GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES
IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS

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The article discusses how cultural information is embedded at the level of grammar and it treats grammar as inseparable from semantics and pragmatics. The study is done within the approach known as ethnosyntax. The article provides examples of cultural meaning embedded at the level of syntax relying on examples from Russian and English. In particular, it demonstrates variation in impersonal constructions in Russian and causative constructions in English. It then discusses variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors on the basis of ways of wording 'requests' in English and Russian. The linguistic examples in the discussion are sources from the Russian National Corpus for Russian and Collins Wordbanks Online for English. The article argues for the importance of culture-sensitive linguistic studies in language teaching.

Key words: ethnosyntax, Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), Russian, English, requests, impersonal constructions, causative constructions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article demonstrates how cultural information can be embedded at the level of grammar and it treats grammar as inseparable from semantics and pragmatics. The study is done within the approach known as ethnosyntax.

Ethnosyntax is an approach to studying grammar as a vehicle of culture. The term 'ethnosyntax' was introduced by Wierzbicka (1979) to reflect a new perspective on grammatical studies with a particular focus on cultural meaning. She advocated the view that grammatical constructions are not semantically arbitrary and their meanings are related to broader cultural understandings.

Two senses of ethnosyntax can be distinguished — a 'narrow' and a 'broad' one (Enfield 2002; Goddard 2002). Ethnosyntax in a 'narrow' sense aims to locate and articulate cultural understandings that are embedded in the meanings of particular grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in a broad sense studies how pragmatic and cultural rules affect the use of grammatical structures. Ethnosyntax in this sense overlaps with some studies in the area of pragmatics, such as ethnopragmatics (Goddard 2002, 2006) and ethnography of speaking (e.g., Gumperz & Hymes 1972). The following discussion provides examples of studies in ethnosyntax in its broad and narrow senses.

The accumulated experience of studies into Ethnosyntax allowed researchers to formulate methodological requirements to this kind of linguistic investigations. There is a degree of unanimity among scholars that research into cultural element of grammatical constructions involves the analysis of their meaning (e.g., Wierzbicka 1979, 1988, 2002; Enfield 2002; Goddard 2002; Simpson 2002). As emphasised by Wierzbicka (1979), a key to decoding cultural meanings embedded in grammatical structures lies in a semantic approach to studying grammar. Conducting an ethnosyntactic analysis involves identifying a construction in question, investigating its meaning, and establishing connections

between this meaning and some wider shared cultural assumptions or understandings (Wierzbicka 1979, 1988; Goddard 2002; Simpson 2002: 291—2). Some scholars also argue for the importance of a comparative cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analysis of grammatical constructions and associated cultural understandings (Simpson 2002; Enfield 2002).

A significant view in Ethnosyntax is that cultural specificity of grammatical structures needs to be studied with a culture-neutral methodology to avoid a lingua- and ethnocentric bias in research (e.g., Wierzbicka 1979, 1988, 2002; Goddard 2002). Such metalanguage can be found in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). NSM comprises 65 empirically identified universal meanings (along with a limited number of more complex meanings known as semantic molecules) which combine with each other in certain ways to form a mini-language. This metalanguage lies at the core of every language (e.g., Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2002, 2014). NSM is applied in semantic studies of words and grammatical constructions to formulate explications, as well as in studies of cultural and pragmatic factors underlying language use to formulate cultural scripts. Several of examples provided in this article represent studies which rely on the use of NSM as a methodological tool.

This article is structured as follows. Sections two provides examples of cultural meaning embedded at the level of syntax relying on examples from Russian and English. Section three illustrates variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors on the basis of ways of wording 'requests' in English and Russian. Section four concludes. The linguistic examples in the discussion are sources from the Russian National Corpus for Russian and Collins Wordbanks Online for English.

2. CULTURAL MEANING AT THE LEVEL OF SYNTAX

2.1. Impersonal constructions in Russian and the cultural themes of 'irrationality' and 'unpredictability'

Russian is rich with impersonal constructions. Malchukov and Ogawa (2011: 20) define impersonal constructions as "constructions lacking a referential subject". In this article we will consider Russian constructions of the type where the notional subject lacks typical subject properties. They are also called "dative reflexive" constructions because the nominal subject occurs in the Dative case and the verb is in the reflexive form. We will consider two types of constructions — with mental verbs and with other intransitive verbs.

