

OBJECTIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT RUSSIAN LANGUAGE IN THE PERCEPTION OF NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS FROM CASPIAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the role of the Russian language which acts as a catalyst for the balanced development of the main activities of the Caspian Sea peoples. The authors emphasize the importance of Russian as a language of international communication, a language of friendship which, together with political, economic and social factors, can contribute to the unity of the cultural and educational space in the multiethnic Caspian Sea region.

The study focuses on objectification of the key concept Russian language in the perception of non-native speakers from the Caspian states who come to study at Astrakhan State University. The article presents the results of an associative experiment, aimed at revealing specific features of the cognitive structure Russian language, formed in the foreign students' minds, which has a significant impact on their country-through-language and linguocultural knowledge. The study scope includes the means of objectifying the concept Russian language and dynamics of its perception by non-native speakers depending on the level of the students' language training during the whole period of their studies at university, and a wide range of axiological judgments, expressed in the definitions given by the students during the associative experiment.

Keywords: *concept Russian language, objectification, non-native speaker, axiological marker, verbalizer.*

INTRODUCTION

The modern political and economic situation prompts to turn to multi-aspect studies of boundary regions more and more often; the role of the latter to preserve and strengthen peace and understanding between the peoples living in neighboring territories is increasing. The Caspian Sea is an example of a community of several states – the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan. The principles determining the activities of the five countries located in the Caspian basin were established in the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, adopted in 2018.

The need to sign the convention was determined not only by the existing political and economic conditions, but also by a specific position of the Caspian Sea as a

scientific, historical and cultural phenomenon. The Convention contributes to addressing the issues of territorial delimitation, emerged in the different periods of time, and powers of the states regarding the Caspian Sea - it established the legal status of the sea which is to become “a zone of peace, good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation, and solving all issues related to the Caspian Sea through peaceful means” (Convention, Article 3). The relations between the states in the fields of politics, economy, culture, and the interaction between the peoples living in the neighboring territories, which is connected, among other things, with the language policy of the partner countries, will largely determine the success of implementation of these principles. Despite the fact that there are many scientific teams studying issues of the Caspian Sea and scientific journals like *Caspian Journal: Management and High*

Technologies and The Caspian Region: Politics, Economy, Culture, there are few linguistic papers dwelling on objectification of the concept *Caspian*. These are the article *The Concept 'Caspian' in the Perception of People from Different Linguocultures* by L.Yu. Kasyanova, Z.R. Agleeva, M.A. Golovaneva and E.E. Zavialova, and *Associative Components of the Concept 'Caspian'* of the same authoring team. The authors managed to find lexemes *kaspiets* (person living in the Caspian region), *Kaspy* (Caspian region), and *Kaspiisky* (Caspian), given only as components of the lexical-semantic field of *sea* in O.E. Popova's monograph *Verbal Representation of Concept. Lexical-Semantic Field as a Fragment of the Linguistic Worldview (a case study of the lexical-semantic field of 'sea')*. The present paper examines the concept *Russian language* through the perception of young non-native speakers from the Caspian region studying at Astrakhan State University.

PART 1

With its existing and gradually strengthening ties, the Caspian region needs the development of a stable international cognitive platform which could guarantee the unity of aspirations of peoples having different ethnic mentality. The Russian language can act as a catalyst for the balanced development of all activities of the peoples living in the Caspian region.

The role of the Russian language in the Caspian states cannot be considered without taking into account the correlation of the ethnic groups in these regions and their economic, political and cultural interaction.

While the status of the Russian language in the Soviet Union and certain regions was clearly defined as the official language and the one of international communication of the USSR peoples before the Soviet breakup, now the issue requires analysis of the current situation even in some autonomies of Russia, not to mention the neighboring countries, and the situation is changing dramatically. For example, the *Turkmenportal* correspondent D. Volodina noted in a short article, published six years ago, that there'd been 770 Russian-language classes, or about 24,000 schoolchildren in the 2013/2014 academic year in the capital of Turkmenistan alone. In the next school year, "the number of such classes increased yet more: additional classes were opened in schools with Russian-language education at the parents' request." (<https://turkmenportal.com/blog/3297>).

