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LINGUISTIC ECONOMY AND TEACHING ENGLISH TO RUSSIAN-SPEAKING AUDIENCE

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Abstract

Aim. To review the phenomenon of linguistic economy, which is represented in the English language system, as the objective global tendency from the viewpoint of teaching English to Russian learners.

Methodology. Grammatical and lexical phenomena in the English language are discussed in terms of their correlation with similar phenomena in Russian regarding their semantic and functional characteristics. The English forms ending in *-ing*, which are considered as the representatives of polyfunctionality in the system of the English verb, are analyzed from the point of view of the difficulties the learners of English are confronted with. The deictic system is analyzed first and foremost at the level of articles, and the phenomenon of grammatical homonymy is subjected to a general analytical description in reference to the semantic structural properties of the English language system.

Results. The approach based on discussing linguistic economy as a global property of the English language system that has been objectively developed throughout its history, may serve as a basic principle of understanding the verbal representation processes as well as a successful language acquisition. The tendency for linguistic economy is determined by the structural and semantic specificity of the English language.

Research implications. The theoretical significance of the article lies in the development of the systemic interpretation of the phenomenon of linguistic economy as an objective property of the language, due to the specificity of its historical development and functional-semantic structure. The practical application is determined by applying the results and material under study in the process of learning English in a Russian-speaking audience, as well as in research practice.

Keywords: linguistic economy, polyfunctionality, homonymy, article, analytical structure of the English language

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ЯЗЫКОВАЯ ЭКОНОМИЯ В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ РУССКОЯЗЫЧНОЙ АУДИТОРИИ

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Аннотация

Цель. Рассмотрение феномена языковой экономии, представленной в англоязычной языковой системе, как объективного, глобального свойства с точки зрения преподавания английского языка русскоязычной аудитории.

Процедура и методы. Рассмотрены грамматические и лексические явления английского языка с точки зрения их соотношения с аналогичными явлениями в русском языке в плане их семантических и функциональных характеристик. Подробно освещены представляющие трудность освоения вопросы реализации англоязычных форм на -ing, рассматриваемых в качестве репрезентантов явления полифункциональности в системе английского глагола. Общему аналитическому описанию подвергается отражающая референциальную картину английского языка дейктическая система, представленная на уровне артиклей, а также рассматривается явление грамматической омонимии.

Результаты. Понимание лингвистической экономии как объективно сложившегося в течение всей истории развития английского языка глобального свойства языковой системы позволяет сформировать у учащихся общее понимание процессов отражения и вербальной репрезентации реальности, что является главным условием успешного овладения языком. Проявление тенденции к языковой экономии обусловлено структурно-семантическими особенностями английского языка.

Теоретическая значимость статьи заключается в развитии системного понимания феномена лингвистической экономии как объективного свойства языка, обусловленного спецификой его исторического развития и функционально-семантической структуры.

Практическая значимость обусловлена возможностью применения результатов и исследованного материала в процессе изучения английского языка в русскоязычной аудитории, а также в исследовательской практике.

Ключевые слова: языковая экономия, полифункциональность, омонимия, артикль, аналитический строй английского языка

Introduction

The relatively new notion of linguistic economy is valuable not only with respect to high linguistic theory, but to the actual process of teaching. Like with many other languages, linguistic economy is typical of English with its homonymy of different morphological forms and the misleading equivalence between unstable compound word and multi-componential word com-

binations. The present article is aimed at revealing the nature of several instances of linguistic economy in English (the absence of articles being the only case of linguistic economy in the Russian language, which is relevant for the native speakers of Russian when they begin to learn English) and at showing the various aspects of usage a Russian learner of English is to be explained when he comes across complicated instances

of linguistic economy. The allegedly incomprehensible English verbal system is much less difficult to grasp compared to the use of articles, verbal nouns ending in "-ing", gerund, participles, unstable compound words and various syntactic constructions, these latter being the key examples of linguistic economy discussed in the present paper.

The problem of linguistic economy in terms of its theoretical and practical significance is considered to be one of the topical problems in the field of modern linguistics. The issue under consideration was subjected to thorough analysis in Éléments de linguistique générale by André Martinet [14], where it was discussed with respect to the principle of the minimum effort, originating from the natural desire of a person to spend as little mental and physical effort as possible in the course of speech production. In this sense language evolution can be regarded as an important factor, since each stage of this evolution is characterized by a certain balance between the needs of successful communication and the heuristic aspects of human language activity, including the new parameters imposed on human communication by the Internet environment [2; 15; 16]. One of the most important aspects of the investigation of the linguistic economy phenomenon is its application in language learning. Thus, when discussing the English language, its syntagmatic and paradigmatic characteristics should be taken into special consideration both in terms of linguistic economy relations, which have been developed in the course of its history, and the results of the manifestation of these that can be discussed in connection with language teaching.