The first construction combines a dative human subject and a mental verb in the third person neuter reflexive form. Some mental state verbs occur in this construction — *xotet'sja* 'to want itself', *dumat'sja* 'to think itself', *verit'sja* 'to believe itself', *pomnit'sja* 'to remember itself' (examples are from the Russian National Corpus):

(1) *Kogda ja vpervye popal na stanciju, mne ne verilos', čto ja smogu vynesti zdes' i nedelju.*

'When I first came to the station I-DAT didn't believe-REF that I would be able to stay there for even a week.'

(2) *Pokidat' stolicu emu ne xotelos', no on ponimal: moskovskoj konkurencii emu ne vyderžat'.*

'He-DAT didn't want-REF to leave the capital, but he understood that he couldn't withstand the competition in Moscow.'

(3) *Mne dumaetsja, takie materialy budut interesny dlja čitatelej vašego žurnala.*

'I-DAT think-REF that such material would be interesting for the readers of your journal.'

(4) *Mne jasno pomnitsja letnee utro i skameečka na dorožke, iduščej ot kalitki k terrase.*

'I-DAT clearly remember-REF the summer morning and the bench on the path leading from the gate to the terrace.'

Speakers of Russian also have an option of using nominative constructions with the verb in the active voice, such as *ja dumaju* 'I think', *on xočet* 'he wants', *ja pomnju* 'I remember'. However, in certain contexts it is preferred to use dative constructions. Overall, dative constructions are less frequent than nominal constructions, but their use is still quite significant. For example, according to the Russian National Corpus data, the form *on xočet* 'he. NOM. SG want.3SG. PRES' is about 3 times more frequent than the form *emu xočetsja* 'he. DAT. SG. want. REF. PRES' (10,824 uses vs. 3,293 uses) and the form *ja xoču* 'I. NOM. SG want.1SG. PRES' is about 4 times more frequent than *mne xočetsja* 'I. DAT. SG want. REF. PRES' (21,318 uses vs. 5,366 uses).

According to Goddard (2003: 416), this structure "implies that for some unknown reason the mental event simply 'happens' inside us" and it suggests "a spontaneous and involuntary" mental state. The choice of the dative construction over the nominative one suggests the denial of responsibility over the action and at the same time submission to it. The reflexive form of the verb, the absence of the nominative subject and the presentation of the expriencer in the Dative case as a recipient of the state contribute these semantic elements to the structure.

In contemporary English there is no exact equivalent of such construction. English has a clear preference towards 'active' constructions, such as *I want*, *I believe*, *I think*, etc. The closest equivalent of the Russian construction would be the expressions *It seems to me* and *It occurs to me*. However, their frequency is significantly lower than the frequency of the active construction. For example, in a 550 million word Collins Wordbanks Online corpus there are 232,607 occurrences of *I think* and only 2,245 occurrences of *it seems to me* and 133 occurrences of *it occurs to me* (that is, respectively, 103 and 1749 times less). In the past, English also employed dative constructions, such as *methinks* (e.g., Bromhead 2009), but they fell out of use.

The meaning of the Russian construction is represented in universal human concepts as follows (after Goddard 2003: 417):

[A] *Mne xočetsja/veritsja* (lit. 'it doesn't want/believe itself to me')
something happens inside me
because of this, I want/believe this
I don't know why

[B] *Mne ne xočetsja/veritsja* (lit. 'it doesn't want/believe itself to me')
something happens inside me
because of this, I cannot not want/believe this
I don't know why

Besides mental acts, numerous other verbs can occur in impersonal dative constructions in Russian. There is a range of verbs that are used in impersonal constructions either in negation or with evaluative adverbs. Below are some examples of such construction in negation:

(5) [...] *Prosto im čego-to ne spitsja.*
'They-DAT simply don't sleep-REF.'
(6) *Nado otsypat'sja, a kak-to ne spitsja.*
'I need to sleep, but I-DAT somewhat don't sleep-REF.'
(7) *Čeloveka po-svoemu neordinarnogo, ee tomila "oxota k peremene mest" — ej počemu-to ne rabotalos' v odnom i tom že teatre.*
'As a rather unusual person, she was driven by the desire for change; for some reason she-DAT didn't work-REF in one and the same theatre.'
(8) *Tolstoj pisal pis'ma, pisal dnevnik, no nad čem-to drugim v te nedeli počti ne rabotalos'.*
'Tolstoy wrote letters and the diary but he-DAT didn't work-REF on anything else in those weeks for some reason.'