Against the background of this information, the article of 2021 looks really dispiriting: "The last representatives of the Russian community are leaving post-Soviet Turkmenistan, experiencing a severe economic crisis. <...> in late August 2020, independent media and *Radio Azatlyk* correspondents reported about classes with Russian-language education being closed in Ashkhabad and other regions of the country" (April 22, Moscow, RIA Novosti, Igor Gashkov, <https://ria.ru/20180422/1519094484.html>).

The stance on the Russian language in Azerbaijan is rather different: Part 2 of Article 21 of the Constitution stipulates the free use of Russian in the country: "The Republic of Azerbaijan ensures the free development of other languages spoken by the population" (Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Article 21). In 2019, Editor-in-Chief of the *Bakuinform.az* information website L. Dzhavanshir noted that at that time Azerbaijan had "16 schools providing education only in Russian, and 342 schools having classes with Russian-language education. <...> 18 higher and 38 specialized secondary educational institutions provide Russian-language teaching, including Baku Slavic University. Besides, there's an Association of Teachers of Russian-Speaking Educational Institutions of Azerbaijan" (<http://www.bakuinform.az/press-centr/5516-russkijjazyk-v-azerbajdzhane-fakty-i-cifryiz-istoriivoprosamesto-v-sfere-obrazovaniya-i-medijnomprostranstve>).

The activities of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which has been doing a lot to support the Russian language and Russian culture in Azerbaijan and beyond, is also worth mentioning. During his official visit to Azerbaijan at the end of 2019, Russian President V. Putin thanked the country's leadership for promoting the Russian language, and this was also one of the topics of discussion at his meeting with First Vice President of Azerbaijan M. Aliyeva (<http://www.bakuinform.az/press-centr/5516-russkijjazyk-v-azerbajdzhane-fakty-i-cifryiz-istoriivoprosamesto-v-sfere-obrazovaniya-i-medijnomprostranstve>) or (ibid).

According to statistical data for 1959-2010, there was a gradual decrease in the number of Russian speakers in the Russian regions located on the Caspian Sea: in Dagestan, for example, their number was 213,754 in 1959, 165,940 in 1989, and 104,020 in 2010, which corresponds to 20.1%, 9.7% and 3.6% of the total population of Dagestan (Ibragimov, p. 130). The number of Russians also decreased in Kalmykia during the same period (from 55.91% to 30.21%). Changes in the educational system, including the introduction of a

regional component in school education, an expanded function of native languages under the Law on the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation and the Declaration on the Languages of the Peoples of Russia (25.10.1991), led, on the one hand, to an increased interest in native languages and cultures in the autonomies, and, on the other hand, to a decrease in the level of the proficiency of the language used for interethnic communication.

PART 2

The role of educational organizations of Astrakhan region – the only Russian region bordering the Caspian Sea that is not a national autonomy – is increasing in the current context. The strategic importance of Astrakhan Region, with the Caspian cluster being actively formed, is also confirmed by the fact that the region is part of the federal special-purpose program *National Border of the Russian Federation for 2021-2024*; Astrakhan has been on the list of historical settlements since 2010, i.e., it has been recognized as part of the world cultural heritage. Besides, the issue of assigning Astrakhan Region the status of a priority geostrategic territory of Russia on the Caspian Sea is being considered at the federal level.

The high mission of Astrakhan Region in establishing intercultural relations with the neighboring countries results from both its geographical location, the historical past, and the unique blending of completely different linguo-cultures that have coexisted in one single area for many centuries. This is what makes Astrakhan Region interesting to a large number of students who have opted for studies at Astrakhan State University which creates all conditions for the development of bilingualism and the equal mastery of their mother tongues and the Russian language and linguo-cultures, since the graduates will later represent the great Russian culture and science in their countries.

