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TERMS AND PHENOMENA – METALANGUAGES SERVING THE CROSS-CULTURAL LINGUISTICS

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The purpose of the paper is to analyze metalanguages of cross-cultural linguistics. The main focus is placed on Wierzbicka's definitions of Japanese words and concepts.

The definitions are critically examined with respect to their usefulness for final users, not necessarily experts on things Japanese. Finally, an alternative descriptive method is provided, based on comparative examples of Japanese and Polish communication phenomena.

As a result of the analysis, considerable inaccuracies in Wierzbicka's approach are revealed, particularly in the interpretation of data gathered from informants, which is performed on too high a level of abstraction.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that general statements used in Wierzbicka's definitions significantly oversimplify the phenomena in question. In other words, definitions useful in applied cross-cultural studies should not go beyond their inevitable limitations. Instead, their main objective should be to provide the descriptions of homogeneous realities that do not obscure the source phenomena.

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INTRODUCTION

In a scientific manner of explanation, simple terms are used in attempt to explain complicated phenomena. The balance between the generic character of applied terms and possible advantages of such approach should assure maximum benefits for final users of proposed definitions ie. minimum simplification of the phenomena in question.

Metalanguage terms convey relations to facts, relations that are indirect by definition. In linguistics, especially in the multi-cultural linguistic research, the above mentioned indirectness is subject to multiplication. The elements to be described are not linked in a passive manner to their designates, but are processed and interpreted actively and creatively by their users (this fact has been acknowledged at least since the time of de Saussure, and hence further discussion is omitted here). The situations in which described elements are used in variable sets of conditions, the priorities not being obvious not only for the researcher but also for the language users themselves, are examined by numerous contemporary works on pragmatics and remain one of most serious though not the only issues which obscure

the results of such studies. The cultural background of a researcher may also influence the description results and foster biased conclusions. The level of abstraction may be regarded crucial in this aspect. The analysis of several concepts of linguistic description related to a number of Japanese cultural phenomena, with special emphasis on recent works by Wierzbicka and al., is the main subject of this paper.

COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT AND THE TASK OF LINGUISTICS

While it does not constitute a major problem to define the very notion of communication environment, it remains questionable to what extent a given environment can be described as a controllable set of conditions. Hymes states that:

- i. "A speech community is defined, tautologically but radically, as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing comprises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use. Both conditions are necessary." (HYMES 1974: 51)

The division in the subject of linguistic study, that is, between the form of speech and its patterns of use, the latter constituting the possible application schemes of the former, may be viewed as a significant effort to define new perspectives for linguistics. The task of the discipline is not perceived only as defining relations between certain system elements. It may be stated, in a somewhat naive but revolutionary manner, that the most general objective of linguistics is:

- ii. "to achieve a scientific understanding of how people communicate." (YNGVE 1975)

The applied status of the discipline is essential, especially to cross-cultural studies. Precisely, linguistic research should seek descriptions empowering their final users with abilities to understand better heterogeneous communication environments. While language systems may be extremely different, relevant data corpora should be analyzed in order to compare different schemes of reasoning laying behind them.

SYMMETRY VS. ASYMMETRY

Brown and Gilman in their classic research on personal pronouns in a number of European languages provided a concise model tool for the analysis of complex language reality. The concept of T and V pronouns reveals differences in their use across various communication environments. On a proper level of abstraction, basic parameters are defined with precision:

- iii. "The relations called *older than*, *parent of*, *employer of*, *richer than*, *stronger than*, and *nobler than* are all asymmetrical. If A is older than B, B is not older than A. The relation called «more powerful than», which is abstracted from these more specific relations, is also conceived to be asymmetrical. (...) Now we are concerned with a new set of relations which are symmetrical; for example, *attended the same school* or *have the same parents* or *practice the same profession*. If A has the same parents as B, B has the same parents as A. Solidarity is the name we give to the general relationship and solidarity is symmetrical." (BROWN & GILMAN 1960)

The low level of abstraction in the above statements corresponds to their high verifiability. The explanations going beyond certain level of abstraction may be of extremely limited use for

applied studies, the latter understood as systematized efforts undertaken in order to diminish the information entropy. The notions of *power* and *solidarity*, when dealt with *in abstracto*, open unlimited possibilities for discussion and interpretation. It is the relation to the clear-cut concepts of symmetry and asymmetry, which enables their usage in scientific contexts.