This construction can also be used with adverbs of manner:

(9) *Emu ploxo rabotalos' v ėtot den'.*
'He-DAT worked-REF badly that day.'
(10) *Nam interesno rabotalos' s togdašnim zamestitelem direktora [...].*
'We-DAT worked-REF with the deputy director of that time with enthusiasm.'
(11) *— A doma vam ploxo žilos'? — Ja ne skazal by, čto ploxo, udovletvoritel'no.*
'— Did you-DAT live-REF badly at home? — I wouldn't say badly, but satisfactory.'
(12) *Ot nego vsegda isxodila kakaja-to radost' [...]. S nim legko žilos'.*
'He always radiated joy. It was easy to live-REF with him.'

The construction with negation expresses inexplicable state when something that one wants or needs to do does not happen. It mainly occurs with verbs expressing an action one wants or is expected to do at a particular time (*spat'* 'sleep', *rabotat'* 'work', *pet'* 'sing'). The 'inexplicable' attitude embedded in this construction is supported by a common use of indefinite pronominal adverbs *počemu-to* 'for some reason', *kak-to* 'somewhat', *čto-to* 'for some reason/somewhat'. Its explication is as follows (after Wierzbicka 1992: 425—426):

[C] *Mne ne spitsja/rabotaetsja* ('to me it doesn't sleep/work')
I want to do something Y
because of this, I am doing it
at the same time I feel something because I think like this:
    I can't do it
    I don't know why
    it is not because I don't want to do it

The construction using evaluative adverbs is explicated as follows:

[D] *Mne xorošo/ploxo/interesno živetsja/rabotaetsja* 'to me it well/badly/interestingly lives/works'
I am doing something now
it happens in some way, not in another way
I don't know why it is like this
it's not because I want it to be like this

These constructions embed in their meaning the ideas of 'not being in control' and 'irrationality'. More impersonal constructions in Russian reflect similar ideas or even something akin to 'fatalism' (Wierzbicka 1992; Goddard 2003). These ideas penetrate Russian lexicon at different levels. At the level of lexicon they are evident in the words *sud'ba* 'fate', *rok* 'fate', *avos'* 'perhaps/maybe', among which *sud'ba* is most culturally significant. *Sud'ba* refers to an imaginary force which determines the course of a person's life and to which a person must submit. These ideas also have been shown to be integrated in the meaning of some Russian emotion terms (Wierzbicka 1999) as well as temporal terms and constructions (Apresjan 2012; Gladkova 2012). At the level of syntax it appears in impersonal constructions discussed in this article as well as in some passive constructions.

There is considerable variation in impersonal constructions across languages (Malchukov and Ogawa 2012). Their meanings can be studied and compared across languages using the same set of linguistic universals embedded in NSM.

2.2. Causal constructions in English and the cultural ideas of 'personal autonomy' and 'non-imposition'

As an illustration of how cultural meaning can be conveyed at the level of syntax in English, we will consider a link between constructions with the verb *let* and cultural ideas of 'personal autonomy' and 'non-imposition' on the basis of Wierzbicka's (2002) study.

