

# From Cognitive Linguistics to Cultural Linguistics

Laura A. Janda  
University of Tromsø



## Which comes first, culture or language?

- Language and culture are inseparable
  - But treated as distinct by scholars
- Cognitive Linguistics has the potential to bridge this gap (Palmer 1996, Achard & Kemmer 2004)
  - linguistic phenomena as artifacts of human experience
  - how human beings conceive of, manipulate, and metaphorically extend meaning

# Overview

1. What is Cultural Linguistics?
2. What can Cognitive Linguistics contribute to Cultural Linguistics?
3. Case Studies in Cultural Linguistics
4. Conclusion

# 1. What is Cultural Linguistics?

- a. Relationship between language and cultural identity
- b. How cultural concepts are embedded in language
- c. What goes into an utterance
- d. The parameters a speaker must attend to
- e. “Thinking for speaking”
- f. Grammar as a cultural construct in context



# 1a. Relationship between language and cultural identity

- Language is the vehicle for nearly every type of cultural expression
  - Culture with “C”: prose, poetry, theater, ritual
  - Culture with “c”: jokes, sayings, songs
  - Transmission of “wordless” media: music, dance, food, costume, handicrafts
- Most important factor in group identity
- Vast majority of minority groups are losing their languages today

## 1b. How cultural concepts are embedded in language

- Lexical characteristics
  - Nomenclature for ecological niches
  - Language-specific lexemes, cf. Cz *mlsat*, Norw *å slurve*
- Grammatical characteristics
  - E.g., syntactic constructions, verb inflections
  - Often overlooked and difficult to compare
  - Dictate how content is organized and presented
  - Systematic, therefore potentially greater impact
- Lexicon and Grammar are cultural constructs



# 1c. What goes into an utterance

- Prisms through which information passes before an utterance is pronounced
  - Sensory perception organs
  - Conceptual process
  - Construal, mental states, imagined scenes, hypotheses, pragmatic intentions



# 1d. The parameters a speaker must attend to

- Many possible linguistic outputs for the same input and speaker
- Choice of options are presented by grammar
- Largely unconscious, yet pervasive, involving hundreds of distinctions in a given language
- Connect to essential concepts such as human relations and time/event structure
- Differ widely across languages
  - E.g., gender, number, verb-framed vs. satellite-framed, temporal location



# 1e. “Thinking for speaking”

- Symbiotic relationship between language and culture
- Grammatical structure as a cultural norm
- Co-evolution and co-influence, not unidirectional determinism
- Distinctive patterns of “Thinking for speaking” (Slobin 1987)
- Every language meets expressive needs of its community, but equality does not mean interchangeability
- One can’t just take the contents of one culture and express them in another language

# 1f. Grammar as a cultural construct in context

- To what extent are grammatical and cultural patterns consistent?
- Are there connections between what grammars highlight and what cultures highlight?
  - E.g. honorifics and respect for social hierarchy

## 2. What can Cognitive Linguistics contribute to Cultural Linguistics?

- a. Recognition of meaning as inherent to all linguistic structures
- b. Grounding of meaning in human experience and extension of meaning via metaphor
- c. Integration of linguistic and non-linguistic cognition
- d. Absence of a presumed set of “language universals”

## 2a. Recognition of meaning as inherent to all linguistic structures

- Cognitive Linguistics does not insist on autonomous “modes” such as lexicon vs. syntax
- All units and structures are meaningful – this includes grammar, not just lexicon
- Use of a particular linguistic category is thus meaningful
- Therefore grammar is relevant to culture

## 2b. Grounding of meaning in human experience and extension via metaphor

- There are many experiences all human beings share
  - E.g., gravity gives us UP vs. DOWN
  - Most languages extend this distinction metaphorically, but different languages do so in different ways, cf. Cz *nad očekáváníí, nad mé chápání* vs. Eng *beyond expectation, beyond me*; Chinese “vertical time”
- Every language has a unique metaphorical profile, and this profile has cultural significance

## 2c. Integration of linguistic and non-linguistic cognition

- Linguistic categories behave the same way as all other human cognitive categories
  - per-/conceptual category for color blue is subject to same cognitive constraints as lexeme *blue*, and “extralinguistic” knowledge is part of the same package
  - The meaning of a concept like *blue* differs across cultures
  - Key words (and grammatical structures) can shed light on the world-view of a given language community (Zaliznjak, Levontina & Šmelev 2005)

