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## National cultural characteristics of the concept of time in Russian language

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**Abstract**

Time is a fundamental category of human consciousness. Language users in different cultures perceive and understand time in their own ways. The concept of time reflects the language users' long-term accumulation of cultural cognition, and affects their perception and judgment of the objective world and then their behavior. Through analyzing and interpreting language materials, this paper sorts out Russians' attitudes towards the past, present and future, and some cultural matters related to Russian polychronic time and the connotation of behavior stereotypes, thus it is proved that the concept of time has great influence on the construction and development of national mentality, and the shaping of national character.

**Keywords**

Concept, cognition, polychronic time, national cultural characteristics.

**Introduction**

Language users in different cultures interact with the world, such as rec-

ognizing themselves and others, understanding and interpreting the world, in conceptualized ways of their own style, so "each language contains an ontology

with its own features"<sup>1</sup>. The concept of time is an important component of people's cognition to the world, the formation of whom is constrained by human cognitive competence and impacted by physical geography, history, religions and social life. In the awareness of language, the concept of time is open, complicated and systematic, in which cultural cognitive experience is coagulated through generations, "language cannot separate from culture and the inherited practices and beliefs in society"<sup>2</sup>. "As for time, every nation has its own ways of feeling, thinking and perceiving"<sup>3</sup>, from the perspective of understanding, the concept of time is closely related to people's views on the world and their status in the world; from the perspective of interpreting, the concept of time is deeply influenced by people's cognitive purpose and ability, value standpoint, and analyzing methods, forming many complex and diversified patterns. Gurevich A.Ya. has

- 1 Aronoff, M., Rees-Miller, J. (2001), *The handbook of linguistics*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, p. 22.
- 2 Sapir, E. (1921), *Language: An introduction to the study of speech*, Harcourt, Brace & Co, New York, p. 221.
- 3 Gaidenko, P.P., (1969), "The subject of fate and the representation of time in the ancient Greek world view" ["Tema sud'by i predstavlenie o vremeni v drevnegrecheskom mirovozzrenii"], *Voprosy filosofii*, No. 9, pp. 88-98.

said, "there are few cultural index like time that profoundly reflect the essence of culture, which contains world view of the age, human behavior and consciousness, the rhythm of life and people's attitudes to things"<sup>4</sup>. The concept and phenomenon of time on cultural level reveal their unique rule, distinctive value and national characteristics. People living in different cultures have different psychological and behavior frames and patterns of cognition and perception to time. People's choices and activities are all involved with time, time value, time selections, time expectations and time feelings and so on. The concept of time has pervasively penetrated in man's real life and inner world, becoming a part of their thinking pattern emotional mode as well as attitude towards life.

### **Russians' attitude towards the Past, Present and Future**

It is because of human's existence that time possesses meaning; it is because of this that the past, present and future are possibly distinguished. People in different cultures have different cognitive orientations about the past, present

- 4 Gurevich, A.Ya. (1984), *Categories of medieval culture. 2nd ed., rev. and enl.* [*Kategorii srednevekovoi kul'tury. 2-e izd., ispr. i dop.*], Iskusstvo, Moscow, p. 103.

and future, revealing the subjectivity on cognition of time.

### Contrariety of the Past

Russians have two attitudes towards the past. On the one hand, they uphold, eulogize and cherish the past; on the other hand, they deny the past and make efforts to draw a clear boundary with it.

Russians are inclined to talk about the past rather than plan for the future, and they always like to look back rather than look forward. Chekhov wrote in *The Prairie*, "Russians like to live in the memory not the present"<sup>5</sup>, where he used *беспамятлив, как кукушка* to scorn those who forget the past. With a typical nostalgia, Russians cherish the memory of childhood, youth, first love, and places they have lived in, and that may explain why Russians cannot live abroad for a long time. That "The past" plays an significant part in Russian awareness is because it carries their experience and wisdom passing from generation to generation. Today, these experiences and lessons have great reference value, from which people can find foundation and moral support for their actions, and

