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Verbal representation of lies in Russian and Anglo-American cultures

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Abstract

A number of researchers maintain that certain differences exist in the way lies are represented verbally in Russian and Western cultures. While Russian dictionaries tend to place particular emphasis on the immoral nature of lies, American ones underscore their illegality. The overall aim of this study is to analyze peculiarities of the conception of lying in these cultures. The study is based on the comprehensive analysis of 240 fragments from Russian and Anglo-American literature that describe lies and their realization. The results show that Russian people have a unique conception of lying that differs greatly from those of Western cultures.

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1. Introduction

People face lie and deception in almost all spheres of human activity; it is linked to our social life, the way we relate with one another (Martins and Carvalho, 2013).

People lie for different purposes: to protect themselves or somebody else, to avoid punishment, to win admiration from others, to maintain privacy or because it is required by politeness. Nobody wants to be deceived. But still some

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studies show that humans are lied to as many as 200 times a day and they tell two to three lies in a ten-minute conversation (Jellison, 1977). Therefore any attempt to remove lies from our lives is “utopian, psychologically wrong and futile” (Dubrovsky, 1994).

There are many definitions of lying offered by numerous researchers all over the world.

According to Paul Ekman, who is one of the world's leading deception experts, a lie occurs when one person intends to mislead another, doing it deliberately, without prior notification of this purpose, and without having been explicitly asked to do so by the target (Ekman, 2009). According to the definition offered by Ekman the sender intends to mislead the communication partner “without prior notification of this purpose”, i.e. depriving him of the legal right (admitted by the sender) to receive full information, his “right to the truth” (Kant, 1994). As can be seen from the above lie can be considered as denial of right to receive information, i.e. illegal action.

The psychology of understanding and identification of lie is rather new and understudied research area for the Russian science. During the Soviet period, the research of lie was under an unstated ban therefore the history of its studying in Russia begins from the 90s of the 20th century (Leontieva, 2012). Significant contribution to examination of the concept of lying was made by a famous Russian scientist V. Znakov who analyzed moral, psychological and social nature of lying. His research featuring 317 Russian and 49 Vietnamese people allowed to reveal cross-cultural peculiarities of the conception of lying. Along with that he examined historical sources, definitions of lying in Russian and foreign dictionaries and correlated the obtained data with those performed in the book by Ekman “Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage” (Ekman, 2009). The analysis of the obtained results revealed that the major part of the definitions of lying given by Russian participants coincide with those performed in Russian explanatory dictionaries and statements of Russian philosophers who emphasized the immoral nature of lying. According to Znakov, Russian people consider lying to be an immoral action. Therefore the conception of lying in Russian culture can be denoted in terms of morality, as opposed to the traditions of Western cultures, where the conception of lying is considered in terms of its lawfulness.

The following definition of lie was given by a famous Russian philosopher V. Solovyov: “In contrast to the delusion and mistake, lie means conscious and morally reprehensible opposite of the truth” (Solovyov, 1996). As can be seen from the definition above Russian scientists tend to describe lying as a negative action that is morally wrong. The aim of the study was to contribute to the current findings that claim that Russian people have a particular understanding of lying - they suppose it to be an immoral and dishonorable action while Western people tend to describe lying as an illegal action. We tried to execute comparative analysis on the basis of Russian and Anglo-American literature to analyze peculiarities of the conception of lying in these cultures and to arrange contextual indicators accompanying realization of lies in literary works.

2. Data and methods

2.1. Materials

People’s national character, their experience and traditions are reflected in literature. The research was conducted on the basis of comprehensive analysis of 240 fragments from Russian and Anglo-American literature that describe lies and their realization.

To reduce experimental errors the continuous sampling method was implied and all the analyzed features were considered in terms of presupposition. As used herein “Presupposition” shall mean that literary fragments analysis consisted of three stages. At first we analyzed the realization of lies in communication acts and denoted features accompanying lies. Then we re-read the book under analysis to know the plot and be sure while marking features in terms of morality. Finally we analyzed the literary fragment again in terms of presupposition, i.e. knowing whether a communication partner understands the immoral nature of lying or not. Presupposition also justifies the term “communication act” as we now know about the intentions of communication partners.

From the above material a sample of 100 communication acts describing lies, their realization and other means of direct and indirect denial of right to receive information was selected. For the integrity of the sample collection 40 fragments from Russian literature and 60 fragments from Anglo-American were selected. All the books under analysis were most famous classical works (J. Austen, F. Dostoevsky, etc.) and modern bestsellers (Harry Potter, P. Coelho, etc.) both selected from internet top 100 ratings, as they seem to be the best culture representatives. For

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