VOCABULARY AS A REFLECTION OF LIFE WISDOM

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Abstrakt
Niniejszy artykuł 'Słownictwo jako odzwierciedlenie mądrości życia' omawia zagadnienia związane z konceptualizacją w języku oraz dążeniem do mądrości poprzez pragnienie wiedzy transmitowanej poprzez słowa i za ich pomocą wyrażonej.

Słowa kluczowe
Mądrość. Koncept. Słownictwo. Znaczenie. Znajomość słownictwa.

Sophocles in *Antigone* written in 5th century BC said *Wisdom outweighs any wealth* (The New International Dictionary of Quotations, 2000:535). Similarly, a common proverb reads *Wisdom is a good purchase though we pay dear for it* and yet *What is not wisdom, is danger* (The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs, 1993:695). An anonymous Greek proverb says *Wonder is the beginning of wisdom* (The New International Dictionary of Quotations, 2000:533). Many more instances of comparable statements could be quoted here in praise of wisdom. It broadens human horizons, allows individuals to solve problems and queries more easily due to experience and knowledge accumulated with time. Wisdom can be understood also as the development of skills and abilities an individual is endowed with, the skill of foreign language verbosity included.

As a term of general reference, wisdom is defined as *1. the ability to discern or judge what is true, right or lasting; insight. 2. common sense; good judgement. 3a. the sum of learning through the ages; knowledge. 3b. wise teachings of the ancient sages. 4. a wise outlook, plan, or course of action* (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000:1974). The definition clearly evokes a number of associations, all of which have positive connotations. Thus, wisdom seems to be the desirable and sought after aspect of human cognition.

Proverbs are typically referred to and regarded as the reflection of life wisdom of the people and as such they rely on words to pass the messages, teach lessons or bring certain aspects of humans nature and/or life to the foreground and focus of attention. As a consequence, an activity can be reconsidered or a particular form of behaviour changed, adopted or induced. They can be applied in diverse forms of language practice (vocabulary extension, lexical associations, interpretation of metaphorical meaning, searching for metaphorical extensions, cognitive mapping, etc.) as a technique supporting the lexical approach, which believes that *language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar* (Hrehovčík & Shevel, 2009:23). The approach in question *concentrates on*

developing learners' proficiency by means of vocabulary-type activities (Hrehovčík & Shevel, 2009:22). Its supporters hold the opinion that an essential ingredient of the process of acquiring language *is the ability to produce lexical phrases as unanalysed wholes or 'chunks'* which become *the raw data by which the learner begins to perceive patterns, morphology, and those other features of language traditionally thought of as 'grammar'* (Lewis, 1993:95). Obviously, in language instruction, concepts play a crucial role in communicating meaning. Nation (1990:53-54) specifies the difference between concept and use of a word as follows:

> *Our concept of the words <u>a person</u> is not the same as particular persons. Our concept of <u>person</u> is a generalisation and abstraction from our experience of many persons. Colour of skin, colour of hair, and age are not criterial features of <u>person</u>. So if we want learners to understand the concept of <u>person</u> we should help them ignore these features. In the case of <u>person</u> this is easily done by presenting the learners with several examples of persons and helping them to see what is the same in all these examples.*

To establish the concept its positive examples need to be listed alongside the negative ones used to highlight the features of concept, and both types of examples have to be organised in the best way for learning. Testing to see whether the concept is comprehended and learned can assume the following form (Nation, 1990:54):

1. presenting several examples to see if the learners can differentiate between examples of the concept (positive) and those which are not its representation (negative),
2. requesting learners to specify important characteristics of the concept,
3. asking learners to translate the foreign language word into their mother tongue, which is useful only in case the concepts exist in both linguistic communities and cultures.

It seems vital at this point to refer to cultural component in language study and analysis. Undoubtedly, as postulated by many specialists in the field, language and culture are interrelated. Language is embedded in culture, therefore one cannot function away from the other. Thus, with language mastery learners have to acquire cultural awareness regarded as *sensitivity to the impact of culturally-induced behaviour on language use and communication* (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993:5-9) and develop cultural competence, which entails the knowledge of norms of society, behaviour, acceptable forms of conduct in various social situations as well as culture-related and culture-dependent meanings, or culturally significant facts. When learners are equipped with such tools of linguistic functioning, the process of perception of social and cultural reality can be significantly enhanced.

