War and Peace of Languages and Cultures?

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The future of mankind depends largely on its ability to communicate. Technical progress provides mankind with an ever-increasing variety of more and more powerful devices and forms of communication: tele-conferences, multi-media bridges, His or Her Majesty – the Internet! However, "the human factor" presents a number of problems hampering the idea of international communication. Generally speaking it is a basic inherent contradiction of equality versus diversity (individuality). People are created equal, they want to enjoy equal rights but they also want to keep their individuality.

The most formidable obstacles on the way to intercultural communication are: language and culture closely intertwined in constant interaction. The paradox is that language as well as culture, stored in it, reflected and formed by it, are at the same time a barrier, a fence, separating peoples, and a shield protecting their national identity. Consequently, every language and every culture guard their subjects against all the "aliens" trying to intrude their domains. The paper deals with linguacultural issues hampering intercultural communication viewed as forms of "weapons" used in these wars.

The fantastic achievements of science and technology have got fantastic results in making people's communication quick and easy. Technical progress has provided us with an ever-increasing variety of devices and forms of communication.

The better, quicker and easier international communication is becoming technically, the more irritating are the obstacles, namely, linguistic and cultural barriers, undermining the possibilities of communication among nations.

The language barrier has been known since the time of the Tower of Babel when people were punished by the loss of possibility to communicate. It is quite obvious that nations are separated by their languages. Every language guards its people like a three-headed dragon in a fairy tale. You cannot outwit, bribe, deceive the guard, but you can learn it. Millions of people shatter the barrier. Many more millions are trying to do so.

However, learning a language does not guarantee the luxury of efficient communication because the cultural barrier is looming large behind the language one.

Thus, nations are separated by two barriers (walls, fences) interfering with their communication. The two guards defend their subjects from numerous intruders trying to penetrate into the domain of the nation. They do not let peoples work, study, build, live together in peace and friendship. However, the language and the culture of a nation are not just guards fighting anybody approaching it; they can also be regarded as shields protecting the nation, saving it from the loss of national identity.

Interestingly, the threat of globalization has given rise to a burst of national self-consciousness which generates a growing public interest in national values – first and foremost, in the national language and culture.

This, in its turn, raises some doubts whether the Tower of Babel incident was actually a punishment or a blessing in a very clever disguise: we are having multicolored meadows of

various languages with specific visions of the world instead of a neatly cut green lawn of just one common (global?) language.

Thus, the double fence of language and culture protects its subjects from any intruders (foreign language learners, interpreters, translators, spies) regardless of their goals: languages and cultures fight both friends and enemies with the same enthusiasm and the same weapons.

Developing the metaphor of "War and Peace" (mostly – alas! – war), the aim of this paper is to register and investigate various kinds of linguistic and cultural weapons and military tricks: traps, ambushes, pitfalls, false routes, false friends, open enemies and smart spies.

Speaking our usual language, the paper deals with linguistic and socio-cultural difficulties we are confronted with while communicating, translating, interpreting, teaching and learning foreign languages.

All these difficulties may be divided by the following parameters: a) linguistic and socio-cultural ones, b) open and hidden ones.

Open Linguistic Pitfalls

Open linguistic pitfalls have been studied for millennia, so they will be just mentioned here in order to present a more complete picture.

1. Phonetics and spelling
2. Grammar

The problems and difficulties of pronunciation, spelling and grammatical categories may be labeled "open" only in the sense that they are obvious from the very start to anybody approaching the domain of a foreign language.

This paper deals with "lexical weapons," that is, with learning and using vocabulary.

Words of every national language, taken together, create the language picture of the world specific to the nation. If we present the picture as a mosaic, then every word and its equivalent may be compared to a piece of it.

Dealing with other languages implies an opposition, a contrast with one's mother tongue. Actually, the very idea of both – a native and a foreign language arises only in this opposition.

Lexical "weapons" used by language to fight the intruders are mostly hidden, that is why they are so efficient and dangerous.

Hidden Linguistic Pitfalls

Hidden linguistic pitfalls may be presented as follows.

The Volume of Semantics

Pieces of language mosaics often differ in size, they cover different bits of space.

For example, the Russian world *dom* has a broader meaning than its supposed "equivalent" – *house*: it includes *home, building, block of flats, mansion, condominium*. There are very many examples of this kind in any two languages.

The Russian word *perevodchik* covers both *translator* and *interpreter*; *nauka* stands for *science*, *humanity*, *branch of knowledge*. Any bilingual dictionary gives numerous and various examples of this kind.

Stylistic Connotations

Pieces of language mosaics may differ in shades of color.

For example the word *crimson* (English) and *bagrovy* (Russian) are semantically equivalent but the Russian adjective has strong inherent negative connotations, unlike the English word.

