# Language World Models: Universal & Specific Features

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Different cultures could be viewed as certain systems, which represent the same reality and human experience in quite contrasting and qualitatively different ways. These qualitatively different visions are reflected in the basic assumptions and beliefs about real world, human knowledge, values and nature of personality.

Being an important part of any culture, natural languages could be seen as an instrument to approach and understand culture from within. Cultural representations are embodied in language forms and meanings. Thus, the listing and investigation of culturally relevant lexical units and grammar forms become very important and topical. Seen from the anthropocentric point of view any ethnic language could be defined as "a place where spirit dwells" (Степанов 1995: 28). In the words of a famous Russian scientist D. Likhachiev, "the language of a nation is in itself compressed or even algebraic expression of all culture of a nation" (Лихачёв 1993: 9).

Such approach to understanding of the essence of natural language is not so very new in linguistics dating back to the ideas of the prominent German scientist W. Humboldt. In the course of the ideas of humboldtianism[1] languages are different interpretations of the world by the man. Representing the indirect reflection of the world (mediated by human consciousness) different languages give different visions of the reality. According to Humboldt, any language creates a certain model of the world for those, who use it, as though leading round them a magic circle of determined representations and images.

To exceed the bounds of this circle one might only by study of another language, "by entering into other circle", i.e. through penetration into the system of world outlook embodied by other language. Thus, distinctions among languages seem to be somewhat greater, than just language distinctions: various languages by their nature, by their influence on cognition and on feelings appear to be different outlooks (Гумбольдт 1985: 370).

[1] Humboldtianism is a totality of views on language and approaches to its study, which formed under the influence of linguistic conception of an outstanding German scientist of the 19th century W. Humboldt. The kernel of his theory might be characterized as anthropological approach to language, supposing its study in close connection and interaction with consciousness and thinking of the person, with human's cultural and spiritual life. Humboldt's ideas were revived in the 20th century within the framework of a linguistic trend called neohumboldtianism.

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Being captured by the language, a person handles the things in a way they are presented by language, behaves in society like this is prescribed by the language. So, the language turns out to be in the closest contact to spiritual activity of the person, with cultural life of the ethnic community, whose communicative needs it serves. The connection between language and culture is rather exactly formulated in such Sapir's statement: the culture is what this or that society makes and thinks, the language is how this society thinks. It means that the language (to be more exact, its content) gives keys to the understanding of ways of thinking of a nation, discloses the peculiar features of mentality of language bearers, gives a chance to look on the world by the eyes of other people, to comprehend how the bearers of another language and culture feel and think.

Thus, the concept of "language world model" is becoming the main concept of linguistic and cultural analysis.

This notion has been founding different interpretations in the works of Humboldt, Weisgerber, Whorf, Coşeriu, Trir and other scientists. Having generalized all available approaches to the definition of the given concept, it seems possible to accept as "a working definition" the following one: "Language world model is the certain sight on the reality conveyed by the means of the certain language. It is a verbalized interpretation of the environment by the language community". Language world model (LWM) shouldn't be identified with scientific world model (SWM). The last is common for all language collectives. It reflects a modern level of development of a scientific international thought that finds fixing in classifications and terminology of the concrete sciences. If the scientific world model is generated by the scientific consciousness, the language world model is produced by the ordinary, naive consciousness, which being refracted in specific language promotes the formation of special for each language substance – LWM.

However, there is no impenetrable wall between these two forms of reflection of the reality. The scientific world model interacts with the language world model in any national language. In fact this global problem can be reduced to a more concrete one: problem of interaction between the concept as a logical category and the meaning as a language category[2]. So what are these language forms which manifest the substratum of the national specific features of the language? Generally speaking, it is the language as a whole, to be more precise, "the form of the language", as W. Humboldt called it. Being unique for every language, conveying the spirituality of the nation, "the form of the language", after W. Humboldt, is the combination of separate language elements in an integral whole. The German scientist distinguished two kinds of language form: the internal and the external ones. The paramount importance is given to the internal form, because the content of this notion implies the inner structure of the whole language, the key principle of its generation[3]. The external form of the language,

[2] This issue is being discussed in detail in the article "Humboldt's Spirit of the Nation" and Approaches to Its Study in Contemporary Linguistics" written by Golubovs'ka I. and prof. Chi Yang (*Tamkang Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1999, no. 4, p. 204 – 217).