According to research and findings in cognitive psychology, the process of perception allows human beings to

> *comprehend the environment in terms of discrete objects and events; as a result, we can say that the world consists of a multitude of uniquely defined objects and events. They can be further organised into classes (i.e. groupings) based on the criterion of similarity (or shared characteristics). The mental construction which comprises the criterion of similarity and which subsequently enables the classification of objects is called the "concept". In other words, it stands for, or represents, a common set of attributes of an object or event* (Puppel, 2001:58).

Concepts are in no way isolated. They work in unison with other concepts and form networks of all kinds thus constituting meanings of various linguistic constructs. Concepts are considered the structural elements (building blocks) of thought and allow individuals to associate new information with the pre-existing one, that is background knowledge. Similarly, Burkhanov states that a concept is *a generic or universal idea conceived in the mind as a mental representation after acquaintance with instances or as a formulation after reasoning* (1998:44). Such interpretation can allow us to consider wisdom as the sum total of a plethora of concepts, which invariably tie in together. In language studies, to enhance semantic description the notion of 'naïve picture of the world' was introduced in order to *denote the aggregate of commonsense concepts underlying meanings of lexical items that form the general vocabulary.* [It] *has been formed over centuries, represents cultural and spiritual experience of a given linguistic community.* This descriptive category *presupposes that there are two relatively independent conceptual systems: a) the naïve picture of the world, i.e. a conceptual model of the world formed by commonsense notions; and b) the scientific picture of the world, i.e. a model of the world formed by scientific concepts* (Burkhanov, 1998:159). To follow the expert's explication, the naïve picture of the world corresponds to *the material and spiritual experience of the linguistic community* and it is characterised by two features. First of all, a particular aspect of reality may in fact be distant from the naïve worldview held by a given speech community. Secondly, naïve pictures of the world for various language communities may not overlap. These characteristics are not shared by the scientific picture of the world which is understood as *a system of scientific concepts which forms scientific knowledge and is supposed to be universal, well-organised, language-independent, etc.* (1998:206).

Irrespective of the worldview adopted by a given speech community, the wisdom expressed in it has to be formulated by means of concepts, ideas, thoughts and passed on with

184

the use of language. It is the case of transferring a system (of concepts, knowledge, information, i.e. wisdom) through another system (of signs/sounds i.e. language). Thus, if we accept the fact that *any language is used differently in different communities, by different speakers, and in different situations* (Svoboda & Hrehovčík, 2006:140) we can state that language is a socially and culturally-conditioned phenomenon. Language incessantly surrounds humans. Cook (2003:3) states that *language is at the heart of human life. Without it, many of our most important activities are inconceivable.* It is used in relationships with family and friends, in learning, holding and expressing opinions, political ideas, beliefs and passing down traditions. Through generations languages were used to establish and maintain relationships of all kind, *play games, sing songs, tell stories, teach children, worship gods, insult enemies, pass on information, make deals, remember the past, and lament the dead* (Cook, 2003:3). These activities are so intrinsic and natural to human life that they are performed without any conscious consideration. It has to be noted here, that throughout generations language has been used to pass information and knowledge. Whether or not it contributed to the development of the scientific or the naïve picture of the world, language has been the vehicle of thought, experience and simultaneously expansion and growth of the body of knowledge.

According to the proverb quoted in the introductory paragraph, i.e. *Wonder is the beginning of wisdom*, it seems that the need of information and knowledge is the motivational factor driving an individual or a certain research group to pursue in-depth analysis of a given phenomenon in search of explanation, confirmation or development of a particular aspect of knowledge. It is the innate need to know, to satisfy the hunger for information that sets individuals on the quest for wisdom, in which words are invariably employed. Highlighting the power of and over words McArthur (1998:38) states as follows:

> *Words are versatile entities. In their conceptual sphere, they are at once containers, tools, and weapons, just as in the physical world a bag is a container, a screw-driver is a tool, and a gun is a weapon. They can serve simply for communication, but are equally likely to be used (in sharp focus) for negotiation, manipulation, domination, argument, and assault. They can do their work consciously, with the full panoply of rhetoric and suasion, or they can do their work without our conscious intent, when we use words as if we were the puppets of our social or ethnic groups. And in doing all this they benefit from a backlog of millennia in which people around the world have admired and stood in awe of the professions of the word: the shamans, genealogists, priests, gurus, and magicians; the teachers, actors, playwrights, and novelists; the philosophers, logicians,*

lawyers, journalists, and critics – all of whom demonstrate every day that words can be made to do and can make us do.