The existence of a large number of constructions with the verbs *make*, *have*, and *let* in English allows Wierzbicka (1988, 2002) to argue for the cultural salience of the domain of causal relations in modern English. She shows that for each verb it is possible to distinguish several semantic invariants of constructions, all characterized by a slight difference in meaning. On the basis of a detailed semantic analysis she proposes the following classification of constructions with the verb *let* and formulates a semantic prototype for each of the constructions:

> *Let* of 'permission' (*She let him go to the party*)
> *Let* of 'non-interruption' (*She let him sleep*)
> *Let* of 'apparent indifference' (*She let him cry*)
> *Let* of 'non-prevention' (*She let him fall*)
> *Let* of 'tolerance' (*Let her be!*)
> *Let* of 'shared information' (*Let me know what happened*)
> *Let* of 'offering to perform a service' (*Let me open the door for you*)
> *Let* of 'suggestion' (*Let's do Z!*)
> *Let* of 'cooperative dialogue' (*Let me conclude by saying ...*)
> *Let* of cooperative interaction (*Let me talk to him*)
> *Let* of cooperative thinking (*Let me think...*)

Wierzbicka compares the English constructions with similar constructions in German and Russian, showing that these languages have less semantically diverse causative constructions and that some of the English constructions do not have idiomatic equivalents in either German or Russian.

Wierzbicka puts forward a hypothesis explaining cultural roots of this elaboration in English:

> [...] as democracy developed in a large-scale modern society — first of all, in America [...] — a new style of human relations evolved, to accommodate the need for both an increased scale of interpersonal interactions and a new footing on which these interactions were to be conducted [...]. The new managerial type of society, too, needed an increased scale of interpersonal causations: for the society to function smoothly and efficiently, lots of people had to be, roughly speaking, told what they were to do. This had to happen, however, in the context of a democracy, where people might be willing to take 'directions' or to follow 'instructions' but not to obey 'orders' or 'commands'. (Wierzbicka 2002, p. 166)

She argues that the idea that 'it is not good to impose and force other people to do certain things' is a cultural idea shared by English speakers and that it finds its realisation in language. Wierzbicka (2006: 52) formulates this cultural rule as follows:

> [E] [people think like this:]
> no one can say to another person:
>   "I want you to do this
>   you have to do it because of this"

> [F] [people think like this:]
> no one can say to another person:
>   "I don't want you to do this
>   you can't do it because of this"

She comments on these scripts as follows: "These scripts don't say that people can do anything they want to do or that there can be no rules legitimately preventing people from doing what they want to do. Rather, they say that it cannot be another person's expression of will that prevents me from doing what I want to do or forces me to do what I don't want to do" (Wierzbicka 2006: 52).

3. GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES
AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON THEIR USE

In this section we provide an illustration of variation in the use of grammatical structures due to the influence of cultural factors. As a case study we will consider ways of wording 'requests' in English and Russian. Requests are a type of speech acts. As a part of the speech act theory, Austin (1962) distinguished between statements (that is utterances that may be assigned a truth value) and performatives (that is utterances that perform some actions whose successful completion rests on felicity conditions). Searle (1979) proposed a further classification of performatives and, according to his classification, requests (along with commands) belong to the group of directives.

It is important to note that the word 'request' is used as a technical label and it is erroneous to equate all speech of this type in different languages with the English word *request*. While other languages might have a term close to 'request' it might not necessarily fully overlap in meaning with the English term. For examples, the closest term in Russian is *pros'ba*. According to Zalizniak (2005: 283—284), the Russian word differs

from its English equivalent and implies the idea of inequality between the speaker and the hearer; the hearer is perceived as someone being above the speaker in status. At the same time, Zalizniak argues, *pros'ba* implies an establishment of some sort of a relationship between two people in that the speaker expects the hearer to do something for him or her out of good attitude towards the speaker. Therefore, the Russian word *pros'ba* presupposes a certain intrusion into a private sphere of the hearer not only in the way that certain actions are expected from him or her, but also some feelings. The difference between the Russian and English terms well highlights the danger of ethnocentrism in linguistic analysis when terms of one language are used to analyse speech practices in another language.

We will use the term 'request' as a label due to existing conventions, but it should be borne in mind that the aspects of meaning of the English terms are not meant to represent the semantic and pragmatic reality of other languages. 'Request' as a technical term stands for a speech act in which the speaker expresses his or her want for the hearer to do something. At the same time, it is not obvious to both the speaker and the hearer that the hearer will perform this act under normal circumstances (cf. Searle 1969).

In this section, on the basis of English and Russian we will demonstrate how different languages employ different grammatical structures to express requests and how this choice is consistent with broader cultural ideas and understandings.