In a letter from China (an invitation to a linguistic conference) the venue of the conference is described in the following way: "With its picturesque landscape, Hangzhou has ever been, praised as 'Paradise on the Earth'. In 13 century, Marco Polo, a famous Italian tourist praised Hangzhou as 'the most beautiful and magnificent city in the world'." The word *tourist* used to describe Marco Polo's visit to China may be correct semantically but it is stylistically unacceptable and produces a comic effect.

In the same way a Soviet Russian cliché *nerushimoe edinstvo* translated into English as *an unbreakable and indestructible unity* sounds wrong stylistically because it violates the stylistic tendencies of the English language which, by the witty words of Robert Daglish, "prefers to whistle in the dark where the Russian language shouts in the broad daylight"[1].

Collocability

Collocational, or lexical-phraseological constraints on speech production are the most concealed and the most dangerous linguistic weapons.

This means that any word in any language has its own characteristic only of the language in question, set or reserve of words with which it is compatible. That is to say, it is "friends" and collocates with certain words and it is not "friends", and therefore, does not collocate with others. Why does the English verb *to pay* (give somebody money for goods, services, etc.) collocate with such incompatible – from the Russian point of view – nouns as *attention*, *visit*, *compliments*? Why is the Russian *rain strong* while the English one is *heavy*, how can English-speaking people *pay attention*, *compliments*, *visits*, and *calls* while we can only *pay money*?

There is only one answer to this: each word has its own collocability (or valency). And collocability is nation-specific (not universal) in the sense that it is characteristic only of a given word in a given language. The specific character of a collocation becomes evident only in juxtaposition to other languages much as one becomes aware of one's own culture through coming into contact (clashing) with an alien culture. Thus, native speakers of a language remain oblivious to the pitfalls confronting the student: it never occurs to Russian students that in a certain language *tea* can be *strong* and *compliments – paid*.

[1] R.S. Daglish, a coauthor of Russian-English Contemporary Dictionary by R.S. Daglish, A.M. Taube, 2001, Drofa. The quoted words were from his lecture which the author had attended.

And, for this reason, the student of a foreign language should learn not individual words and their meanings but the common and more or less fixed collocations in which these words occur in a given language.

Lexical collocation undermines the foundations of translation and interpretation. Bilingual dictionaries are a case in point. The translation of words with the help of a dictionary that gives "equivalents" of their meanings in another language can lead students astray and encourage them to use foreign words in collocational contexts typical of their own language.

It is not surprising, therefore, that most numerous and common mistakes are made by foreign language learners when they are translating from their mother tongue into the language under study.

The following examples of collocations translated from Russian into English illustrate this point as they reflect Russian collocational patterns.

to create a commission (instead of *to set up a commission*)
closed arena (*canopied arena*)
to visit lessons (*to attend classes*)
light athletics (*track-and-field athletics*)
constant residence (*permanent residence*)
mistakes repeat themselves (*mistakes recur*)
to wash one's head (*to wash one's hair*)

Every non-native teacher of foreign languages has huge collections of this kind of mistake.

Developing the metaphor with war collocations is a barbed wire strung upon a language barrier.

"False Friends" (Deceptive Cognates)

This is a well-known and well-investigated linguistic fact – a good old trap "for tricking unsuspecting people" (Benson, Benson, & Ilson, 1986, p. 259). Therefore just one example will suffice.

The Russian *nationalnost* and the English word *nationality* look deceptively close but the former means ethnic origin, belonging to a group of people of the same race, the same physical anthropological characteristics while the latter means citizenship. Consequently, Russian students of English are puzzled by such phrases like "former nationality" and "he's applied for British nationality."

All the devices described above are properly linguistic; they are components of what is called "language barrier," language weapons of fighting intruders and defending its own people.

However, extra-linguistic aspects of communication must be taken into consideration too.

Language is inseparable from its User who is both its master and its servant. The User is inseparable from the real World surrounding him/her. Correspondingly, Language is inseparable from the User's inner and outer Worlds. Language reflects the Worlds and moulds the User.

The main and most evident connection of language with extralinguistic reality is through lexis, through the **meaning** of language units of which **Word** is the main one. The meaning of the word, defined as referring a sound or graphic complex to an object, or phenomenon of reality is a thread connecting the world of language with the world of reality, or rather, a path leading from one world to the other. The meaning of a native word is leading to the native world reflected by the native language and imposed on its users. The meaning of a foreign word leads to a foreign, strange and alien world and the same sort of culture.

The difficulties of communication in a foreign language, determined by the cultural background of a language, may be called linguocultural. In this case language and cultural barriers unite to put up a strong defense – sometimes open, more frequently – secret. Consequently, overwhelming the defenses requires special efforts.