[3] Alongside with the notion of "inner form of the language" W. Humboldt operates with the notion of "inner form of lexical unit" or "etymon", which could be defined as a semantic attribute fixed in the name of the designated subject or phenomenon. Etymon gives reasons for a phonic substance of a



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manifesting and incarnating the internal form, embodies it on all levels of language structure in phonetic, semantic and grammatical language substance. Thus, Humboldt's idea of "the form of the language" is rather like the modern linguistic concept of "the language world model", the working definition of which has already been given.

The national and cultural peculiarity finds its expression not only on semantic, but also on morphological and syntactic levels of the language structure, that was excellently shown in the works of Anna Wierzbicka. In her work of 1991, she argues with the adepts of traditional understanding of language meaning coming up with new approaches to interpretation and investigation of language meaning: "Language is an integrated system, where everything 'conspires' to convey meaning: words, grammatical constructions and various 'illocutionary' devices (including intonation). Accordingly, one might argue that linguistics falls naturally into three parts, which could be called lexical semantics, grammatical semantics, and illocutionary semantics. Ch. Morris's division of the study of signs into three aspects: semantics, syntax, and pragmatics may make good sense with respect to some artificial sign systems, but it makes no sense with respect to natural languages, whose syntactic and morphological devices (as well as illocutionary devices) are themselves, carriers of meaning. 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 1991: 16, 17).

However, the vocabulary (lexical staff) of that or other language doubtlessly remains the leading substance for the expression of the mental-language peculiarity of certain peoples. It is just lexical level, which shows the unevenness of the semantic mapping of the world by different languages; lexical items containing connotations (emotional associations of positive or negative character able to express all sensual, emotional, behavioral, volitional elements of human consciousness) also function on lexical language level and are doubtlessly culturally orientated in their overwhelming part. Furthermore, words, denoting mythical objects created by the collective consciousness of different peoples and embodied in national myths, legends and epic pieces also belong to the language level of words.

Though this culturally determined lexics forms a perfect object for cross-cultural investigation, we'd like to focus now on another one: on so called "cultural concepts", which are implied in any culture being embodied in language forms on lexical language level. There are two main understandings of the term "concept": 1) general concept about something (a traditional one); 2) complex of culturally orientated notions about an object (in the spirit of A. Wierzbicka). We'll look upon concepts as culturally determined notions (cultural concepts), which have a sublogical basis embodying the intuitive collective knowledge of certain ethnic community about some entities deprived of materialistic ontology. On the language level these notions are represented in the form of abstract nomens (nouns), which

word, exposing the motive of expression of the given meaning just by the given combination of sounds. Sometimes the connection between the form and the meaning as though "lays on a surface" and could be easily realized, though much oftener the etymologists' work is needed for the restoration of words' etymons.



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display their inner nature through the set of most frequently used contexts. Cultural concepts are related to the world of ethnic personality, reflecting specific features of national character, way certain peoples perceive the outer world, feel, think, communicate and behave in the society[4].

As it was already shown in my work "Russian Cultural Concepts" (Голубовская, 2000), Russian personhood could be explored through the concepts of *душа* (soul), *тоска* (anguish, depression), *воля* (freedom) and *судьба* (fate). As to the Chinese cultural concepts related to the characteristics of Chinese personhood, I dare state, that the representations of typically Chinese ways of thinking, feeling and behaving might be clearly seen with the help of the following concepts: *xin* – heart, *qi* – internal vitality and energy, *mian* – face, *ming* – fate and fortune, *xiao* – filial piety; *guan xi* – interpersonal dynamics and relations. American modern culture could be could be explored on the language level through the concepts of *self, control, action and competition.* We assume that the list of key words of different cultures is open and any word could be added to it if the scholar would be able to say anything essential or original about the culture through the analysis of the chosen word.