provide comfort and reasons for their decisions. The saying, *Русский мужик задним умом крепок*, describing persons who become wiser after the event, also refers to those of foresight, which is not uphold the foreknowledge but to emphasize consideration and cautiousness. In other words, Russians are better at summarizing and analyzing the past than setting goals and realizing them. This kind of past-orientation has something to do with the cyclical cognitive pattern of time. Etymologically, *время* (time) originated from former south Slavic word "vermeḡ" which means rotation. It is obviously that Slavic ancestors construe time as relevant to circling motion. Under cyclical cognitive pattern, people believe old and durable things are dependable, just like *Старое надежно; Оно проверено временем*, so life experience and secret recipes inherited from the ancestors are cornerstone of current life. Existing pattern is the yardstick of everything, and everything should be measured by the past criterion. Some Russian expressions are good examples – *предок, первопроходец, предшественник* (people walking in front) and *старейшина, сенатор* (senior) refer to ancestor; *потомок, последователь* (people walking behind) and *подражатель* (imitator) mean descendant and junior.

5 Chekhov, A.V. (1995), *Steppe (The Story of a Journey)* [*Step' (Istoriya odnoi poezdki)*], Nauka, Moscow, p. 82.

Although Russians uphold following the past and learning traditions, their extreme tendency, "take all or take nothing", has led them to repudiate the past totally. Under linear cognitive pattern, things are vanishing in the past and will never appear again, reflected in such expressions as *Что было, то прошло; Былого не вернуть; Что было, то сплыло; Что было, быльем поросло; Что было, травой поросло*. Therefore, when Nekhludoff begged Maslova to forgive him, Maslova rejected him by "*Нечего искупать; что было, то было и прошло*". Since *Потерянного времени не воротить; Время губить, не воротить* (lost time never returns) and *Кто старое помянет, тому глаз вон*, people should not be reluctant to split with the past. Due to Russians denying the past, there are expressions like this *хлам истории* (historical rubbish), *осколок прежней жизни* (leftovers of the past). They deem that the old experiences should be forgotten and let all restart, like *начать с чистой страницы, не вливать молодое вино в мехи старые* and so on. Only if there is *после*, experiences before *до* are meaningless. Under linear cognitive pattern, although Russians can realize their participation in building the world, they do not strongly expect this participation be-

cause the unpredictability of future has deeply rooted in their mind. Russians' concept of time is more related to repeatability, periodism and cyclicity, seeing also in Yakovleva's detailed research<sup>6</sup>.

### Unpredictability of the Future

Time cannot be chosen or be controlled (*Время на дудку не идет; Годы идут своим чередом*); the same as life, unsteady and irregular, which people cannot manipulate in his life. Russians advocate that human life is a mysterious course during which it is fated that certain things happen to people, so they often say так сложилось (*вышло, получилось, случилось*). The unpredictability of future mirrors in many expressions, such as *День дню рознь: нынче тепло, а завтра мороз; Бабушка надвое сказала; Наперед не загадывай*.

Due to the unpredictability of future, Russians hold two opposite attitudes towards life. On the one hand, life is so changeable and erratic that people need to store resources ahead of time, take precautionary measures and keep around for

6 Yakovleva, E.S. (1994), *Fragments of Russian language worldview (Models of space, time and perception)* [*Fragmenty russkoi yazykovoï kartiny mira (Modeli prostranstva, vremeni i vospriyatiya)*], Gnozis, Moscow, pp. 73-83.

a rainy day, so *припрятать что-либо на черный день*; *Береги денежку на черный день* (save money for needs in difficulties) and *Ешь и пироги, да хлеб вперед береги*. Osip in Imperial Envoys said, "*Что там? Веребочка? Давай и веревочку, – и веревочка в дороге пригодится: тележка обломается или что другое, подвязать можно*". On the other hand, since life is unpredictable, any preventive preparation will be in vain, so Russians become passive, careless and even dependant on a fluke. The latter is such a typical attitude of Russians that some small words like *авось* and *а вдруг* are hard to be translated into other languages. This kind of fluky psychology is connected with polytheistic beliefs. Ancient Russians entrust their lives to the care of magic and believe the old magic will eliminate all disasters. That thought which still imprints on Russians' mind enable them to keep hopeful to the future. What's more, Russians' obedience, forbearance and conformance have something to do with the Orthodox creed of compliance; besides, the long automatic rule in Russian history also cannot be neglected.