Open Linguocultural Difficulties

The only case of "openness" in this sphere I could think of is: nation-specific words that have no equivalents in other languages because they denote things that do not exist in other cultures. These words are usually borrowed by other languages, for example, *whisky*, *vodka*, *esquire*, *Bolshevik*, etc.

Hidden Linguocultural Difficulties

Thus, there are different worlds behind words of different languages. Words of a language are a veil over the real world and the real life. Therefore a foreign language user must remember to have a look behind the veil, behind the curtain of words, in order to realize where paths of word meanings are leading to. It becomes especially clear and vivid in the process of translating from one language into another one. The translator has to translate not just words but also underlying words, merges them, brings them together. It is a very difficult and complicated task, especially when language and culture barriers are united as a double shield of national identity.

Hidden linguocultural pitfalls may be presented in the following ways.

Deceptive Equivalence

Linguistic communication based on the shared code of its participants implies equivalence of language units as its pivot. No established equivalence – no shared code – no communication. It is as simple as that.

However, nothing is simple in the natural human language, and the notion of equivalence is quite relative because absolute equivalence may be possible only on condition that the worlds reflected by the languages are equivalent too. But the worlds (both inner and outer) are different; therefore, the question of word equivalence is relative and doubtful. For example, the Russian word *dom*, as has been mentioned above, is broader in meaning than its English counterpart *house*, i.e. they differ in semantic scope. They also differ in their valency and their use in speech. For instance, *dom* is obligatory in a Russian address while its counterpart is absent from an English address. The only way to present *10 Downing St* in Russian is *Downing St, dom 10*.

But, even when/if the Russian *dom* and English *house* coincide semantically and collocationally in certain speech situations and, consequently, may be regarded as equivalent (and easy to translate), one has to make allowances for cultural differences at the level either of the real object itself or of concepts and ideas about it.

In order to understand the English sentence: *That morning she had a headache and stayed upstairs*, one should know the lay-out of a typical English house, the structure and social functions of its interior. A word-for-word translation of the sentence will mean very little (or nothing) to Russian speakers. Indeed, most of them do not know the notions *upstairs* (bedrooms) and *downstairs* (the dining room, sitting room, kitchen) because these notions imply a certain life style and house plan designated by the English word *house* which sets apart a typical English house from the Russian concept of *dom*. Both concepts expressed by the words *house* and *dom* have been developed over the countries in response to life style, climate, geographical features and many other factors. In Northern Russian villages (Arkhangelsk Region) the ground floor of a house ("downstairs") is for people, while "upstairs" is for their cattle. A very thrifty and peaceful idea^ on the one hand, you do not waste money and effort on extra-heating (the warm air from downstairs goes upstairs) and, on the other, people and animals are all just one family living under the same roof.

Sociocultural Connotations

Words of different languages with the same meaning, that is, referring to the same things acquire different cultural connotations determined by their different cultures.

The most obvious and vivid examples may be given from the field of names of animals. Indeed, although these words are merely zoological terms, animals in different cultures are associated or, rather, endowed with certain qualities and characteristics which vary greatly from culture to culture.

For example, when a little Russian boy got angry with his little English friend and called him *a puppy* because the Russian equivalent of the word used about a human being has negative connotations (someone who is young and stupid), it did not provoke a conflict because the English word is either neutral or sounds rather positive.

Here is another example from a much "higher" sphere. When Russian President Vladimir Putin met British prime-minister Tony Blair in St. Petersburg in March, 2000 he spoke about Chechens' insulting attitude to Russians and illustrated this by an abusive slogan in Russian in a Chechen military camp: *Above us is Allah, under us are goats*.

The British prime-minister was obviously puzzled as he could not see anything very insulting in translation. But the Russian word for *goat* is very rude when it is used about people. Now – alas! – it is widely used. The English word does have "usually disapproving" connotations when used about a man with the meaning "very active sexually, or would like to be and makes it obvious." Cambridge International Dictionary of English (CIDE) marks it as dated. No wonder Tony Blair could not see the insult because, as Chechens live in the mountains, above them is Allah and under them are mountain goats. It sounds rather poetic than insulting.

Color terms are another example of a variety of sociocultural connotations determined by a difference in cultures. Even when the nominative meaning of color terms coincides in different languages their sociocultural connotations may vary quite considerably. Every color

of the physical specter has quite a number of sociocultural connotations in different cultures of different societies. There exists a vast literature on the subject. However, only one example will be used here from the Russian language to illustrate radical recent changes in connotations of the word *krasny – red*. The nominative meaning of the word is the same in every language (it is a **term**, after all). *Red* is defined in CIDE as "(of) the color of fresh blood." Definitions of *krasny* in most dictionaries of the Russian language are the same: "the color of blood."