In the present article we'd like to discuss some basic American values as they are perceived by Russians. Let us begin from the most cherished American concept of a sovereign *self* through which one can see the Americans as independent operators, each of whom must emphasize personal strengths and develop *self – esteem* to succeed in life. This word is closely connected with such words as *individualism* and *privacy* the latter finding no equivalents neither in Russian, nor in Chinese. There are many reasons considering the history of the United States to explain these values (see deep insights into this problem in Marshall 1998). Concepts of *self* and *privacy* could be regarded as components of individualism which is a core of American character alongside with such features as action – work orientation, practicality and others. The positive connotations for the concept of *self* one can find in English proverbs and sayings, which emphasize the importance of protecting one's own interests:

> When everyone takes care of himself, care is taken of all. // Look after number one ["Number one" refers to oneself]. // Number one is the first house in the row. // Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. // Every man for himself, and God for us all. // He that is ill to himself will be good to nobody. // He helps little that helps not himself. // God helps them that help themselves. // Mind other men, but most yourself. // Self – preservation is the first law of nature. // Every man is nearest himself. // The parson always christens his own child first. // The tod never sped better than when he went his own errand (Fergusson 1983).

American individualism is tightly connected to the *self – help concept*: American culture claims against relying on others:

> If you would be well served, serve yourself. // If you want a thing well done, do it yourself. // If you want a thing done, go; if not, send. // Command your man, and do it yourself. // Self do, self have. // He who depends on another dines ill and sups worse.

[4] Analysis of some Russian cultural concepts one can find in Weirzbicka 1996; Арутюнова 1999; Голубовская 2000.



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Self – support concept is closely related with the idea of solitude, which in the majority of cases takes positive connotations in English proverbs:

> Solitude is often the best society. // Better be alone than in bad company. // He travels fastest who travels alone. // Solitude is the nest of thought. // It is better to want meat than guests or company. // Safety lies in solitude [Persian proverb]. // Misery loves company.

Russian evaluation of solitude is totally different:

> Сам на себя никто не нарадуется [‘Nobody would become happy because of himself’]. // Сам себе на радость никто не живёт [‘Nobody lives for to be happy alone’]. // Моя радость хоть во пне, да не во вне [‘My joy could be even in a stump, though not in myself’]. // Живи для людей, поживут люди для тебя [‘Live for people, and people would live for you’]. // Друг на друга глядючи, улыбнёшься; на себя глядючи, только всплачешься [‘If you look at another person, you would smile, if you look at yourself, you would just cry’]. // Глуп совсем, кто не знается ни с кем [‘If you don’t want to know other people, you are just stupid’].

Individualism as a distinctive feature of American character is in sharp contrast to Eastern idea of collectivism and community. Speaking about Russia which is considered to be the half – oriental country we can state, that Russian “communal” way of thinking was determined both historically and geographically: centuries of constant danger of enemy invasion, severe climate, vast territories, – all these factors formed what is called now Russian character (Павловская 1999). Ideology of Soviet Russia was focused on the communist concepts of collectivism and community, it absolutely ignored the personality with all its needs, desires and potential. But the ethical socialist and communist ideas of unselfishness, selflessness and respect for the interests of collective worked well in Russia, because they found a good response in Russian mentality, in the sphere of archetypes of collective subconscious. Let’s see how these fundamental characteristics of Russian way of thinking are reflected in Russian proverbs:

