

The role of concept analysis in studying English (on the basis of American political discourse)

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Abstract

Once a person sets a goal of studying the culture of some country or even of teaching it to foreign students in classrooms, he/she cannot manage without taking into account its reflection in the languages. It is the language that fixes all peculiarities of people's world perception and becomes the storage of knowledge about it. It is in the light of such perception that a human being sees the world. Thus, one can speak about a linguistic world view. The linguistic world view is based on the set of certain concepts. A concept is a great deal broader than the lexical meaning of a word as it also includes an evaluative component. Cultures may share the same concepts or possess their own uniqueness. The latter are often referred to as national-specific concepts. These are the concepts that render the peculiarities of nation's mentality, world view and evaluation of the material world. In order to understand each other people must share the set of concepts and the same background information. This is often referred to as "common knowledge" [1.P.174-175]. At present considerable attention is drawn to discourse, especially its political variety. The analysis of national-specific concepts and the set of linguistic means which express them in political discourse seem to be of special interest in the discussion of typical cultural characteristics as political sphere is one of the constituent parts of any national culture. Thus, political discourse contributes to the understanding of the ways values have been developed. The importance of linguistic analysis of political discourse as part of culture teaching can be illustrated using materials from the African American political discourse, in which such concepts as 'freedom', 'power', 'equality' and 'African American dream' come to the fore.

Keywords: discourse, culture, teaching, worldview, concept, African American dream

"Every language is a temple in which the soul
of those who speak it is enshrined."
Oliver Wendell Holmes

Language is a means of communication between people. It is inextricably bound to the life and development of people who use it. It is a human being who perceives and understands the world through various senses and creates a worldview on the basis of this experience. Having received the results of such a perception, people pass their knowledge to other people with the help of language. That is why one can argue that language, thinking and culture are so closely interconnected that they exist in the state of unity.

Language does not only reflect people's worldview and culture; among its key functions one can also name preserving culture and passing it on to the next generations. In this respect it goes without saying that it is necessary to turn to language analysis when teaching foreign cultures to students. People see the world around them differently: Their worldview depends on what has become traditionally important to them. The peculiarities of the vocabulary of a language should be noticed by teachers of language and culture and explained to students.

As a result of world perception one can observe the appearance of concepts in culture. Their nature has been defined by such prominent Russian linguists as V.A.Maslova and Y.S.Stepanov. Then their theory has been applied to a great variety of languages (see Levenkova E.R., Ter-Minasova S.G., Vishnyakova O.D. and others). As a result of their research it has become clear that an important peculiarity of a concept, which helps to distinguish it from the lexical meaning, appears to be the fact that a concept is “felt through”, i.e. it carries some special emotions and reflects a person’s attitude to it (positive or negative). Moreover, concepts are connected with the norms of people’s behaviour since they also fix the peculiarities of native speakers’ culture.

Having clarified the notion of a concept to students, it seems to be of major importance for teachers to classify all its variants. Concepts represented only in a specific culture are often called “national-specific”. It is they that fully reflect the peculiarities of people’s mentality, values and worldview. In addition, the representatives of various social classes also see it in their own way. That is why one can speak not only about national-specific concepts but also about historically- and socially-conditioned ones of a certain language. In addition, it is essential to keep in mind that the set of concepts in language always changes and that their structure and meaning transform as well because the world is perceived differently at certain stages of history. So, one can differentiate between static and dynamic concepts, though the former ones are less numerous than the latter ones.

At this stage it seems necessary to illustrate the role of language in representing people’s worldview by adducing some examples. For this reason let us turn to political discourse in its African-American variety. In this article an example of political discourse was chosen for analysis as it is that is characterized by a high concentration of stylistic means, which contribute to the expression of concepts in language.

The aim of turning to political discourse is also explained by the fact that the political sphere is one of the constituent parts of any culture. It plays the key role in reflecting the national worldview and pursuing political aims, and is meant to influence the addressee by means of language. This peculiarity explains the reason so much attention is drawn to political discourse at present.

One of the best examples of political discourse can be found in the USA. Political public addresses have always been important for Americans. An increase in their significance is observed in the 20th and 21st centuries when African Americans took the political floor in America. Let us illustrate the way of concept analysis with the help of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech where a new concept – the African-American Dream – can be singled out.