(A)SYMMETRY OF THANKS

Anna Wierzbicka is not only one of the most quoted scholars in recent works on cross-cultural communication studies, but also the author of numerous inspiring works in the field. While it is not this author's intention to undermine entirely the description techniques and concepts provided by Wierzbicka, it is his conviction that at least several of her definitions related to Japanese deserve more thorough insight.

In her definitions of cultural concepts Wierzbicka uses the 'natural semantic metalanguage' (WIERZBICKA 2003: 6). As stated elsewhere:

iv. "This metalanguage consists of a small set of simple meanings which evidence suggests can be expressed by words or bound morphemes in all languages; for example PEOPLE, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, THIS, SAY, THINK, WANT, KNOW, GOD, BAD, NO." (GODDARD, WIERZBICKA 1997)

While the basic assumption works in theory, in practice it may be difficult to implement, as in the following example v.:

v.

"*thank*

kansha suru 感謝する

a) I know: you did something good for me

a) I know: you did something good for me

b) I feel something good towards you because of this

b) I feel something good towards you because of this

b') I know: I couldn't do something good like this for you

b'') I feel something bad because of this

c) I say this because I want you to feel something good

c) I say this because I think I should say it"

(WIERZBICKA 2003: 157)

Seemingly very similar schemes of language behavior reveal substantial differences in their practical application. As such, the example serves to support the basic hypothesis of the original Wierzbicka's article. Still, it is not clear, why Japanese thanks (should they be called so) require in their scientific description conditions (b') and (b''), quite differently from their English quasi-counterparts. The link between the theory and its practical implementation is missing. More details on (b') and (b'') will follow.

ON STRONG ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

Japanese *sake* (vi.) and *miai* (vii.) are defined as follows, according to Wierzbicka's idea on the lexicon units revealing properties unique for a given culture:

vi. "Japanese word for a strong alcoholic drink made from rice." (WIERZBICKA 1997: 2)

vii. “[Russian] doesn’t have a word corresponding to the Japanese word *miai*, referring to a formal occasion when the prospective bride and her family meet the prospective bridegroom and his family for the first time” (ibid.)

Actual facts are simpler than their descriptions. Neither is the so-called *sake* (more often called *nihonshū*, while *sake* tends to function as a general term for ‘alcohol’ or ‘alcohol drinks’) “strong”, whatever it may stand for (it rarely contains more than 16% of alcohol), nor is the idea of *miai* (more often: *omiai* A. J.), ‘matchmaking’ by any means unique to Japanese culture. Since at least the former statement may be easily verified in practice, without actually asking native informants, it is the informant choice that seems to constitute a major issue in Wierzbicka’s approach.

Numerous brands of *sake* are drunk in a variety of manners all over Japan, depending on season and occasion. It is typical to combine *sake* with beer and stronger alcoholic drinks. Usually, the alcohol content of subsequent liquors increases on time axis. What can be guessed in relation to that very fact is that Wierzbicka’s informant was simply asked whether *sake* is a strong drink, in which case the answer could be positive, especially when compared to beer. Cross-cultural researchers must display more criticism towards information gathered from native speakers.

ON THE DELICATE ART OF SAYING SOMETHING

It is thinkable and possible that many Japanese could have lived their lives without drinking *sake*. Similarly, many of them might have not experienced *omiai*, however the former and the latter are defined. Still, it would rather be amazing to expect that the members of any nation could live without actual communication.

Goddard and Wierzbicka enumerate the following scripts of Japanese verbal behavior:

viii. “often it is good not to say anything to other people.” (GODDARD, WIERZBICKA 1997)

ix. “it is not good to say things like this to other people:

«I want this», «I don’t want this»

«I think this», «I don’t think this»

if I say things like this, someone could feel something bad.” (ibid.)

x. “before I say something to someone

it is good to think something like this:

I can’t say all that I think

if I do, someone could feel something bad.” (ibid.)