> Одна пчела немного мёду натаскает [‘One bee would bring a little honey’]. // Один в поле не воин [‘You can’t fight, if you are just single’]. // Одной рукой и узла не завяжешь [‘With one hand you can’t tie a knot’]. // Две головни и в поле дымятся (курятся), а одна и в. печи гаснет [‘Two charred logs smoke in the field, and one goes out in the stove’] // Веника не переломишь, а по пруту весь веник переломаешь [‘Besom is not so easy to fracture, but it is easy to do twig by twig’]. // В согласном стаде волк не страшен [‘A good herd should not be afraid of a wolf’]. // Братчина, так и складчина (всё пополам) [‘Where there is brotherhood, everything is shared’]. // Семеро одного не ждут [‘Seven men don’t wait for one’] (Даль 1984: II, 229–230).

Language forms not only reflect the environment and culture of the certain ethnic community: they also form the personality of the bearer of language. And, as a rule, ethnic personality remains unconscious about the great creative role of native language in structuring of his character, behaviour, attitude to life, way he interacts with other people, of how he realizes his role and place in the society. Even language grammar forms could be very helpful while investigating the influence of language on the formation of national character. Some of them just lie on the



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surface. Let's compare English and Russian pronouns. It is a common knowledge, that English pronoun of the first person singular is written from the capital letter: *I (me – first)*. In Russian language when we want to express the respectful attitude to another person we write the pronoun of the second person *plural* from the capital letter – *Вы*. In the Chinese language it's impossible to find forms, which have relation to extolling of one: instead, in Chinese there exist a special polite form to address *another* person – *nin*. American cult of personality might be also seen through socio – language phenomenon, which is getting lately such names as language correctness, political correctness and commercial correctness. In its basis lies the positive effort not to hurt people's sensitivity, to maintain one's dignity, good humor, health, life. On the language level the work of this principle could be seen through the usage of different euphemistic words and expressions in order to make the attitude to any person as a member of a society even more humane. Unfortunately, the Russian language is now making just first steps in this direction still ignoring a separate person as the object of due respect and caring attitude. Professor of Moscow University S.G. Ter-Minasova in her article *Language, Personality, Internet* gives an interesting example. In the USA when person becomes old he or she gets so called *golden passport,* which implies lots of moral and material privileges *for long service.* In Russian *pension book* the first line reads "the pension is appointed because of old age" (Тер-Минасова 2000: 39). It goes without saying, that it is much more ethical treat a retiring person in American way. Language correctness is mostly developed in the sphere of commerce where any person is firstly regarded as a client, customer or passenger. To cope well with business one has to be extremely polite. That's why passengers of all types of transport are classified in such a way*: first class, business class* (Russian equivalent – *second class*), *economy class* (Russian equivalent – *third class*). On the package of Russian medicine one can read, for example, *годен до* 9.01.2002 (valid until 9.01.2002); the corresponding inscription on American products is not so categorical: *best before* 9.01.2002. I assert, that Russian customer would never buy this medicine even on the eve of the 9th of January 2002, because in his language consciousness *годен (valid)* is opposed to *не годен (not valid)*. As to American customer I may assume, that his behavior would be most likely modeled by language forms, which put *best* into one line with *better* and *good.* The given examples are not just mere illustrations of how language correctness works: they also demonstrate the deep and mighty impact of language on the models of our behavior in the society. Sepir and Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity in our days takes contours of the theory.

Going back to comparison of the basic features of national characters let's examine how the attitude to work/action vs. idleness is conveyed by language forms in American and Russian. It is a common knowledge, which Americans are very much addicted to work and leave no or little time for rest and relaxation. On the other hand, "Russian laziness" has also become a kind of Russian idea. Here are some English and Russian proverbs to compare:

> Standing pools gather filth. // A sluggard takes a hundred steps because he would not take one in due time. // Idle folks have the least leisure. // It is more pain to do nothing than something. // The dog that is idle barks at the fleas, but he that is