## 2d. Absence of a presumed set of “language universals”

- Lack of a priori assumptions about specific universals makes Cognitive Linguistics well-suited for exploration of diversity, both linguistic and cultural
- Supports investigation of inherent values of distinctions made in different languages, rather than just calculating overlap and “distance”
  - E.g., Germanic & Slavic languages organize physical location around concepts of containment and supporting surfaces (*in* vs. *on*), but Korean focuses on tight vs. loose fit (*kkita* vs. *nehta*; Bowerman & Choi 2003)

## 2. Summary of what Cognitive Linguistics can contribute

- If:
  - Meaning plays a role in all linguistic phenomena
  - Grammar is connected to culture via shared content
- Then:
  - Grammar is part of the semiotic endeavor of projecting values and identity



## 2. Summary of what Cognitive Linguistics can contribute

- Both language and culture use metaphor to elaborate their content
- Inclusion of “extralinguistic” knowledge in linguistic categories integrates language and culture
- Encourages focus on language-specific values and their culture-specific parallels

### 3. Case Studies in Cultural Linguistics

Case studies of

- a. Gender
- b. Inst vs. Dat case
- c. BE vs. HAVE
- d. Dative reflexive clitic
- e. Singular vs. plural
- f. Source–location–goal

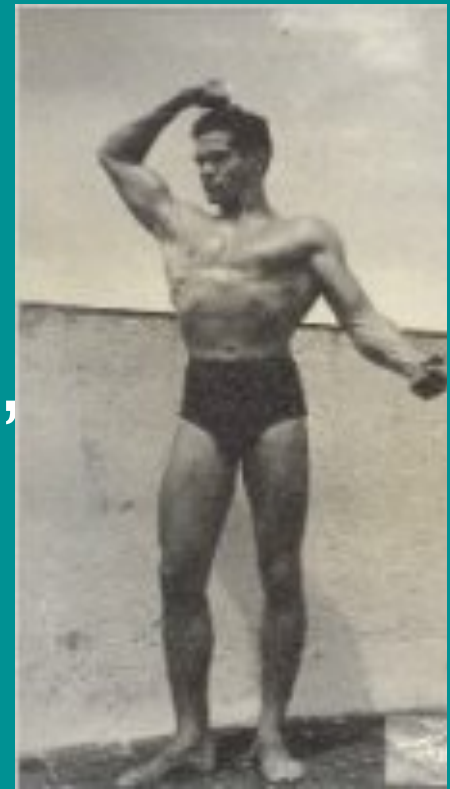
Based on research on  
Czech, Russian, Polish,  
Norwegian, and Sámi

Different  
languages show  
different  
patterns of  
directing  
attention

There may be  
cultural  
correlations

## 3a. Gender

- Virility: male human beings vs. everything else
- All Slavic languages (except Slovene) can express virility grammatically: special numerals, inflectional endings, syntactic constructions (Janda 1997, 1999, 2000)
- Most robust in Polish – see data on handout



## 3a. Gender

- ICM places male human at top end of scale
- Does NOT mean that Polish language and culture are more discriminatory
- Possible cultural correlates:
  - Poland is most ethnically homogeneous state in EU (2006 CIA World Fact Book)
  - Poles are very concerned about “purity” of Polish (Dybiec 2003)
  - Chivalry still highly prized in Poland

## 3a. Gender

Julia Kuznetsova – grammatical profiling of Russian verbs

- Russian marks gender of subject on singular past tense forms of verbs: masculine, feminine, or neuter
- Data: Russian National Corpus (>140M words) – 8,340 verbs with more than 20 past tense forms
- fem:masc ratio for all verbs, ranging from zero to infinity
- Peak is at 0.3 – typical Russian verb has 3x as many masculine as feminine forms

## 3a. Gender

(See data sample on handout)

- Top 100 Masculine verbs in Russian:
  - leadership, professions, drinking, smoking, aggressive sex, argumentation, evaluation, cutting, hammering, liturgical and high style domains
- Top 100 Feminine verbs in Russian:
  - maternity, child-rearing, needlecrafts, cooking, washing, crying, exclaiming, lamentation, relationships with men, moving and speaking like a bird

## 3b. Instrumental vs. Dative case

- Russian & Czech inherited same grammatical case system from Proto-Slavic
- Case government of verbs expressing domination differs (Janda & Clancy 2002, 2006)
- See data on handout