### Unseizability of the Present

Russian thinker Berdyaev sermon once said, "time is divided into the

past, present and future. The past has gone, the future has not come yet, and the present is becoming the past and future. People cannot seize any of them... human carry out their life in the splitting eternity, the terrible reality, the transparent past, present and future"<sup>7</sup>. This is the typical attitude of how Russians look at the present which is hard to catch. Some proverbs are good proofs, such as, *Время за нами, время перед нами, а при нас его нет*; *День мой – век мой*; *Что до нас дошло, то и к нам пришло*; *Век мой впереди, век мой позади, а на руке нет ничего*. Life is constantly moving while our life is only "a moment between the past and the future"<sup>8</sup>.

In Russians' mind, the present is always turbulent in crisis, the future is unpredictable, and only the past is reliable, so they gain comfort from the past. The saying warns Russians "*Завтра обманчиво, а вчера – верно!* (Tomorrow is deceptive, while the past is trustable)"

7 Berdyaev, N.A. (1934), *I and the world of objects. Experience of philosophy of solitude and communion* [*Ya i mir ob"ektov. Opyt filosofii odinochestva i obshcheniya*], Ymca-Press, Paris, pp. 120-121.

8 Dal', V.I. (2000), *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language. In 4 vols.* [*Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka: v 4 t.*], Rus. yaz., Moscow, p. 260.

and "*Иди вперед, а оглядывайся назад* (Walking ahead and don't look back)".

### Humanistic Outlook on Time

Hall puts up monochronic time and polychronic time from ethnological perspective. Monochronic time, which emphasizes on schedule, planning, phasing and punctuality, considers time as ruler of actions; while polychronic time, which is more casual and flexible on counting and using time, stresses participation and completion of tasks rather than compliance yield to the schedule and permits people to deal with several things at the same time. Generally speaking, Western people act according to monochronic time, while Russians and Chinese polychronic time, thus it is not by accidental that Russians and Chinese take the same attitude towards time. This polychronic time is not only fully embodied in language, but also deeply rooted in some Russian behavior patterns.

### Polychronic Time in Language

There are abundant ways to express the relationship between events and real time, just as Shmelev pointed, "*утром, поутру, с утра, под утро,*

*наутро, к утру, утречком, с утречка* are all synonyms, which illustrates Russians treat time more casually than Westerners"<sup>9</sup>. Russians believe time is elastic, and it can be long or short according to people's inner feeling, so timing unit is not precise, for example, *буду сию минуту* may be ten to fifteen minutes or even longer; *момент* and *сейчас* in *Один момент; Сейчас я иду* could be five to twenty minutes. Westerners are used to apply the accurate timing unit, while Russians the blurry one, such as *Одну минуту; Давайте встретимся около трёх; Он будет к двум часам* and so on.

Because of the unpredictability of future and flexibility of life, Russians do not rush to search solutions but always to think over before taking decisions; "*семь раз отмерить* (look before you leap)", it is better to postpone making choices. They are used to putting off things but not finishing them quickly. A series of linguistic expressions are good proofs, for example, *Тише едешь – дальше будешь; Поспешишь – людей насмешишь; Работа не волк – в лес*

9 Bulygina, T.V., Shmelev, A.D. (1997), *Language conceptualization of the world (based on Russian grammar)* [Yazykovaya kontseptual'zatsiya mira (na materiale russkoi grammatiki)], Yazyki russkoi kul'tury, Moscow, p. 494.

*не убежи; Где бы ни работать, лишь бы не работать; Должна – не спорю, отдам не скоро; Наступила ночь, и в Стране Дураков закипела работа; Мы работаем на глаз, а получается как раз; Ешь – потей, работай мерзни; Инициатива должна быть наказуема* and so on. Westerners say, "don't put off till tomorrow what should be done today", while Russians joke, "*Не откладывай на завтра то, что можешь сделать послезавтра* (don't put tomorrow what should be done the day after tomorrow)".