In English, there is a variety of ways to express 'request'. One of the ways, often considered as most common, is to use an interrogative or interrogative-cum-conditional form, as in the following examples from Collins Wordbanks Online (cf. Wierzbicka 2003[1991]: 32):

> (13) *Will you give mother and father my love?*
> (14) *Look, will you please stop it!*
> (15) *Will you tell the court, please.*
> (16) *Would you mind moving on, please?*
> (17) *Captain Paterson, would you please come with me.*
> (18) *Would you be so kind as escort Commandant Warner to the First Sister's quarters?*
> (19) *Please would you come with me.*
> (20) *Would you mind telling me what you're doing here?*
> (21) *Would you care to join me for a drink?*
> (22) *Why don't you do one of your funny voices and cheer the kid up?*
> (23) *Could you be a little more specific?*
> (24) *Could you give me some guidance please?*
> (25) *Can you get in the front please?*
> (26) *Can you pass me a towel?*

The use of an imperative form is also a possible way of wording a request (e.g., *Shut up!*), but using a bare infinitive form is considered rude and the imperative is often 'softened' by the use of modifiers, that is words like *please*, *just*, *dear*:

> (27) *Hang on a minute, please.*
> (28) *Pass my monocle, dear boy, I'll need a view of this.*
> (29) *Just be on your guard.*

In English requests are also expressed by tag questions:

(30) *Meet him here, will you?*
(31) *Cut it out would you please.*
(32) *You couldn't possibly come back, could you?*
(33) *You couldn't give me his name, could you?*
(34) *You can explain, can you?*

Other ways to express requests is to employ speaker-oriented utterances which contain an indirect question:

(35) *Actually I wonder if you could excuse me for a moment.*
(36) *Yes, but I wonder if you can tell me something else.*
(37) *I wondered if you'd care to meet me for a drink or something.*

One could employ declarative utterances expressing a hypothetical wish of the speaker:

(38) *I would like to ask you to sing one for me.*

Utterances where the speaker expresses his or her gratitude to the hearer in case the request is performed are also possible:

(39) *I'd appreciate it if you'd be careful with her.*
(40) *I would appreciate it if you made no mention of my existence.*

Bowe and Martin (2009: 20) report on a survey of middle managers in business in the eastern area of Melbourne conducted in 1995. The aim was to find out which of the following forms are most commonly used in requests:

(a) *Pass the salt (please).*
(b) *Can you pass the salt?*
(c) *Can you reach the salt?*
(d) *Would you mind passing the salt?*
(e) *I would appreciate if you would pass the salt.*
(f) *Would you pass the salt?*

Their findings suggest that the most frequently used request forms were variants of (b) and (f) with the addition of the word *please*, that is forms like *Can you pass the salt please* and *Would you please pass the salt.*

Russian also employs a variety of linguistic structures to express request, but their choice and distribution differs from English. The most commonly used structure is that of imperative (Larina 2009, 2013). The following examples are taken from the Russian National Corpus:

(41) *Rasskažite, kak ėto proizošlo.*
'Tell, how it happened.'
(42) *Prideš', pozvoni.*
'(When you) come, call.'
(43) *Devuška, skažite, novyx pravil uličnogo dviženija net?*
'Girl, say, are there new road rules?'
(44) *Peredaj salfetku.*
'Pass the napkin.'

(45) *Daj kakoe-nibud' bljudečko?*
'Give any saucer?'

Unlike in English, this structure is considered neutral and not rude. However, it can also be 'softened' by the use of the following devices: the word *požalujsta* 'please' (example 55), the use of diminutive forms in the forms of address (names or kin terms) (examples 56, 57) and the use of minimisers or diminutive forms (examples 58, 59):

(46) *Skažite požalujsta, a cvety č'i?*
'Tell, please, whose are the flowers?'
(47) *Babul', otkroj, ėto ja.*
'Grandma-DIM, open, it's me.'
(48) *Lenočka, skaži tete, v kakom ty klasse?*
Lena-DIM, tell aunty what grade you are in?
(49) *Čerez časik podojdite.*
'Come in an hour-DIM.'
(50) *Daj-ka mne žurnal'čik, ja gljanu.*
'Give-INT me the magazine-DIM, I'll have a look.'