Methodology

The analysis is based on the functional approach to language studies and on the use of a number of methods that include the method of structural and semantic analysis aimed at the study of linguistic functions and meanings of the units under discussion. Here the semantic and structural correlations within the language system and the flow of speech

should be taken into account, as well as the contextual analysis with reference to various types of context, determining the processes of the functional and semantic formation of the linguistic units in question. Also of particular significance here is the comparative method, including the use of translation in the technical methodological sense, which is especially important when discussing the lexical and grammatical capacities of English [6; 9; 11] as applied to teaching this language to the Russian-speaking audience. It should be emphasized that what is also to be taken into special consideration within this type of analysis is the conceptual method that concerns itself with the notions that lie in the basis of the verbal representations of morphological, syntactic and lexical issues. We proceed from the premise that language exists objectively in speech, in its representations, which should be studied in order to understand its essentials [10, c. 12].

Results and Discussion

It is common knowledge that direct correspondences between various levels of linguistic organization of languages like Russian and English are comparatively rare, not least because quite often the principles of linguistic economy typical of the English language have no parallels in Russian, which makes it extremely difficult for the Russian users of English to grasp the foreign language they are learning in its entirety. An obvious example of the disparity between a Russian learner's expectations and the actual system of usage in the English language is the lack of similarity between the verbal systems of the two languages in question, which refers to a number of theoretical problems concerned with categorization and parts-of-speech classification in languages under consideration [5]. The natural desire of a Russian student when he needs to express the idea of duration or of completeness of some action in English is to turn to the marked forms of Continuous ("was writing") and Perfect ("has / had written"), while in English the predominant choice in both cases is in favour of Indefinite (wrote), this being caused among other things by the tendency towards linguistic economy so typical of English. Other morphological, as well as morphosyntactic and syntactic differences between the two languages seem to be less evident after one masters the "subject - predicate - direct object" word-order, but in fact it is in this sphere of usage that the most recurrent and the-mostdifficult-to-eradicate mistakes are made. In the present paper we will discuss articles, verbal nouns ending in "-ing", gerund, participles, unstable compound words and the structure of compound Russian sentences as compared to English sentences in order to show that these problems may be solved through revealing the nature of the linguistic economy Russian learners of English should grasp for the adequate understanding and studying of this foreign language.

Among the linguistic units just enumerated the absence of articles in the Russian language is the only case of linguistic economy where Russian outruns English. Russian here seems to be more sparing, and the absence of the relevant class of words in the Russian language makes it extremely problematic for Russians to learn to use English articles properly. Traditional explanations to the effect that the first mentioning of an object requires an indefinite article, while all other "mentionings" need the definite article are misleading, and this may be illustrated with the help of just three lines from a poem by Thomas Moore:

"May we never meet worst in our pilgrimage here,

Than the tear that enjoyment may gild with a smile,

And the smile that compassion can turn to a tear".

Though the usage of "smiles" here corresponds to the above simplistic "first / nonfirst mentioning" pattern, with "tears" the situation is exactly the opposite. This isolated example may be treated as an exception which confirms the general rule, but the actual practice of using articles in English offers yet another and altogether different

opposition of zero versus the definite articles, which the counting of "mentionings" utterly fails to cover. To clarify the point learners should first become accustomed to reproducing examples of the right usage of articles without being bothered by the why and the wherefore. Only after some working knowledge of the realizations of the system is acquired the learners are to be given the explanation of the opposition of generalization, classification and identification manifestly unobserved in the Russian language due to its peculiar tendency towards linguistic economy in the sphere of deixis.

Both generalization and classification are opposed to identification in that they do not refer to a unique object or phenomenon opposed to a class of similar objects or phenomena [4; 12] (cf. "The communication with my parents now gives me less than the communication with my friends" and "The book I am reading now is "Hamlet" by William Shakespeare"), but name respectively a class of objects generally ("Communication is important for people, it helps them to develop") or an object belonging to a class, but not opposed to it ("I want to read a book in English"). The choice of zero article or of the indefinite article is conditioned by whether we deal with an abstract unaccountable noun or with a concrete countable noun. Finer distinctions come when countable nouns are used to denote a class of objects as a whole, for here zero article is impossible all the same, and its function is performed by the definite or the indefinite article ("The tiger is a ferocious animal", "A tiger is a ferocious animal") - all this with one notable exception, when pairs of countable nouns are used for naming whole classes of concrete objects, thus acquiring zero article in phrases like "The relations between teacher and student may be somewhat stormy", which disappears within the sentences where only one member of the original pair is retained ("Could you please repeat whose relations with the / a student are potentially stormy?"). As for forms of Plural, zero article and indefinite article merge into what may be called the absence of an article, while the definite article retains the same characteristics we have spoken about in connection with forms of Singular.