When speaking about the American mentality in general, one easily singles out individualism, rationality, individual freedom and self-confidence. The most well-known and complex concept of the American worldview is the “American Dream”. It belongs to national-specific concepts even though similar ones appear in modern worldviews of other peoples (the “Ukrainian Dream” [2], the “Georgian Dream” [4]).

The notion of the American Dream is closely connected with the idea of America’s social and cultural ‘selectedness’. That is why, in order to identify themselves and distinguish themselves from other nations, there appeared unique values and ideas, one of which is the American Dream.

The term was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book “The Epic of America.” He states that the American Dream is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” [1, pp.5-6]. In order to let the students get a fuller understanding of the concept in question, it is necessary to turn their attention to its

definition in dictionaries published in different decades.

Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture [6, p.33]:

American Dream (the): the idea that the US is a place where everyone has the chance of becoming rich and successful. Many immigrants to the US in the early 20th century believed in the American Dream.

Oxford Guide to British and American Culture [8, p.13]:

The **American Dream**: the belief of Americans that their country offers opportunities for a good and successful life. For minorities and people coming from abroad to live in America, the dream also includes freedom and equal rights.

As a result of definition analysis, students can see that immigrants' understanding of the American Dream was added to the dictionary entry. If they consult more dictionaries they will find out that nowadays there exist a number of definitions of this concept, each of them bringing its various components to the fore. It shows that the components of the American Dream have not always been the same. From this one can conclude that the American Dream is a dynamic concept. So it seems possible to speak about their evolution. [1] If at the end of definition analysis a concept is named "dynamic", students must be asked to prove it with the help of examples. So, the next step is looking for the actual realization of this concept in discourse. As mentioned above, a concept contains an emotional-evaluative component. That is why one of the students' tasks is also to figure out the emotional colouring of the concept in question.

Martin Luther King was an African American and addressed the audience with the "I Have a Dream" speech during the civil rights movement in the USA. It is crucial to keep this fact in mind while analyzing the set of concepts in the speech. Being the citizens of the USA, African Americans partly shared the views of Americans, as they are united by the territory and history. However, there is a set of concepts that were influenced by the peculiarities of historical development of the USA, i.e. a long period of segregation and discrimination of African Americans. That is why there appeared a unique concept of the "African American Dream". This new concept is a key to understanding the African American worldview since it is based on their strivings, cravings and hopes for the future. Some time ago the African American Dream used to be part of the American Dream, a broader concept. That is why the definitions of the earlier period are applicable to a narrower concept. Here, the African American Dream is examined as a separate concept that has its own characteristics, which are often different from those of the American Dream.

It is not difficult to imagine what African Americans have been dreaming of during the two previous centuries. What they wanted most of all was certainly freedom. Only after 1865 newly freed African Americans started new lives in spite of the fact that attitudes toward them were still negative. That is why there appeared one more component of their dream – the will to be treated equally to the white population of the country. African Americans dreamt of being able to make choices without the restriction of their race and skin colour.

It was Martin Luther King who spoke about a new dream that was not the same as the American Dream. In his best-known speech, "I Have a Dream," he defined it in the following way: "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream <...> a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.'" [7] These words can be seen as the emergence of the African American Dream. So, its core element in the middle of the 20th century, in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s opinion, was the idea of racial equality.

In the "I Have a Dream" speech, Martin Luther King stands up for the existence of the Dream in people's hearts. He shows that even though African Americans are not satisfied with the way they are

treated, they do not deny the Dream. Ill-treatment of African Americans, injustice, persecution, discrimination, and oppression are shown in the “I Have a Dream” speech as threatening, sinister and sullen:

- *the long night of captivity*
- *quicksands of racial injustice*
- *storms of persecution*
- *winds of police brutality*
- *heat of injustice*
- *heat of oppression*

On the contrary, positive treatment is seen as a pleasant and joyful natural phenomenon:

- *a joyous daybreak*
- *sunlit path of racial justice*
- *invigorating autumn of freedom and equality*
- *oasis of freedom and justice*

In order to describe the modern attitude towards African Americans, the leader of the U.S. civil rights movement uses a sequence of adjectives and nouns with negative connotations: “dark”, “desolate”, “storm”, “heat”. They represent natural phenomena that prevent peaceful existence. The same idea can be applied to unfairness, discrimination and segregation. That is how emotionally coloured words contribute to the understanding of the concept.