## 3b. Instrumental vs. Dative case

- For verbs expressing domination,
  - Russian uses the Instrumental case, stressing that human beings under domination are used like tools
  - Czech uses the Dative case, stressing the human capacity of dominated people
- Maybe just coincidence
- Possible cultural correlates: historical reality – Russians have often dominated, Czechs have often been dominated



## 3c. BE vs. HAVE

- Russian is a BE language:
  - *U menja mašina* [By me (is) car]
  - Only one modal verb, *moč'* 'be able'
  - Many impersonal constructions with logical subject in Dative case
- Czech is a HAVE language:
  - *Mám auto* [(I) have car]
  - Plenty of modal verbs
  - Less use of impersonal constructions

# 3c. BE vs. HAVE

- Russian is a language where things happen to people
- Czech is a language where many of the same experiences are things people do
- Possible cultural correlates:
  - Russian fatalism is a famous phenomenon (Nietzsche 1888 to Guelassimov 2006)
  - There is no corresponding “Czech fatalism”

## 3c. BE vs. HAVE

- BUT:
  - Sámi is also a BE language (like Russian):
  - *Mus lea biila* [Me–LOC is car]
  - Sámi has even more modal verbs than Czech
  - ...and even fewer impersonal expressions

## 3d. Dative reflexive clitic

- Czech preserved the Proto-Slavic short form Dative reflexive clitic pronoun *si* ‘for oneself’
  - this form was lost in many neighboring languages (Russian, Polish), but behaves somewhat similarly in Slovak
- Czech has used *si* to develop a wide range of expressions of self-indulgence – See data on handout

## 3d. Dative reflexive clitic

- Czech makes large and consistent investment in emphatic expression of benefit to the self
- Possible cultural correlates:
  - me-first self-indulgence of Švejk
  - Jára D. Cimrman's "inventions"
  - Dubček's "Communism with a human face"
  - Contrast with Russian communism which was more focused on collective than individual needs



## 3e. Singular vs. Plural

- Both Russian and Czech use singular for masses, plural for countable objects
- Russian has a higher threshold for the transition between count and mass, accepts rather large objects as masses; Czech treats many of these as singular masses (See data on handout)

## 3e. Singular vs. Plural

- The count vs. mass distinction for nouns in Slavic has a parallel in verbal aspect
- Perfective conceived of as a countable solid object (Russian): *Pisatel' napisal roman* 'A writer wrote [perfective] a novel'
- Imperfective conceived of as a mass (Russian): *Pisateli pišut romany* 'Writers write [imperfective] novels'

## 3e. Singular vs. Plural

- Russian uses more Imperfective than Czech (cf. historical present, general-factual, polite imperatives, annulled reversible actions), parallel to use of more singular-only mass nouns for items like *kartofel* 'potatoes', *kljukva* 'cranberries', and *izjum* 'raisins'
- Possible cultural correlates: Size boundary for individuation is higher in Russian, might correlate to focus on individual vs. collective



## 3e. Singular vs. Plural

- In Sámi, sg vs. plural does not correspond to count vs. mass, but instead both sg and plural are used for masses
  - **sg** designates masses that are wet/hold together *gáffe* ‘coffee (cooked, drinkable)’, *deadja* ‘tea (cooked, drinkable)’
  - **pl** designates particulate masses that don’t hold together *gáfet* ‘coffee (dry beans)’, *deajat* ‘coffee (dry leaves)’, *jáfut* ‘flour’

## 3f. Source–location–goal

- Norwegian uses three different ways to express source, location, goal
- Russian uses the same preposition to express both location and goal
  - A location is a place you go to
- Sámi uses the same case to express both source and location
  - A location is a place you come from

See data on handout

## 3f. Source–location–goal

- Possible cultural correlates
  - Sámi has traditionally a nomadic culture, Russian is not
  - Sámi has a very complex kinship system, strong reference to where one comes from

# Conclusion

- Some linguistic differences are probably not culturally relevant (cf. Polish *Idę do mamy* vs. Russian *Ja idu k mame*/Czech *Jdu k mámě* ‘I am going to my mother’)
- There are counterexamples (cf. Russian uses more Perfectives in narrations of sequenced events)
- But language and culture might be congruent in many ways
- Use of Cognitive Linguistics to examine cultural linguistic phenomena is a new line of research, relevant to the identities of thousands of speech communities on Earth