Is it possible for a society to function, should any of its members be entitled to say anything in any conceivable situation, apart from saying “all that they think”? The basic assumption underlying the authors’ way of reasoning is that Japanese culture is different, whether the facts confirm it or not. The setting in which one may “say all that one thinks” are extremely limited, be it in Japan or in any other communication environment. Considering this, the scripts viii., ix., and x. are applicable in a large number of environments, not necessary Japanese.

The authors rely on arbitrary interpretation of secondary sources in their superficial description of linguistic data, making their final and rather amazing conclusion that:

xi. “Japanese cultural attitudes discourage one from verbalizing about one’s own emotions.” (ibid.)

Delicate but numerous misunderstandings lead researchers to such statements as xi., on the basis of otherwise insightful third-party sources that raise the notions such as *enryo*, *omoiyari* and *aizuchi* as well as numerous facts from Japanese grammar. Certain selected facts of limited character are in this manner transformed into maxims on Japanese cultural attitudes, into unfortunately, as will be shown below, false maxims.

KEY WORDS AT LARGE

The most advanced application of Wierzbicka’s approach is the concept of cultural key words. As the author puts it:

xii. “basic patterns of Japanese everyday discourse and the Japanese «cultural scripts» reflected in them (...) are closely linked with the semantics of Japanese key words.” (WIERZBICKA 1997: 31)

Wierzbicka’s statements on Japanese culture are formulated on the basis of word definitions scrutinized above, including the idea of *miai*:

xiii. “in Japan, people not only talk about «miai» (using the word *miai*), and practice the social ritual of *miai*, but also think about *miai*, (using either the word *miai* or the concept associated with this word.” (WIERZBICKA ibid.: 5)

The following sets of key words are regarded representative for Australian (xiv.) and Japanese (xv.) cultures.

xiv. Australian: *chiack*, *yarn*, *shout*, *dob in*, *whinge*, *bloody*, *bastard*, *bugger*, *bullshit*. (WIERZBICKA ibid.: 233–234)

xv. Japanese: *amae*, *enryo*, *wa*, *on*, *giri*, *seishin*, *omoiyari*. (WIERZBICKA ibid.: 278–280)

The xiv. lists words related to the notions of solidarity, both of positive (*chiack*, *yarn*, *shout* etc.) and negative character (*dob in*, *bloody*, *bullshit*), while the Japanese elements in xv., which may be *ad hoc* translated for the sole purposes of this paper as ‘indulging behavior [towards one’s seniors, parents, etc.]’, ‘restraint’, ‘harmony’, ‘gratitude’, ‘obligation’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘empathy’, allude only to positive values. As a result, the reader gets an impressive but false image of Japanese culture based on the notions of harmony, sympathy and mutual restraint. As will be demonstrated below, it is not the only failure of the proposed set of key words.

ANOTHER APPROACH: ON JAPANESE AND POLISH COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENTS

As an alternative to Wierzbicka’s approach, this author proposes a comparison of Japanese and Polish cultural values based on Sugiyama-Lebra’s classification of social situations typical to Japanese culture. According to this, only two of four possible situational patterns (RITUAL and INTIMATE) may be expected in Japanese environment (xvi.).

xvi.

	official	unofficial
private	- (non-existing)	INTIMATE
public	RITUAL	ANOMIC (no rules)

(SUGIYAMA-LEBRA 1976: 112)

In Poland, all possible four combinations of parameters tend to be used (xvii.).

xvii.

	official	unofficial
private	SINCERE	INTIMATE
public	RITUAL	HONORABLE

(JABŁOŃSKI 2010)

Four concepts require further clarification.

- RITUAL situations are executed when formal, fixed and predictable schemes of ranks are mutually recognized by the participants, which explains why thanks are executed, “because one should say it” in v. (c).