### **Polychronic Time in Behavior**

Russians' behavior is not organized according to reasons and logic, but mood, emotions and personal feelings; in other words, they allocate time by emotion rather than specific affairs. Therefore, they may suddenly change plans due to private business or their mood, such as late arrival, cancelling a date at last minute, and breaching their promise, and they will make no effort to explain or compensate. It is worth noticing that Russians treat work time and private time differently. Generations of Russians (especially in the Soviet Union) regard work as a national obligation, and because wages are not decided by labor

contribution, it is deep-rooted in society to overlook work time, particularly in nonproductive area. Many movies, dramas and literatures have displayed these popular phenomena including coming to work late, leaving early, dragging on lunch time, and gossiping over teacups at working hours. Today, in private enterprises since the salary has been decided by labor contribution, those phenomena are reduced gradually.

### **Polychronic Time in Values**

Westerners often solve problems "linearly" and "step by step", approaching the goal gradually; in their view, yesterday and the past are insignificant, and we should focus on the future, which is directing us. However, Russians hold that the future is so unpredictable that anything could happen in life, so it is unnecessary to plan for the future. Only by living harmoniously with nature and particularly with people around can life be easier. In Russians' opinion, life is not a straight line leading to the target, but a wriggling road to nowhere; time is associated with people and things involved rather than with fixed target, so when arranging and allocating time, Russians pay more attention to affective and personal feelings than the practical utility of

certain things. Although, time and tide wait for no man and *Семеро одного не ждут*, both mean late arrival is impolite, linguistic analysis shows that Americans put time first while Russians put people first. In America, being late is shameful and even a kind of sin, possibly because "time is money". Wasting other people's time affects their efficiency and benefit, and material wealth is the criteria to measure success, "property is regarded as indivisible...it outmatches any principal cultural canon in our society"<sup>10</sup>. There are many Russian proverbs on time such as, *Деньги пропали – наживешь, время пропало – не вернешь; Время деньги дает, а на деньги время не купишь; Время дороже золота; Время – не деньги: потеряешь – не найдешь*, but they aim to emphasize precious time not to relate time with efficiency and benefit. Different from American culture, value of time is always being neglected, while value of spirit is being stressed, and for them interpersonal communication is the best investment on time. Interpersonal relationship comes first, so being late is forgivable. For Russians, qualities such as punctuality, scrupulousness, and acting as schedule are not crucial values

though they are punctual either, but they think the real life, various situations and interpersonal relationships are more important than time.

## Conclusion

The essence of time has some profound and mysterious association with that of cosmic and human beings. Time is not only the mystery of philosophy and science, but also the mystery of culture and human study. Since the industrialized civilization, time, having gradually broken away from the symbol of daily life, has separated from the space-time association, and become an independent object. Different cultural groups adopt the same measure of time, and evaluate the value of human and the change of society by time parameter, thus the value of time directly simplifies into the commercial value of working time. Although the concept of time with national characteristics in different cultures are submerged in the tide of globalization and become more and more similar with each other, Russians' concept of time, as the deep stable factor of national culture, still secretly contains the features of Russians' character such as the contrariety, the extreme tendency of "taking all or taking nothing", abundant emotions, un-

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10 Strauss, C., Quinn, N. (1997), *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 146.

predictability of life, as well as irrational or even fatalistic attitude towards life, which are taking effect as ever. Between man and time, Russians always put man first, and consider time as a component of life rather than an mechanical moving item which is irrelevant with man. That

shows Russians' humanistic orientation on time cognition. This paper provides a new perspective for the domain of time, which helps us to explain the mental mystery of Russia, and offers profound guiding significance on cross-cultural communication.

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## **Национальные культурные особенности концепта Время в русском языке**

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### **Аннотация**

В данной статье автор рассматривает культурные особенности концепта Время в русском языке, описывает новую перспективу для поля времени, что помогает объяснить духовное таинство России, а также конкретизирует глубокое руководящее значение концепта на межкультурное общение.

**Ключевые слова**

Концепция, познание, полихронное время, национальные культурные особенности.

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