SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS AND THE SOCIAL COMPONENT OF WORD MEANING: A COMPARATIVE VIEW OF GERMAN, RUSSIAN AND UZBEK

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Abstract: The paper considers how social relations existing in a community become part of the lexical meaning of words, and compares this process in German, Russian and Uzbek. Drawing on the semantic analysis of dictionary-attested lexemes, it shows that relations of work, role and status, age, gender, kinship, ethnicity and region are encoded as recurring semantic features which form a distinct social component of meaning. The comparison reveals that the three languages share a common set of underlying oppositions, such as "own vs. foreign", "formal vs. informal", "centre vs. periphery" and "experience vs. inexperience", while differing in the cultural weight attached to them. German tends to foreground institutional and legal aspects, Russian frequently adds emotional and evaluative colouring, and Uzbek gives particular prominence to moral norms, respect for elders and family hierarchy. The findings are relevant for contrastive semantics, translation and the teaching of German as a foreign language.

Keywords: social component of meaning, sociocultural factors, contrastive semantics, social hierarchy, forms of address, German, Russian, Uzbek

Words rarely name things in a neutral way. When speakers call someone a *colleague*, a *newcomer* or an *elder*, they do not only identify a person; they also place this person within a network of social expectations, rights and duties. Linguists have long noted that such information is not a matter of context alone but is, at least partly, stored in the meaning of the word itself. This layer of meaning is usually described as the social component of lexical semantics. It reflects the way a society is organised, the roles it recognises and the values it attaches to them [1; 2].

The question becomes especially interesting when languages belonging to different cultural traditions are compared. German, Russian and Uzbek are spoken in societies with distinct histories of social organisation, religious experience and family structure. At the same time, they are increasingly brought into contact in Uzbekistan, where German is taught at universities and Russian and Uzbek coexist in daily communication. For learners and teachers of German in this setting, the differences in how social relations are verbalised are not an abstract issue: they show up in translation errors, inappropriate forms of address and misread connotations.

The aim of this paper is to outline how sociocultural factors shape the social component of word meaning in the three languages and to identify which features are shared and which are culture-specific. The material consists of lexemes recorded in standard explanatory dictionaries of German, Russian and Uzbek [3; 4]. Each unit was described through a set of semantic features, for instance "person + professional activity + violation of norms + social disapproval", which makes it possible, in line with componential approaches to meaning [5], to compare words that look like equivalents but carry different social loads. The theoretical starting point is the understanding of language as a social semiotic system [6] and the view that cultural concepts can be compared through a shared set of semantic primitives [7].

A useful first observation is that social relations in all three languages are coded through a limited number of oppositions. In the domain of work, the opposition between conformity with labour norms and its violation is clearly polarised. German contrasts *der Fleißige* with *der Blaumacher*, a colloquial label for someone who skips work; Russian sets *работяга* against *бездельник*; Uzbek opposes *mehnatkash* to *dangasa*. The structure is the same everywhere, yet the emphasis shifts. The German words point above all to discipline and reliability, the Russian pair is noticeably more emotional and expressive, while the Uzbek lexemes are embedded in moral discourse and are often used when older family members pass work values on to younger ones.

National and cultural relations are organised around the opposition “own vs. foreign”. In German, *der Landsmann* implies shared origin and solidarity, whereas *der Gastarbeiter* combines the ideas of a working function, a temporary stay and social distance. Between these poles there is a whole scale of designations, from the legally neutral *Einwanderer* to the more recent descriptive formula *Deutsche mit Migrationshintergrund*, which tries to stress belonging rather than difference. Russian *мигрант* is ambivalent and may sound neutral or negative depending on the discourse. Uzbek *vatandosh*, by contrast, rests on the idea of a common homeland and emotional closeness, while *chet ellik* signals cultural distance. The criteria of belonging therefore differ: legal and territorial status in German, social and economic position in Russian, ethnic and cultural affinity in Uzbek.

Role relations and forms of address provide perhaps the most practical evidence for teaching. The German distinction between *Sie* and *du*, the Russian *вы* and *ты* and the Uzbek *siz* and *sen* all express the same basic contrast between distance and closeness. However, the systems are not identical. German supports the pronominal choice with a developed set of status markers such as *Herr*, *Frau*, *Doktor* and *Professor*, which are regularly used in official communication. In Russian, respect is typically expressed by addressing a person by first name and patronymic. Uzbek relies heavily on kinship-based forms: *aka* and *opa* are used to address older people who are not relatives at all, and *domla* conveys reverence for a teacher or scholar. A learner who transfers the Uzbek habit of addressing an older stranger in a family-like way into German, or who uses *du* too early, may unintentionally violate the norms of politeness.

The age dimension is equally revealing. All three languages contain pairs that contrast advanced age with youth: *der Greis* and *der Jüngling*, *старец* and *юноша*, *qariya* and *yigit*. On a general level they oppose experience and wisdom to inexperience and potential. Yet the German words are rather descriptive and, in the case of *Greis*, may even suggest frailty. The Russian *старец* carries spiritual associations, while *юноша* sounds somewhat romantic. Uzbek *qariya* is clearly marked by respect, which mirrors the cultural norm of honouring elders, and *yigit* evokes masculinity, physical strength and social activity. In other words, the same semantic skeleton is filled with different evaluative content.