Realizing the special mission of the region as a promoter of the Russian language and culture, the ASU teaching staff has been constantly searching for new areas, forms and methods of work with foreign students. Participating in the process of educating citizens of the Caspian states, the university's teaching staff ensures a fairly high level of linguistic training of students at the Preliminary Training Unit and students of all faculties, creating original teaching aids, workbooks, etc. At the same time, the list of two-profile teaching programs (History and Russian as a Foreign Language, Elementary Education and Russian as a Foreign Language, etc.) has

been considerably extended, and the list of additional general programs aimed at improving the quality of Russian-language education has been supplemented, too.

Learning the Russian language is one of the main conditions for ensuring the unity of the cultural and educational space of the multiethnic Caspian region, a necessary factor for exercising the right to education. While learning Russian, representatives of neighboring and non-CIS foreign countries, living in the Caspian Sea, also get acquainted with the space of Russian and world cultures. The authors decided to trace the results of constant monitoring of the learning activities of the non-Russian speaking students throughout all study years to see the degree of this right enforcement in Russia. Some results of a questionnaire on perceiving the concept *Russian language* are given below.

Russian higher educational institutions and experts in Russian philology, teaching non-Russian speaking students, face a difficult task of motivating foreign students to study Russian and of motivating philology students for linguo-cultural studies, minimizing the grammar and country-study material correctly in terms of methodology, selecting interesting texts from the history and modern reality of Russia in general and of a multiethnic region in particular.

PART 3

Being in the studied language speaking area, a foreign student as a secondary linguistic personality inevitably turns to the cognitive structure *Russian language* which determines the key mental markers of its speakers. The aspiration for learning a foreign language is always associated with comprehending foreign mentality, as well as comprehending the essence of those concepts that define the national identity of the target language speakers. For instance, the key concept *Russian language* appears at a certain period of forming the image of a speaker of the studied language in foreign students who come to Russia for studies. Its content is comprehended by the mind of the speakers, for example, of the Turkmen language which has characteristics different from the ones of the Russian language – the Altaic language family, Turkic group, Oghuz sub-branch (agglutinative type). The linguistic and cultural world of a non-Russian speaking student from Turkmenistan requires expanding the boundaries of the key cognitive structure *Russian language* which already exists in their minds but has its linguistic and cognitive specificity. This is due to the peculiarities of international relations, influenced by a certain degree of national closedness and restraint of Turkmenistan.

In order to identify specific features of the cognitive structure *Russian language*, formed in the foreign students' minds, which has a significant effect on their linguo-cognitive and linguo-cultural spheres, and to determine the peculiarities of its transformation, the authors conducted an associative experiment to reveal the means of verbalizing the concept *Russian language* in the ASU applicants from the Caspian countries, and in foreign students of the 1st-5th study years. The study also focused on the dynamics of objectification of cultural concepts like *Faith, Motherland, Peace, and Friendship (of peoples)* which are significant for a multiethnic region. The respondents used the relevant vocabulary correlated with the combination-stimulus *Russian language* in their minds.

Organizing the experiment, the authors adhered to scientific positions of N.F. Alefirenko, who believes that in the course of theoretical comprehension of the essence of a concept, it is necessary to make the greater emphasis on studying the processes of concept verbalization, i.e. to remain the linguist rather than change the object under study: "Therefore, the meaning of a linguistic sign is expression of a specific form of linguistic consciousness, with people's cultural and historical experience being recorded and represented. So, a language serves not as an external attribute of consciousness, but as an objectified consciousness capable of anticipatory reflection of naturally expected changes in the world under cognition" (Alefirenko 2004, p. 65).

