whether one conceptualizes the act of using something because the verb in that language governs the Accusative without prepositions as opposed to the prepositional Genitive.

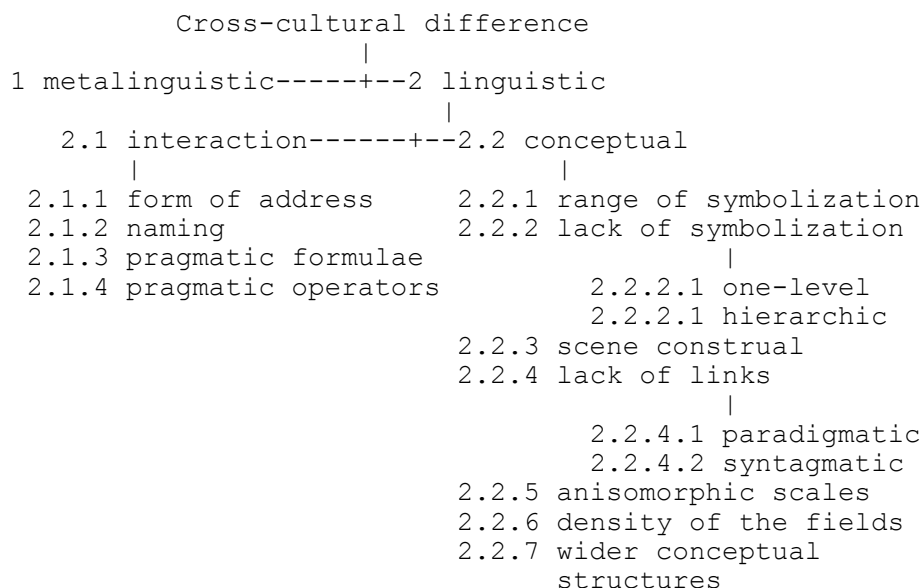
Examples like these bring us to the following questions:

- a. Where can we find correlations between language and culture?
- b. How can we demonstrate these relations?
- c. What kind of correlations can we identify?
- d. What are the consequences of these relations to Slavic studies?

It is a matter of course that I will not be able to answer to all these questions. I will propose a taxonomy of the differences between Polish and Serbo-Croatian which can be related to the differences between these cultures. Such taxonomy can be a first step in answering the questions mentioned above.

#### 4. A Tentative Taxonomy

The following taxonomy has been proposed



By metalinguistic differences, I mean a situation where a community consciously shapes its language, such as in the process of developing the standard form language, or any particular terminology. In all those cases the cultural norms, which are not incorporated in the language, influence the form of language as independent factors. My own investigation of Polish and Serbian computing terminology (Šipka, 1998b) has shown that the Serbian terminology stabilizes considerably slower than its Polish counterpart (on average exhibiting 1.41 equivalents of one English term as opposed to 1.21 in Polish). Similar results have been obtained by Serafin 1998 and Çakolli 1998 using the example of car-mechanic and economic terminology respectively. One possible explanation is that the confrontational patterns of the Balkan cultures make it more difficult for their speakers to come to an agreement about which terminology is to be used.

On the other hand, linguistic differences refer to cases where language and culture are interwoven, where cultural traits are incorporated into the substance of language. Among linguistic differences one can differentiate interaction differences, i.e. those that come into existence in speech acts and in no other circumstances, and conceptual differences, which

influence one's cognitive functioning as a whole, when, for example, one language has a lexicalization (as defined by Lipka 1992:95) and the other does not.

Among interaction differences we can identify four groups. First, there are differences in addressing one's interlocutor in formal occasions, which was mentioned before. Second, Polish tends to use shorter forms of some proper names in informal address (forms like: Ania rather than Anna, Kasia rather than Katarzyna, etc.) as neutral whereas Serbo-Croatian has full forms as neutral. The same is true for naming goods one wants to buy in a grocery store. In Polish one normally uses diminutives *mleczko* 'milk', *chlebek* 'bread', *maselko* 'butter', *bułeczka* 'bagel', etc and Serbo-Croatian full forms *mlijeko* 'milk', *hljeb* 'bread', *maslac* 'butter', *zemi;ka* 'bagel', etc. Third, Serbo-Croatian has pragmatic formulae like „Crko dabogda! 'Drop dead, for God's sake' which are not common in Polish. Finally these two languages differ in their inventory of pragmatic operators. For example, Polish has the exclamation 'o' (used when something has been found or one remembers something) which is non-existent in Serbo-Croatian. Budzińska (1998) provides numerous other examples of the differences from this last group.