One more point of analysis in this speech is the revelation of a Biblical layer that broadens the understanding of the African American Dream. The main source of M.L.King’s language was the King James translation of the Bible. In his childhood, King attended his father’s church and listened to the preachers. He had a unique memory and could cite the passages from the Bible. As a result, one can find numerous allusions to the Bible in the speech under analysis. Examples related to the representation of the African American Dream are provided below:

“we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”	AMOS 5:24: “But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”
“I have a dream that every valley shall be exalted”	ISAIAH 40:4: “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low”
“from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood”	MATTHEW 7:24-27: Parable of the houses built on the sand and on the rock.

The use of Biblical allusions is truly remarkable because by introducing such metaphors in the address, Martin Luther King not only expresses his own ideas with respect to the actual state of affairs at the time, but also reminds people of the parables, which are relevant at all times. [5, p.79]. Thus, thanks to Martin Luther King the African American Dream has connections to religion, proving the fact that not only material wealth is important for immigrants.

Later, in 1965, Martin Luther King would elucidate the concept by quoting the Declaration of Independence once again: “It wouldn’t take us long to discover the substance of that dream. It is found in those majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, words lifted to cosmic proportions: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by God, Creator, with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.’ This is a dream. It’s a great dream.” [3] In this passage he drew special attention to the words “all men” as they suggest absence of any division of the Americans into groups and the idea of unity comes to the fore.

To sum up, with the help of the examples adduced above, it has been shown that the African American Dream is a true concept as it meets all the requirements of a concept mentioned in the theoretical part of the present article: It is a national-specific dynamic concept that arouses certain positive emotions of people who use it. Being a historically conditioned concept, it also has some historic references to African Americans' past, especially to the civil rights movement in the USA.

The concept of the African American Dream is not the only one that finds its realization in Martin Luther King's speech. In his address he also turns to the notion of freedom, which becomes a separate concept: it is a complicated and important notion without which it is difficult to imagine the culture in question [3, p.27]. Some decades ago, the concept of freedom was understood merely as freedom from slavery, but in this very speech it reflects something greater – the attitude towards African Americans in society and their moral state. This time its main components are getting rid of segregation and discrimination and letting African Americans feel equal to white Americans.

“But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination”[7].

The modern understanding of freedom, in Martin Luther King's opinion, is close to that of freedom from slavery because men are still not free, but “crippled by manacles and chains”. However, in this case one comes across a metaphoric understanding of African Americans' inability to escape from the fetters of segregation and discrimination.

Moreover, there is a link between the notion of freedom and other components of life that African Americans have been striving for, for example “freedom and ... justice”, “freedom and equality” and “an oasis of freedom and justice”. Thus, the notions of justice and equality also define the African American worldview, showing that freedom is not everything they want to achieve.

If African Americans want to get the desired result, they need to put in a great deal of effort. That is why the concept of freedom is accompanied by the idea of struggle.

“<...> we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”

“We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one...”[7].

As can be seen from the examples adduced above, struggle presupposes not an armed rebellion but a constant movement forwards, spiritual power, a desire to change the current state of affairs and hope for the future. It follows that Martin Luther King, unlike Malcolm X, was not an adherent of a radical approach to the situation, but promoted integration with the rest of Americans.

These are two basic concepts of the African American worldview that have been reflected in the political discourse of the civil rights movement, represented in the article by Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech. They have also been developed in addresses by other African American leaders and politicians. Some of these concepts exist even at present, though slight changes in their understanding are possible. One can find them in Barack Obama's and Louis Farrakhan's speeches.

The African American Dream of the 20th and 21st centuries is characterized by a definite opposition of the reality and the ideal, by a necessity to struggle, by believing in the Dream. The African American Dream remains a complex and multilayered concept. To get a fuller picture, students can also turn to

Malcolm X's addresses and even to addresses by our contemporaries such as Barack Obama and Louis Farrakhan. That is how the evolution of the concept in question can be illustrated.

To conclude, language is a great source of information about culture and the worldview of people. It is a means of passing traditions and attitudes from generation to generation and setting them firmly in people's minds. That is why doing concept analysis, following the stages mentioned at the very beginning of this article, in culture classes with foreign students seems to be of considerable importance.

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