Gender relations show how social change enters the lexicon. German *die Gleichberechtigung* and *die Emanzipation* are linked to the idea of legal and social progress, whereas *der Macho* is perceived as a negative and somewhat outdated type of behaviour. Russian discourse on the topic is more strongly shaped by ideological terms such as *феминизм* and *сексизм*. In Uzbek, expressions like *gender tengligi* and *erkaklar hukmronligi* reflect a tension between traditional hierarchy and newer views on equality. The common opposition here is "equality vs. dominance", but the way it is discussed depends on the public debate in each society.

Religious vocabulary illustrates how historical experience colours meaning. In each language one finds a similar triad: a word for a believer (*der Gläubige*, *верующий*, *dindor*), a word for a non-believer (*der Ungläubige*, *неверующий*, *dinsiz*) and a word for a heretic (*der Ketzer*, *еретик*, *bid‘atchi*). The first term is generally neutral or positive, the second marks distance from religion,

and the third is clearly negative. The differences are subtle but telling. German *Ketzer* retains a strong historical charge connected with the authority of the medieval church, while in Uzbek this historical layer is less prominent. Political and economic terms, on the other hand, are remarkably close across the three languages: *die Opposition*, *оппозиция* and *muxolifat*, or *die Marktwirtschaft*, *рыночная экономика* and *bozor iqtisodiyoti*, show that concepts of modern public life tend to be shared internationally and carry fewer culture-specific overtones.

Kinship terms deserve special attention, because they demonstrate that formal equivalence can hide deep cultural differences. Basic words such as *Familie*, *семья* and *oila*, or *Freund*, *дуг* and *do‘st*, seem to correspond almost perfectly. The picture changes when we look at more specific units. Uzbek *kelin* does not simply mean a son's wife, as German *Schwiegertochter* does; it denotes a social role with clear duties and a subordinate position in the husband's parental home. The word *ichkuyov*, referring to a son-in-law who lives with his wife’s parents, has no one-word equivalent in German, where a descriptive phrase is needed. Russian has the dialectal and historically somewhat disparaging *примак*. The absence of a direct equivalent is itself a cultural fact: it signals that the corresponding family model is not regarded as typical in the other society.

Territorial and ethnic designations follow similar lines. German regional names such as *der Bayer* or *der Berliner* foreground regional identity, Russian *москвич* and *провинциал* add a clear contrast between the capital and the periphery, and Uzbek *toshkentlik* or *samarqandlik* often bring the historical prestige of a city into focus. Ethnonyms like *der Usbeke*, *узбек* and *o‘zbek* have a stable denotative core, but their connotations may change with the context and with the dominant discourse about interethnic relations.

A separate group is formed by words that describe asymmetric role relations. Following L.P.Krysin, we may distinguish verbs in which the subject's role is higher than that of the addressee, such as *befehlen*, *командовать* and *buyruq bermoq*, and verbs in which the subject occupies the lower position, such as *gehorchen*, *подчиняться* and *bo‘ysunmoq* [8]. The meaning of these verbs cannot be fully grasped without both participants, because the social relation between them is part of what the word says. Similar asymmetry appears in nominal pairs: *der Chef* and *der Mitarbeiter*, *руководитель* and *сотрудник*, *rahbar* and *xodim*; *der Lehrer* and *der Schüler*, *учитель* and *ученик*, *ustoz* and *shogird*. It is worth noting that the Uzbek pair *ustoz – shogird* carries a strong moral and almost personal bond, which is weaker in its German counterpart.

What do these observations tell us about the role of sociocultural factors? First, they confirm that social stratification, professional status, age, gender, ethnicity and religion are not external to meaning; they leave a stable trace in the semantic structure of words [9; 10; 11; 12]. Second, the comparison suggests that the basic categories of social life are largely universal. Every society distinguishes between its own members and outsiders, between superiors and subordinates, between the old and the young. Third, and most importantly for practice, each language assigns its own cultural weight to these categories. German usually stresses institutional and legal relations, Russian tends to add emotional evaluation, and Uzbek foregrounds moral norms, respect and the hierarchy of the extended family.

These findings have direct implications for the teaching of German in Uzbekistan. Vocabulary that seems easy because it has an apparent equivalent in the learners’ native language is often the most misleading. Teachers can make the social component of meaning visible by comparing word pairs across the three languages, by asking students to describe who may use a word, to whom, and with what attitude, and by discussing cases where no direct equivalent exists. Work with forms of address, kinship terms and words of status is particularly productive, since it combines linguistic accuracy with intercultural awareness.

In conclusion, the social component of word meaning offers a convenient lens through which the relationship between language and society can be examined. The comparison of German, Russian and Uzbek shows a common architecture of social oppositions combined with culture-specific evaluations that grow out of each community's history and values. Further research could extend the analysis to corpus data, which would allow us to trace how quickly these evaluations change, for example in the vocabulary of migration, gender and digital communication.

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