- INTIMATE situations focus on the in-group character of interaction and as such are opposite to RITUAL on the axis: fixed–creative or: formal–informal. Thanks executed in an INTIMATE setting may be free from formal obligation, in which case Wierzbicka’s v. (b’) and v. (b’’) do not hold.

- SINCERE situations are evoked when the participants recognize themselves as entitled to say “what they think”. They are standard in Poland. They are opposite to RITUAL in their focus on “facts known better” by a participant, not on ranks, which is unknown to Japan, where ranks are examined first.

- HONORABLE situations are executed when an uncertainty to the partner’s expectations exists, opposite to the RITUAL certainty. In Japan they are forced into the RITUAL scheme, in order to avoid possible misunderstandings, while in Poland the intention is to show to the partner that a referent can astonish them by doing more than expected. They may be chosen in situations recognized in Japan as ANOMIC, avoided by their definition in Japan, but not necessarily in Poland.

The situational schemes should be supplemented by a number of Japanese-Polish miscommunication examples gathered in interpretation practice (ibid.). They reveal numerous differences between Japanese and Poles (xviii.).

xviii.

JP

- As a rule, people are different.
- Exchange of views may reveal unwanted individual differences.
- Expressing self is not necessary in communication.

PL

- As a rule, people are the same.
- Exchange of views enables mutual understanding and better communication.
- Expressing self is natural and necessary in communication.

- d) In actual communication, it is better to hide one's personal views, especially towards one's vertical senior.
- d) Hiding one's personal vies makes communication difficult, ranks regardless.
- e) Exchange of views and sincere behavior depend on context. They may be allowed within one's own group.
- e) Sincerity means that one acts the same, regardless of context.
- f) Out-group communication is possible only by predictable performance of fixed roles.
- f) Roles should be performed in a creative manner.
- (ibid.)

The above parameter descriptions are rather preferred schemes of interpreting social facts than definite statements on "who the Japanese and Poles are". Hierarchies exist among the members of both communication environments, but in Japan a hierarchical RITUAL interpretation of personal relations is probably going to be preferred more often than in Poland. There are situations, both in Japan and Poland, when people tend to express themselves freely, but due to the above mentioned hierarchical consciousness of the Japanese, the recognition of higher status of a communication partner may exclude such situations from a set of possible schemes of choice in Japan more often than in Poland. The rule xviii. d. supplements important missing content to the scripts viii., ix. and x. quoted above. One may feel restrained to "say all that they think" towards one's senior, but not necessarily towards equals or inferiors. As a result, statement xi. above must be regarded false. Last but not least, there are commonly recognized roles and rules of conduct for a number of social situations both in Japan and in Poland, but the Japanese may be more strict than Poles in their recognition, and the Poles may reveal serious reluctance in executing schemes by the book. When no RITUAL scheme is given and no INTIMATE relation observed, the interaction will be avoided almost at any cost in Japanese environment, with no reference to key words quoted in xv. above – another example of how and why definitions formulated on an exceedingly high level of abstraction miss their point.

CONCLUSION

Attempts to describe the requirements of heterogeneous communication environments constitute the most challenging task of linguists and as such should be examined with attention. Unfortunately, Wierzbicka's approach to the phenomena of Japanese communication environment is far from satisfying.

The fact that heterogeneous environments are different should not be an excuse to neglect obvious facts. Definitions on the level of words should not only include the information gathered from informants, but also be backed up by personal experience of the researcher. In other words, *sake* reveals its most important features when not researched remotely.

At the same time, cross-cultural researchers should be aware of their limitations. It is astonishing how easily advanced conclusions on how people living in different environments do or do not express "what they think" are formulated, often contrary to linguistic and social facts, not to mention the idea of common sense. Statements on such high level of abstraction should be made with extreme caution, having in mind that:

- xix. "It seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human." (SAID 1979: 93)

The proposed comparison of Japanese and Polish communication environments should be viewed as an attempt to overcome the above mentioned difficulties in description of heterogeneous reality. The statements were intentionally made on low level of abstraction, to avoid the gap between the theoretical metalanguage and actual cultural data. The success or failure of such approach may be judged by final users of cross-cultural studies' theories.

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