Requests in the form of imperatives can also be intensified by the use of intensifying particles, 'double' (or even 'triple') imperative and repetition:

(51) *Nu pozovi-ka ego.*
'Well, call-INT him.'
(52) *Slušaj, starik. Sgonjaj na Smolenku, a?*
'Listen, old man. Drive to Smolenka, ah?'
(53) *Slušaj, bud' drugom, pomogi matanaliz sdat'.*
'Listen, be a friend, help me to pass Mathematical Analysis.'
(54) *Rasskazyvaj-rasskazyvaj.*
'Tell, tell.'

The use of a 'double imperative' in requests is characteristic of a 'camaraderie' attitude (Larina 2009; Gladkova 2013a and b).

Interrogative forms are also possible in the expression of requests in Russian, but their scope and frequency is much smaller than it is in English. Examples (13—26), if translated into Russian, would simply not be possible as an expression of request. In Russian the interrogative forms are used in the future (as in 55). Moreover, the use of negation can be regarded as a more polite form because it implies a possibility of a negative response:

(55) *Vy ne podskažite, pjatnovyvoditel' "Boss" u vas est'?*
'Won't you tell if you have "Boss" stain remover?'

Like English, Russian also uses speaker-oriented utterances in question and statement forms.

Larina (2009) conducted a study in which Russian and English native speakers performed a discourse completion task to several 'request' situations. According to this data, Russians speakers use imperative 3 times more often than English speakers while English speakers use interrogative forms 4 times more often than Russians speakers (Larina 2009: 450).

From the point of view of Ethnosyntax, the difference in preference towards different grammatical structures in the expression of 'request' can be explained by prevalence of different cultural values. Wierzbicka (2006) relates a common use of whimperatives for wording requests, the cultural rules of using *thank you* and the avoidance of phrases like *you must* in suggestions in English, with the prevalence of the value of 'personal autonomy'. (See the discussion of cultural scripts [E] and [F] in the previous section.)

In Russian 'personal autonomy' and 'privacy' are not regarded as important cultural values. In fact, Russian does not have a word that fully corresponds to the English word *privacy*. Therefore, the idea of 'distancing' in a speech act like 'request' is not realised in Russian to the same degree as it is in English. In certain forms of Russian requests, particularly when diminutive forms are used, it is the idea of 'expressing good feelings' becomes dominant.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Language is highly sensitive to cultural and societal processes. Grammatically elaborated areas of a language commonly embed meanings or ideas that are particularly salient in the collective psyche of a people. Knowledge of these meanings or ideas can equip cultural outsiders with more effective and successful tools of communication with the representatives of the culture.

This article has provided some examples of studies illustrating cultural significance of grammar within the Ethnosyntax approach. These investigations can be of particular importance to other areas of linguistics, including language teaching. The proposed formulae can be applied in language teaching to explain meanings and use of grammatical constructions. Moreover, appellation to broader cultural rules can explain to learners why there exists variation in grammatical constructions across languages. The use of universal human concepts makes it possible to translate these formulae into any language without any change in meaning.

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ГРАММАТИЧЕСКИЕ СТРУКТУРЫ
В МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНЫХ СРАВНЕНИЯХ

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На материале русского и английского языков в статье обсуждается вопрос о том, как культурная информация передается на уровне грамматики. В данном случае грамматика рассматривается в неразрывной связи с семантикой и прагматикой. Исследование проведено в рамках этносинтаксиса. В работе анализируются безличные конструкции в русском языке и конструкции причины в английском. Также на примере речевого акта «просьба» в английском и русском языках рассматриваются различия в употреблении грамматических структур, вызванные культурными факторами. В качестве источника примеров используются Национальный корпус русского языка и Коллинз Вордбанкс Онлайн. В статье подчеркивается практическая важность лингвистических исследований, выявляющих культурный компонент значения, для преподавания иностранных языков.

Ключевые слова: этносинтаксис, Естественный Семантический Метаязык (ЕСМ), русский язык, английский язык, просьба, безличные конструкции, конструкции причины.