The questions and tasks offered during the associative experiment were related to the linguistic component of the concept *Russian language* as a cognitive structure. The research materials taken as a basis for the present paper were the results of a questionnaire survey conducted among the 1st-5th-year students, as well as the conclusions drawn from a written record of stimulus-response testing. The study focused on the processes of verbal thinking of the communication participants studying at different faculties of Astrakhan State University and their discursive mastering of the components of the concept *Russian language*. The research scope of the paper included the means of verbalization of the above-mentioned cognitive structure and a wide range of axiological judgments that are expressed in the definitions given by the students during the associative experiment.

G.G. Slyshkin considers a concept as "a multidimensional mental unit that is determined by cultural facts and has the ability of being objectified in various linguistic forms" (Slyshkin 2004, p. 105). Being of the same point of view, the authors focused their

research attention on the means of objectifying the concept *Russian language*, the dynamics of its perception by non-Russian speaking students depending on the level of their language training throughout the whole period of their studies at Astrakhan State University (as mentioned above, the experiment was conducted in several steps). It was very important for the authors to get the majority opinion, and the point expressed by Prof. N.F. Alefirenko seems relevant in this regard: "The role of a subjective component in the structure of a concept is significant ... A subject acts and thinks within a certain discursive and semantic space, the boundaries of which are objective in terms of the given act of communication" (Alefirenko 2008, p. 34).

The conceptual component of the concept *Russian language* contains the following information derived from the combination of the two units – *Russian* and *language*: "Russians – 1) an East Slavic ethnic group, constituting the general population of Russia. 2. Representatives of this ethnic group" (Efremova 2015, p. 727); "An ethnic group, the general population of the Russian Federation" (The Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary, 2006, p. 927); "A language is the historically developed system of sound, vocabulary and grammar means, objectifying the process of thinking and being a tool of communication, exchange of thoughts and mutual understanding of people in society" (Ozhegov, 1989, p. 913).

In the course of the extended multi-year experiment, the authors managed to find out that foreign applicants and students noted the relevance of a number of key verbalizers to the combination-stimulus *Russian language*, chosen by the non-native speakers from the suggested lists of adjectives. It should be noted that the authors chose three leading axiological markers – difficulty, richness, and beauty of the Russian language, while other markers, like melodiousness, functionality, etc., are not given in the article.

The experiment involved 612 students from Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Almost the same composition of students performed the same work during the experiment when entering ASU and at the end of the 1st, 3rd, and 5th years of study. The researchers used two forms of questioning: 1) stimulus-response observation, where the stimulus was the combination *Russian language*, and the reaction included adjectives and participles describing the Russian language that were randomly given by the non-native speakers. Having distributed the offered units into groups (difficulty, richness, functionality, and beauty) on their own, the researchers identified the most relevant

characteristics through calculation; 2) a questionnaire offering lists of definitions from which the non-native speakers could choose the most relevant ones for the word combination *Russian language*, focusing on the attributes of difficulty, richness, functionality, and beauty of the language. Here conclusions were also drawn through calculation.

Thus, the foreign students of different years of study and age groups used the following lexemes to objectify the characteristic of the **difficulty of the Russian language**: *difficult, puzzling, twisted, complicated, abstruse, tricky, challenging, sophisticated, inaccessible, hard, unmanageable, arduous, serious, unclear, weird, shifty, intricate, consisting of nothing but exceptions, severe, thorny, tight, dead-end, heavy, and cunning*, as well as with the phraseological units like *hard nut to crack, over one's head, out of one's depth, and work one's socks off*.

On the other hand, characterizing the Russian language as rich and capable of expressing any nuances of thoughts, which is not typical of all languages, is confirmed in the non-native speakers' answers. At the same time, the vector of positive assessment expands over time. For example, by the end of their university studies, many foreign students note that the following definitions from the lexical group **rich** are applied to Russian: *brilliant, rich, comprehensive, flexible, thick, intensive, exhaustive, concentrated, multidimensional, saturate, one-of-a-kind, unequalled, extensive, solid, dense, full-blooded, complete, strong, substantial, firm, precise, fundamental, functional, wide, and efficient*.