Among very common conceptual differences are those concerning the range of symbolization. Thus one Russian symbolization *дядя* 'uncle' comprises two Polish (*wuj* 'maternal uncle', *stryj* 'paternal uncle'), and three Serbo-Croatian (*ujak* 'maternal uncle', *stric* 'paternal uncle', *tetak* 'husband of one's father's sister'). The other way around, Serbo-Croatian has only one word for church (*crkva*), Polish has two of them (*kościół* 'Catholic or any other church' and *cerkiew* 'Orthodox church'), whereas Russian has three of them (*церковь* 'Orthodox church', *костел* 'Polish Catholic church', *кирка* 'Lutheran church'). The same phenomenon can be found in grammar. In plural of adjective declension Russian has only one

form for all three genders, Polish has two (masculine-personal and non-masculine-personal) while Serbo-Croatian has three genders (masculine, feminine, neuter). Similar examples can be found in Dębińska 1998, where we can see that the symbolization of directions using prepositional phrases is much more precise in Serbo-Croatian than in Polish. Polish uses *do* + *Gen* where Serbo-Croatian differentiates *do* + *Gen*, *na* + *Acc*, *u* + *Acc*, *uz* + *Acc*, or Dative without preposition.

The second major conceptual difference is the absence of symbolization in one of two languages. These examples are well known from language teaching and translation practice (culture-bound lexemes, Slavic verb aspect, etc.) I would like to point out that these examples belong to two different categories. On the one hand we have the one-level absence of symbolizations, such as in Serbian *slava*, ‘family patron’s day’, which is nonexistent in Polish. On the other hand, we have hierarchical absence of symbolization such as in Polish *rodzeństwo* ‘sibling’ which is a generalization for one’s brother and sister, and which does not have any Serbo-Croatian equivalent.

One of very frequent conceptual differences is related to the way one construes scenes in two languages. The Polish verb *przepraszać* ‘excuse oneself’ assumes a scene where we are giving somebody our excuses *przepraszać* + *Acc* (in the scene one who is ‘guilty’ ‘excuses’ the one to whom she is guilty) whereas reflexive the Serbo-Croatian *izvinjavati se* ‘excuse oneself’ assumes impersonal excusing oneself. In Russian, however, one asks (orders) her interlocutor to excuse her (извините меня). Numerous examples of such differences can be found in Borowska (1998) and Wilk (1998).

The categories mentioned so far refer to the language symbols taken in isolation. There are, however, such differences where which can be observed only in the system as a whole. One language can have links which are nonexistent in the other. This pertains to both paradigmatic and syntagmatic links. Thus, Serbo-Croatian and Russian have a paradigmatic link between *čaj/чай* ‘tea’ and *čajnik/чайник* ‘tea-pot’ and Polish does not have it in its *herbata*, ‘tea’, and *czajnik*, ‘tea-pot’. Similarly, Polish has syntagmatic links between *wielki*, ‘great’, and *emocje*, ‘emotions’, *tenis*, ‘tennis’, which does not exist in Serbo-Croatian, where *veliki* ‘great’, cannot be used with those nouns (rather *jake emocije*, lit. ‘strong emotions’, and *tenis na visokom nivou*, lit. ‘high-level tennis’).

Similar to the previous category are certain anisomophic scales in two languages. Thus on the temperature scale, Polish has a more differentiated cold end, whereas Serbo-Croatian has a more precise hot end of its scale, as we can see from the following example.

hot	cold
<u>gorący</u>	- ciepły - letni - <u>chłodny</u> - zimny
vreo - vruć	- topao - mlak - <u>hladan</u>

Similarly, systems can differ in density of their lexical fields. Thus, Serbo-Croatian has many more obscene lexemes than Polish, which can be seen from Pecyna (1998).

Finally the last category is related to the wider conceptual structures, mostly idioms. To exemplify this, let us use the example of Polish idiom *złatwić coś krakowskim targiem* ‘settle an issue by mutual concessions’, which is nonexistent in Serbo-Croatian. Serbo-Croatian, on the other hand, has idiom *Bog Bogova* ‘the allmighty, literally: the God of all gods’, which does not exist in Polish. Numerous examples of this kind can be found in Przewoźna (1999)

Let me stress that the taxonomy which has been presented is just a list of differences which, due to its relevance to the cognitive and sociopsychological sphere, might be considered cross-cultural differences. This is just a first step in answering the four previously mentioned questions.

## 5. Conclusions

The taxonomy and its examples have shown that the two observed languages, although being closely related genetically, differ considerably when being contrasted from a cross-cultural perspective. At the same time one could see that lexical and grammatical differences fall into the same categories. This has at least three consequences. First, in any project of applied linguistics (language teaching, lexicography, etc.) one should take these differences into consideration. Second, the results support claims reiterated by Wierzbicka, Pike and others about relations of languages and their respective cultures. Third, it supports Langacker's negation of the autonomy of grammatical structures.

Further goals of this project are twofold. First, it should build applied linguistic tools to cope with such cross-cultural linguistic differences. Second, it should find mechanisms of testing and proving that these differences are indeed culture-related. Both these goals assume complex research in the field of overlapping of pragmatics and other linguistic disciplines on the one hand and cross-cultural psychology on the other.

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