This Russian word has metaphoric meanings – *beautiful, bright, honourable, happy* – all quite positive. (The Red Square in Moscow is "a beautiful square" from very old times). During the period of the Soviet Union the word *krasny* developed a meaning *revolutionary, associated with Revolution, the Soviet Power, the Red army* (a *red officer, red troops, etc*.).

In the Soviet Russian language the word *krasny* had only positive connotations. The collapse of the USSR, the revolution of the early 90's last century, the complete overturn brought new ideas, new values, new overtones; and the perception of red color – the color of October revolution, of the Soviet flag – has been changing all this time.

A poem called "Kumach" (a cotton fabric of bright red color) by Nikolai Aseev (written in the 1920s) begins with the following lines:

Red dawn,
Red morning,
Red speeches at the Red Gate[2]
And red people in the Red Square.

All collocations with *red* sounded positive in the Soviet context. *Red dawn* and *red morning* meant the beginning of a new day, a new life. Both collocations were later frequently used as names of plants, factories, collective farms. *Red speeches* are beautiful, eloquent speeches (the Russian equivalent for *eloquence* is a compound word consisting of two roots *krasny* and *rech*: *red* and *speech*) and *red people* are beautiful happy people. Even the placenames Red Gate and Red Square in the context of the poem revived their old almost completely forgotten meanings and began to sparkle with positive connotations in a new polyphonic way merging *beautiful* with *revolutionary*.

All this was and still is correct if we are talking about the perception of the poem by "the red" of the Revolution and those Russians who think of "good old times." As for "the white" of the past and the new generations of Post Soviet Russians they saw and still see this color through the prism of hatred for the Revolution, communists and the red, so the same words sound different to them and have a negative sociocultural connotation. The definition of the word *krasny* (the *red*) – *the color of blood* came to the forefront and gave the picture a strong flavor of evil: the whole world is flooded with blood: it is a kingdom of violence and murder.

Correspondingly, now, to those for whom the color and its name are associated with "bad old times," they are changing traditional positive connotations for negative sociocultural ones.

Modern Russian dictionaries illustrate the word *krasny,* alongside with old historical positive collocations (with *the sun, maid, girl*), with a newly coined form the *red-brown* meaning *fashists* (used to be called *black shirts*).

[2] A place in the centre of Moscow.

One more example is that the Russian word semantically equivalent to the English word *Europeans* has positive sociocultural connotations while the word *Asians* has a shade of negative ones though, undoubtedly, Asian cultures are more ancient and richer than European ones.

Sociocultural Context

Words (including terms) of different languages denoting the same things live and function differently in different sociocultural contexts. It concerns, for example, even such "formal" things as figures, dates, measures, etc.

Thus, an English baby is 18 months old while a Russian one is one year and a half. The same number 2500 may be presented in English as *twenty five hundred* but in Russian it is *two thousand and five hundred*.

Years are presented differently too though they look the same graphically: 1963 in Russian is pronounced as *one thousand nine hundred sixty-three* and the English way *nineteen sixty-three* sounds culturally shocking in Russian.

When a foreign visitor speaking Russian to a Moscow University academic audience mentioned "the ninth eleventh" very few people guessed that he meant the tragic day of September, 11, 2001 in New York. The miscommunication was caused not only by calling a month by means of an ordinal number, but also because in Russian language culture the figure of the day **precedes** that of the month.

The second World War and the Great Patriotic War in the Russian language refer to the same historical event but the former sounds like a formal academic term while the latter is positively emotional because it is great and patriotic, it is **our** war with **our** enemies in the same way as Russia is our and not **this** country. In our country there are no veterans of World War II, we only have veterans of the Great Patriotic War.

Conclusion

The urgency of solving inter-linguistic and intercultural communication problems hardly needs any special explanations. People have been trying to shatter the barriers of language and culture from the time of the Tower of Babel, the main obstacle being the difference in forms of communication, first and foremost, in languages and cultures. The fact is that language as well as culture, stored in it, reflected and formed by it, are at the same time **a fence**, a barrier, a wall separating peoples, interfering with their communication and **a shield** protecting their national identity. Consequently, every language and every culture guard their subjects against all the "aliens" and "outsiders" trying to intrude into their domains. The paper deals with various forms of arms and weapons used in this kind of wars (mines, traps, ambushes, tricks, spies – false friends, etc.). In a situation like this the role of foreign language teachers, translators, interpreters, experts in cultures is dubious. What are we – peace-makers helping peoples to find a common language or "the fifth column," traitors bringing alien, foreign ideas into the minds of people which undermines the national identity?

Thus, the main question, challenge, problem is on the one hand, to enjoy the luxury of international communication leading to the unity of mankind, and on the other hand, to preserve the integrity of national identities, keeping, strengthening, developing national

languages and cultures. The former is the noble task of experts in foreign languages and cultures, the latter is the sacred task of every nation.

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