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hunting feels them not. // The devil finds work for idle hands to do. // An idle brain is the devil's workshop. // He that is busy, is tempted by but one devil; he that is idle, by a legion. // By doing nothing we learn to do ill. // Of idleness comes no goodness. // Idleness is the root of all evil. // Sloth breeds a scab. // An idle youth, a needy age. // Idleness is the key of beggary. // Laziness goes so slowly that poverty overtakes it. // Idleness must thank itself if it goes barefoot. // The slothful man is the beggar's brother. // A horse that will not carry a saddle must have no oats. // The sluggard's convenient season never comes. // For the diligent the week has seven todays, for the slothful seven tomorrows. // Idle folks lack no excuses. // The slothful is the servant of the counters (prisons). // Sluggards are never great scholars. // A lazy sheep thinks its wool heavy. // As good be an addled egg as an idle bird.

As we see, English proverbs focus on bad effects and dangers of laziness connecting it with poverty and bad deeds. Idleness and slothfulness get negative ironical characteristics. On the contrary, diligent attitude to what you do is linked with the idea of success, luck, money and prosperity. Action in itself is very positively characterized:

Diligence is the mother of good fortune. // Care and diligence bring luck. // Diligence makes an expert workman. // Better wear out shoes than sheets. // Labor overcomes all things. // A diligent scholar and the master paid. // Better to wear out than to rust out. // Elbow grease gives the best polish. // Where bees are there is honey. // No bees, no honey; no work, no money. // Keep your shop and your shop will keep you. // The mill gets by going. // He that labors and thrives, spins gold. // Plough deep, while sluggards sleep; and you shall have corn to sell and to keep. // Footprints on the sands of time are not made by sitting down. // Ninety per cent of inspiration is perspiration. // You don't get something for nothing. // He that will not endure labor in this world, let him not be born. // The race is got by running.

But if we look through Dal's dictionary of Russian proverbs, we will find just a few units where labor is positively characterized:

По готовой работе вкусен обед ['When the work is done, dinner tastes well']. // Работа – лучший приварок ['Work is the best gain']. // Своя ноша не тянет. На себя работа – не барщина ['Your own burden is not so heavy to carry. Working for oneself is not working for the landowner']. // Терпение и труд – всё перетрут ['Patience and work overcome everything'].

On the contrary, there are plenty of proverbs where laziness is treated apologetically. Work is mostly described negatively, as something that can wait and seems not so pleasant to do. Diligent and honest work is not connected with the idea of big fortune:

Пилось бы да елось, да работа на ум не шла ['We'd rather eat and drink not thinking about the work']. // День к вечеру, а работа к завтрему ['Day comes to the evening, and work will be done tomorrow']. // Всех дел не переделаешь ['You can't do all things']. // На мир не наработаешься. Работа молчит, а плеча кряхтит ['It's hard to work for community. Work is silent, but shoulder hurts']. // Дело не малина, в лето не опадёт. Дело не голуби, не разлетятся ['Business is not a kind of raspberries, in the summer it won't fall down. Business is no pigeons, it won't fly away']. // Работа не чёрт, в воду не уйдёт ['Work is not the devil, it won't go under



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the water']. // Дело не медведь, в лес не уйдёт ['Affair is not a bear, it won't go to the forest']. // Что дело, дело не сокол – не улетит ['Affair is not a falcon – it won't fly way']. // Работа не волк, в лес не убежит ['Work is not a wolf, it won't run away to the forest']. // У бога дней впереди много: наработаемся ['God has plenty of days for work']. // Нам бы так пахать, чтоб мозолей не набивать ['We'd like to work not getting callus on our hands']. // Ретивая лошадка недолго живёт ['Zealous horse has a short age']. // Ретивый надсадится. Горяченький скоро надорвётся ['An ardent man will soon overstrain. A fervent one will split his health']. // От трудов праведных не наживёшь палат каменных ['Working honestly one can not build a big house made of stone. (Ever busy, ever bare)']. // От трудов своих сыт будешь, а богат не будешь ['Your work will feed you, but will not make you rich']. // От работы не будешь богат, а будешь горбат ['Your work won't bring you any wealth, it will just make you humpbacked']. // На наши заработки и годовой псалтыри не закажешь ['For what we earn we can't buy even Psalter'].