When confronted with all these rules and exceptions and exceptions to exceptions a Russian learner is likely to appreciate the linguistic economy typical of his own native language and to hope that no more unpleasant surprises are in store for him in the process of mastering the English language – which, however, is not the case.

All the other cases of linguistic economy we are going to speak about are connected not with the Russian, but with the English language. For a speaker of Russian beginning to learn the English language the existence of the regularly realized homonymy on the level of verbal nouns ending in '-ing', gerund and participles comes as a complete surprise to be marveled at, and struggled with, in the process of studying English. Modern English grammars bring these three together under the heading of "-ing forms" [13, p. 60], blurring the already complicated distinction still further. To present the linguistic material in an orderly fashion one should apply the triple criterion including semantics, the syntactic functions and combinability [3].

Participles as qualifiers of an action (e.g. "Teaching English to the beginners I noticed that ...) are semantically easily distinguishable from nouns and gerund, while with the latter two a finer distinction is to be taken into account: an action treated as a phenomenon (e.g. "The teaching of English to beginners is not an easy task") versus an action treated as a process (e.g. "Teaching English to beginners is a long and tortuous process").

Syntactically the easily distinguishable cases are again participles as opposed to verbal nouns and gerund, as participles function in the capacity of parts of simple verbal predicate ("I am coming tomorrow"), attributes – often adjectivized (an alluring young lady") and members of participial constructions ("Doing this work I realized that ..."), Absolute Participial Construction included ("He being a good man, I often turn

to him for help"). The only possible case of misunderstanding and misinterpretation here is connected with telling gerund from participle when the former is used in compound nominal predicates: cf. "I believe it is not putting it too strongly to say that..." where "is not putting" may be mistaken for the form of Present Continuous. With verbal nouns ending in "-ing" and gerund the situation is not that simple, for both are used as subjects, direct and prepositional objects, parts of compound nominal predicate and parts of adverbial modifiers. For speakers of Russian this linguistic economy is no economy at all, because in translation these syntactically similar homonyms disperse dramatically, verbal nouns being translated with the help of verbal nouns, and gerund turning not only into a Russian verbal noun, but also into the form of infinitive or of a subordinate clause proper.

The point when verbal nouns and gerund become obviously dissimilar is the level of combinability: here gerund moves decisively in the direction of Present Participle, having, in contrast to nouns, no article before and no preposition after (with the exception of cases when gerund is derived from verbs with fixed prepositions), allowing of attributes in the form of adverbs and not of adjectives and coinciding with verbal nouns only in its capacity to be preceded by demonstrative and personal pronouns.

Yet another difference between verbal nouns and gerund is morphological, as the latter may be used in forms of Perfect, Passive and Perfect Passive, which is absolutely unthinkable with nouns: cf. "Having done the work does not mean having done it properly"; "Being once asked to play the piano by ear eventually resulted in me developing useful additional skills"; "My having been taught by real professionals in my university years allowed me to get a well-paid job immediately after I graduated from the university").

The linguistic economy in question is truly mind-boggling for a Russian learner of English, and responsible teachers working with the relatively advanced students should not spare time and effort when trying to explain to them the difference between these three morphological classes and to teach their students to use these homonymic units appropriately and correctly, for otherwise the learner is to make mistakes for the rest of his life when using the more formal varieties of English where it is impossible to avoid using all the three "-ing forms" we have just discussed.

The next example of linguistic economy on the part of the English language, usually understood by Russian learners somewhat inadequately or not at all, is the use of unstable compound words [1; 8] like "history teaching process". Here there is yet another misleading terminological ("nouns used as adjectives") modern grammarians actively propagate, thus blurring the distinction between word combinations of the Adjective + Noun type and unstable compounds which are functionally similar to separate nouns, for they name just one, though complex, phenomenon, while in word combinations we have at least two semantically separate units. Not only does the semantic and structural specificity of words and word combination become blurred when the unfortunate appellation "nouns used as adjectives" is chosen; the acoustic distinction between the two turns out to be impossible to explain as well, for the presence of the unifying stress on the first element of an unstable compound word seems to be illogical if we treat it as a particular variety of attributive word combinations. As a result the learner will continue making mistakes when trying to distinguish between "a mad doctor" as an unstable compound word equivalent to "a psychiatrist", with the unifying stress on the first element, and "a mad doctor" as an attributive word combination equivalent to "a doctor who is mad", where both elements are stressed.

