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Semantic Primitives and Conceptual Focus

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Abstract

From the communicative point of view the concept is a cognitive model according to which the speaker uses a certain language unit in one or another way. The core of the concept has been named “the conceptual focus”. It includes the most stable central substantive components which are universal for the specific language community. Along with images, emotional and sensational constituents these cover the main essence of the concept content.

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1. Introduction

A lot of thoughts that exist in our consciousness never get verbalized, because they are not for communication, and probably, there are no available linguistic means to express them. One can even believe that these thoughts have significant influence on human behavior, but this cannot be verified, and one may only make indirect judgments. That is why we are particularly interested in the concept expressed by linguistic means.

The verbalized concept points at the meaning: the meaning is the concept caught by a sign. Stopping for a second at this definition, which became classical in the linguistic literature, we need to note that it is actually not fully correct. If the sign is at least a bilateral essence (in any case, in its classical understanding it includes the form and the content), then the concept being already a mental essence is further “caught” by the content. The proper “catching” moment is probably related to «learning of the Existence» in the phenomenological philosophy concepts (in particular, Heidegger and Jaspers); in its turn, this can be a consequence of the “aggressive” etymology of the German word «notion», which literally means «catch» (greifen).

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This definition of the concept is consonant to the medieval thinkers who understood concepts as acts of catching, understanding and learning of the senses during verbal discussion and conflicts of interpretations. The “catching” acts are expressed in speech, which according to Abelard, are perceived as «a concept in the listener’s soul» or as an idea of an opus». He believed that concepts are not linked by the mind forms; they are derivatives of the elevated spirit or the wit capable of creative reproduction or collection, senses and thoughts as a universal thing, a combination of objects and speeches, which contains the mind as its part» (Abelard, 1995).

Although sometimes the language is not needed for creation of concepts, its role is evident in the internal organization of the communication subjects. The language is used for alignment, and therefore, for construction of concepts, to some extent. To be able to “catch” a thought, it must be also “volatile”. And such word must be “caught flying” too. Thus, there is double catching: catching of a thought by a word and catching of the flying word by the thought.

The communication process requires expression of concepts by linguistic means which often differ. Moreover, due to the complex structure no concept can be represented in speech in full. This is due to the fact that cognition has individual nature, in the same way as formation of the proper concept. Knowing a language means that the person also knows how to translate thoughts into word chains and vice versa. Therefore, the human mind may contain a specialized module responsible for such ability.

We need to mention that the word is not a complete representation of a concept – with its meaning, it transmits a few main conceptual attributes relevant for the message, and “transmission” of which is the task for the speaker. The rich content of the entire concept may be theoretically expressed only by combination of language means, while each reflects only its part. Therefore, the word is the means of access to conceptual knowledge. The language sign can be similar to a switch – it “switches” the concept in our consciousness, activating it in general and “launching” it into the thinking process. There follows the process of its inclusion into a certain context.

1.1. The Concept and a Word Meaning

The language is undoubtedly one of the main tools of the ambient world cognition, conceptualization and categorization. The role of the language is to provide internal organization of the subjects to be communicated. The concepts of the lexicon that have received a linguistic form and denotation are used for accumulation and further operation of the contents of information quanta about the world. They help to consolidate and generalize all the information that arrives via other channels: vision, hearing, taste, tactile senses and smelling. A certain space of meaning emerges, i.e., the linguistically fixed knowledge of the world which integrates the national and cultural experience of the specific linguistic community. The world of speakers of this language is formed, i.e., the linguistic view of the world as the complex of knowledge reflected in the vocabulary, phraseology, grammar, syntax.

However, speakers of different languages may see the world differently. The world is largely depicted, i.e., created depending on the conceptual system that is reflected in the language. Therefore, the language does not remain indifferent to the process of objects denotation and notions expression. Although there are variations in the conceptual structures of the consciousness, the relevant world images are much closer in the principal features. People fill the language units with the content that is dictated by the world structures and human activity in the world, which are stored in their heads as conceptual structures of consciousness. That is why we can only partially agree with the hypothesis of linguistic relativity (avoiding its extreme construction), taking into account the fact that we see, hear and generally perceive the ambient world in this certain way, and not differently, mainly thanks to the fact that our choice in its interpretation is predetermined by the cultural and linguistic habits of the specific society.

Different language can solve the task of segmentation of the flow of our sensorial and conceptual experience in absolutely diverse ways. Each language system «sets» its own ontology, i.e., the combination of referent objects which attract our attention and our thoughts in the cognition process. Thus, adoption of one or another language system means something much larger than the agreement on the ways of external expression of our knowledge. We never receive the reality directly, the world of objects is always given via a certain conceptual system, through a complex of linguistic meanings. The worlds created by man are, first of all, language worlds (or at least, the worlds expressed in linguistic form). Moreover, no universal linguistic worlds exist.

Being in a broader context, we have to point out that the ambient world is structured according to the common

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