Such "Russian attitude" to work could be explained historically, by centuries of serfdom, which implied the forced labor of those humble people, who appeared to be the main architects of national folklore.

American action/work orientation is undoubtedly related to the idea of time control. According to Dr. Robert Kohls, American language is filled with references to time, giving a clear picture of how much it is valued. Time is something to be "on", to be "kept", "filled", "saved", "used", "spent", "wasted", "lost", "gained", "planned", "given", "made the most of", etc. (Kohl 1994: 56). English proverbs are also very indicative as to the value given to the time and its proper use within English – American culture:

Time works wonders. // Time is money. // He that has time, has life. // Gain time, gain life. // Patience, time and money accommodate all things. // The crutch of time does more than the club of Hercules. // What greater crime than loss of time. // Time spent in vice or folly is doubly lost. // If you lose your time, you cannot get money or gain. // Time lost can't be recalled. // Lose an hour in the morning and you'll be all day hunting for it. // Take time when time comes, lest time steal away.

Russian attitude to time is no so pragmatic. Complicated weather conditions, long periods of coldness during the late fall, winter and early spring (almost half of the year), impossibility to work efficiently during cold time determined a specific treatment of time in Russia. Russian emotionality and love for developing interpersonal friendly relations also could be seen as factors, which determine depreciative attitude to time as to value in itself. Russian mentality seen through American values in the case of time definitely seems irrational (alongside with many other things). For example, Russian can be waiting for a friend who is being late for a very long time not getting mad at him at all, finding instead reasons and good excuses to justify him. In American culture your being late is qualified as a personal insult mainly because Americans perceive waiting as wasting time, rationalistically realizing they could do a lot of work *for themselves* instead of doing this irrational thing "waiting *for you*". Thus, intercultural "case of time" pushes you to think, that Russian culture is more "people-oriented" in comparison with American "thing-oriented" culture, where, inevitably, the dear "self" firstly values what is done for the sake of the private benefit.



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Here are some Russian proverbs about time to compare with American proverbs given above:

> Пошла по масло, а в печи погасло [‘A woman went to get some butter, meanwhile fire in the stove went out’ (meaning she met somebody and began to talk)]. // Пошёл по кавун, да там и затонул [‘He went to get a watermelon and sank’ (meaning he met somebody and got involved into another activity)]. // Русский час – всё сейчас. Русский час долог [‘Russian hour is long‘ (“now” means not “now”, but after in Russia)]. // В русский час много воды утечёт [‘During Russian hour lots of water can fly away’]. // Наше дело на срок не поспело [‘We haven’t managed to finish work on time’]. // Откладывать в долгий ящик [‘To put away into a long drawer’ (meaning not to do something that must be done for a long time)]. // Это долга песня. Этой песне конца нет [‘This is a long song. It has no end’ (said about something which is supposed to take lots of time for final fulfillment)].

As we tried to show, there are some cardinal differences in Russian and American world outlooks, in the way two peoples perceive and understand the outer world projected on them. In another vein, there are lots of common in how different nations think, feel and behave. The real world is unique, so are general laws of human thinking and behavior. Processes of internationalization and globalization (very active at the present time) with the help of internet create a new type of humankind: world wide society, where peculiarities of ethnic consciousness and ideology become less and less visible. Nevertheless, cultural differences still exist and remain worthy for diligent and detailed study.

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## Models des langues du monde : caractéristiques universelles et spécifiques

Dans cet article il s'agit de problème des models mondiales de langues, leurs traits universaux et spécifiques. On étudie les concepts comme des constantes de la conscience humaine. Les proverbes concernant les notions de paresse et de temps sont choisis comme le matériel empirique.

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