The appellation we are so critical about is unacceptable for yet another reason. Having learnt that in English there is a convenient way of avoiding the direct translation of the Russian multi-componential attributive word combinations with an accumulation of substantival elements in the forms of Genitive ("обсуждение проблем перевода художественного текста») and having thus appreciated this particular manifestation of linguistic economy in English, a native speaker of Russian is likely to start producing such monsters as 1) "*the Shakespeare problem discussion participation" or even 2) "*the Shakespeare problem discussions participation" if this native speaker of Russian is aware of the unstoppable, though morphologically untenable, tendency to turn the initial root morphemes of an unstable compound word into fully-fledged words [7, c. 162].

The first variant is unacceptable for semantic reasons, the second one is even worse, for here both semantics and morphology are disregarded, though modern grammarians will see nothing wrong about it, as introducing forms of plural for the initial components of the unstable compound words has become the standard practice of the modern usage of English. Semantically both variants are highly problematic, but those who have been told that they are dealing with "nouns used as adjectives" will fail to see anything inadequate about the monstrosities we have just introduced, because potentially there is no limit to extending the chain of adjectives in such word combinations as "a big black cold uncomfortable house". But the thing is that elements of unstable compound words are not adjectives or nouns used as adjectives, and that unstable compound words are not attributive word combinations, but words, as the term itself makes it perfectly clear. So the principles of forming attributive word combinations simply do not work when it comes to using unstable compound words.

Unstable compound words are used only when they may be proved to refer to one global semantic whole. "*The Shakespeare problem discussion participation" may be treated as such only in an over-formalized text. In all other cases the initial Russian phrase should retain its syntactic and semantic status when translated into English. Here in fact we

deal with a multi-componential word combination, not a compound word, because within it semantically isolated components are brought together: "(1) participating in (2) the discussion of (3), (4) the Shakespeare problem. If we think of including this word combination in a sentence, further reduction of nominative components will take place, if we are not speaking about a truly global notion: "I decided to participate in discussing the Shakespeare problem". However tempting, the elimination of articles and prepositions provided by unstable compound words does not correspond to the principle of linguistic economy applied at such a global scale. Unstable compound words allow of missing articles and prepositions only when a semantically indivisible whole is formed according to this productive model; in all other cases, when a combination of semantically separate units is found in the source language, it cannot be translated into English with the help of this model, and applying this particular principle of linguistic economy indiscriminately results in coining texts which sound excruciatingly un-English.

The next example of linguistic economy in English as compared to the Russian language concerns syntactic relations proper. In the absence of any observable case-system to speak of (forms of Possessive case being the only notable exception if we turn to nouns and the entire disappearance of this category if we turn to adjectives) the English language could be expected to foreground the potential of prepositional phrases and to develop free word order to make the grammatically unrelated, but semantically related elements stick together. However, the English language has found a totally unexpected variant of linguistic economy, allowing itself to retain its fixed word order and to simultaneously avoid using too many prepositions. Not immediately apparent to the native speakers of Russian, English sentences rendering a complicated idea in a detailed manner do tend to begin with grammatical subjects, occasionally preceded by an apposition or by just one - not very extended - adverbial modifier

and often followed by an apposition if it is not used before the subject. As the sentence continues, there is a tendency, when possible, not to separate a subject from its predicate by excessively long attributive constructions (either attributive subordinate clauses or participial constructions), contrary to the practice so many speakers of Russian are familiar with, and to the principles they adhere to, when they use their own language. Coordination in English in so many cases is preferable to subordination, which leads to reconsidering the role of the cause-andeffect relations (as rendered with the help of conjunctions), whose expression a Russian speaker is prepared to find in a Russian text and whose considerable reduction is a surprise for him when he is dealing with texts written or pronounced in English.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion we would like to say that in English side by side with the structurally transparent manifestations of the principle of linguistic economy (conversion as a popular model in word formation, for example) there are not very obvious cases of linguistic economy displayed on the morphological, morphosyntactic and syntactic levels of the organization of this language. To enable a Russian learner of English to use this foreign language correctly teachers should become aware of the fact that these instances of linguistic economy in English are not just a matter of high linguistic theory completely irrelevant for the practice of language teaching. These cases of linguistic economy very different from what one may find in Russian occur in English with startling regularity and thus cannot be ignored. If a teacher thinks that the students at a certain moment of their linguistic development are unable to comprehend the consequences of this linguistic economy and the existing objective differences between the two languages, the proper explanation of what the students are confronted with may be postponed for a while, but not forever. The explanations may be complicated, but they must be there all

the same, for otherwise even advanced students will keep making mistakes and get frustrated at their inability to use the English language confidently and correctly.

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