The expert focuses on the omnipresence of words as well as their multiple functions performed in human daily life. It seems indisputable that the conglomerate of carefully selected words put together in an orderly, logical manner can transfer infinite amount of specialist, professional knowledge to develop the self or shape the minds of others.

While considering the influence exerted by the lexicon we can focus on linguistic knowledge of foreign language students. For them, the implications are twofold; they need to recognise the string of words from the aural or written input as meaningful and they have to comprehend the meaning of such combination. Moreover, they have to master the skill of appropriate selection and use of lexemes to transfer the desired meaning in messages to be created. Various issues are involved here, namely lexical knowledge, collocability, genre and register, to mention just a few. McArthur (1998:48) devotes a lot of attention to the discussion of the phenomenon in question:

Because of its many dimensions, the concept 'word' is more like a cluster than an atom. On the level of theory, the cluster contains the kinds of words discussed above[1]. On the level of practical activity, people 'know a word' not simply when they can use and understand a single item but when they know a range of variation and practices associated with it: for example, to know the word know[2] entails knowing how to say, hear, read, and write its various forms and extensions, fitting them into phrases and sentences (knows, knowing, knew, known), relating the simple to the complex (as in knowledge, knowledgeable, unknowing, unknowable, unknowably, unknown), relating these to such compounds as knowhow and know-all, managing idioms (y'know, in the know, know the ropes, know what's what, know a thing or two), using and grasping senses, expressions, and collocations (knowing someone or something, knowing how to do something, knowing better, and even knowing 'in the Biblical sense'). This cluster, with its clear centre and hazy periphery, shares semantic space with other clusters cited as the words understand, perceive, and fathom. All operate within a system whose size

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[1] In the preceding discussion on kinds of words (McArthur, 1998:45-48) the expert mentions the following eight classes of words, i.e. the *orthographic* word, the *phonological* word, the *morphological* word, the *lexical* word, the *grammatical* word, the *onomastic* word, the *lexicographical* word, the *statistical* word. The group is later appended by the *translinguistic* word (e.g. *realitas* in Latin, *realidad* in Spanish, *reality* in English), a category referring to 'the same word' in various languages in which *despite significant morphological, phonological, and semantic differences, a high degree of lexical continuity survives across the linguistic divide* (1998:48).
[2] The underlines are mine to indicate the original author's highlighting of particular items, which were italicised in the original.

and complexity defy comprehensive description, but without being beyond the reach of the everyday user of the language.

In the early stages of foreign language learning such knowledge is beyond the grasp of a novice learner, yet at more advanced levels of language proficiency students' awareness of lexical meanings develops and individual senses of words become more easily manageable. Lexemes and their combinations that are chosen for instruction are complex in nature and suitable to learners' overall linguistic competence and proficiency. After a period of relative neglect, vocabulary is now at the core of language teaching. It is evident from various research findings that lexical relations are essential in vocabulary instruction, together with cohesion and coherence. Johnson and Johnson state that context that is meaningful and appropriate is of paramount importance as it assists learners in developing *an awareness of lexical patterns such as collocation and sense relations (e.g. synonymy). Componential analysis can help by grouping vocabulary into lexical fields according to conceptual mapping of categories or semantic fields* (1999:368). Such an approach to vocabulary analysis and description can largely enhance comprehension of relations between individual concepts and/or notions as well as constitute background for finding extensions and peripheral meanings bordering on other related concepts.

Whether it is expert knowledge, common belief or personal idea, words more often than not express a particular kind of life wisdom, embodiment of thought and/or knowledge processing which accumulates with age, exposition to knowledge and experience. Proverbs are an ideal language material to explore while searching for interpretation of intended meaning as well as metaphorical extensions. Foreign language learners have a chance to analyse whether similar concepts are expressed in contrasted languages with the use of similar lexical items. If not, the differences can be a ground for comparison of how particular notions are conceptualised in diverse languages.

Besides being customarily considered to hold some common truths or life wisdom of a particular community, they equally frequently mirror the folklore and beliefs of diverse groups of people, and can be universal or culture-specific. For this reason language is also considered a tool which reflects cultural differences between various language groups, thus by developing awareness of such divergences it might enable language students to bridge cultural gaps and equip them with tools essential in recognising and appreciating cultural variety. Such awareness contributes to more holistic understanding of various facets of human existence, which in turn results in gaining more knowledge and experience as well as approaching the doorstep to wisdom. Words are powerful in what they mean and how they

function, therefore their appropriate and careful application is the key to successful functioning in the linguistic reality, since *What is not wisdom, is danger* (The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs, 1993:695).

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