Familiarity with the lexical units pointed out by the respondents indicate the great complexity of learning the Russian language by non-native speakers, which prompts the hosting Russian institutions to strengthen the linguodidactic component in the educational process in order to promote the Russian language and strengthen its international positions. However, this axiologically positive assessment of the language provided by the foreign students at the time of completion of their studies indicates the efficacy and efficiency of the methodology implemented by the teachers.

The functionality of the Russian language in its application in the scientific and professionals sphere optimally meets the expectations of non-native speakers studying in Russia. This characteristic is revealed with the lexical units given below. The respondents specify that this characteristic, applied to the Russian language in all periods of learning it, including their secondary school studies, is indisputable for them. It is obvious that the above group of adjectives, describing the richness of the

language, semantically adjoins the subsequent group of words indicating its functionality and intensifies it due to the relevance of all the definitions given in it for scientific and professional activities. For instance, the stimulus *Russian language* causes a reaction objectified in the units describing the **language functionality**: *expressing, expressive, flexible, capacious, describing, working, informative, precise, and functional*. It is obvious that certain units (*flexible, informative, and functional*) are used by non-native speakers when describing both the richness of the language and its functionality, which indicates the connection between these aspects and their importance for the practical application of the language.

The characteristic of the **language beauty**, belonging to the aesthetic and hedonic spheres, is represented by the following units in the respondents' answers: *beautiful, magnificent, distinct, expressive, flexible, marvelous, picturesque, sonorous, graceful, tender, melodious, elegant, delicate, gentle, imaginative, captivating, splendid, attractive, impressive, diverse, gorgeous, fine, colorful, wonderful, aesthetic, spectacular, and vivid*. It is known that the feeling of the beauty of a foreign language in most cases comes to the learner when a good many of mechanisms of speech production and speech perception become automated and similar in speed to the native language mechanisms. The lack of cognitive difficulties or the ones of speech activity allows the non-native speaker's mind to concentrate on semantics, on evaluation of phonetic and phonological components of the vocal speech or the perceived foreign speech, to feel the perfection of the language as a socio-natural phenomenon. Therefore, the answers of the associative experiment participants make it possible to state the presence of axiological characteristics of the Russian language in the minds of non-native speakers.

In the context of the article, it is important to note that a language contains cultural and historical information about the ethnic group, its mentality, traditions, and customs, and reflects the inner world of a person, which results in an inseparable connection between language and culture, reflected in the educational programs for the training of non-Russian speaking students at Astrakhan State University and indicating the success of teachers' linguodidactic practices.

CONCLUSION

The study results show that objectification of the concept *Russian language* in the perception of non-native speakers from the Caspian states is characterized by the presence of lexemes with both negative and positive axiological markers. The characteristic of the Russian

language difficulty, reflected in the words-reactions of the associative experiment and in the words-definitions offered in the questionnaire, is supplemented by the characteristics of its richness, functionality, and beauty. At each stage of the training of non-native speakers, their conceptual sphere turns out to change to a certain extent due to the work of cognitive mechanisms. The practical value of this transformation of concepts like the concept *Russian language* in the minds of foreign students consists not only in acquisition of some positive signs by the concept, but also in the fact that non-native speakers get an opportunity to observe the mental-transformative activity of the language and manifestation of its vital force and real impact on person's thoughts and feelings.

The associative experiments carried out at different stages of training also showed that the programs composed correctly in terms of methodology, well-thought-out tasks in the Russian language and a set of educational activities offered by Astrakhan State University allow to develop a stable interest of non-native speakers to the Russian language, Russian culture, Russian system of values, and the desire to connect with the greatest works of art in Russian, created by our compatriots.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The article has been written by a team of authors; all the authors have taken equal part in the theoretical analysis of the issue and in carrying out the research. Z.R. Agleeva analyzed research papers and mass media material on the issue under study. M.A. Golovaneva carried out an associative experiment among the university's international students. L.Yu. Kasyanova summarized the data, submitted the original manuscript, and contributed to revising and editing the paper.

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