Reversity as a universal phenomenon of cognitive nature

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Summary: The article covers the problem of reversity as one of the linguistic phenomena that helps to represent linguistic view of the world. In the article the authors try to prove that it is a universal feature typical of all languages represented by specific language structures in particular language. The study of such phenomena in different groups of languages gives the opportunity to find out some principles revealing the true nature of language development and semantic modification.
Key Words: reversity, cognition, conversity, polysemy, functional shift, proversion, proversion or reversion models

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes even sophisticated linguists come to think about the phenomena that seem absurd from the point of view of a language system. However, the real facts sometimes cannot but induce thoughts whether that the language system is based not only on similarities but contraries as well. Very often linguists notice that different phenomena of language and speech belonging to the same paradigms demonstrate sometimes semantic, pragmatic and functional characteristic features of the contrary effect. Take, for instance, the cases of the so-called enantiosemy, or holophrasis, that is the possibility of expressing contrary senses in the form of the same lexical unit. For instance, the two meanings of the adjective wild, namely, 'wayward, passionate, uneasy to keep, e.g. a wild horse' and 'timid, bashful, e.g. the girl keeps wild' are a vivid example of such a phenomenon.

This phenomenon (as well as many other ones demonstrating structural semantic controversy) is on the surface. These problems have been demonstrated in many scientific works on the topic [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6]. Yet, no consistent reasons explaining why structurally and, as in the case of holophrasis, semiotically identical structures, receive the contrary semantic interpretation not only in certain contexts but in their semantic paradigm as well. The essence of this seems to lie in more general semantic grounds which need to be viewed and explained in the linguistic works on semantics, and the material for the investigation should not be limited only with the data of separate languages. A more profound comparative investigation should be undertaken in this respect. But the present-day comparative and typological semantic investigations are aimed rather to find certain differential traces of different linguistic codes than certain universal characteristic features that could give possibility to work out a certain general theoretic basis for description of languages having different structural and generic characteristic features on some common theoretical hypothesis.

It seems as if the linguists majoring in this problem should stop their empty attempts and recognize the principal incongruity of different language codes but for the question often asked by people who are rather remote from linguistics as a science: what gives the possibility to gain mutual understanding, to come to common profitable decisions and to agree with other values to people brought in different social and historic backgrounds, having their specific cultural and religious values and using different semiotic codes in their everyday communication? Our opinion is that people of different races and nationalities living in different parts of the Earth have not only the common basic biological parameters but the common mechanisms of cognition, of natural and social phenomena and the structural ties within this process of cognition on common grounds, these ties being reflected by general mechanisms of linguistic structuring this knowledge.

From this standpoint, one can see the importance of structural cognitive characteristic features of different languages, rather than simply structural or structural functional ones. In this respect much progress has been made with such a principally new paradigm as the cognitive linguistics appearing on the front stage of modern semantics. Principles of structuring language knowledge and intricacies of such basic mental processes as categorization and conceptualization have substantially enriched the description of meaningful structuring taking place within the units of different hierarchal levels of the language system.

At the same time, there exist a number of substantional achievements in investigating the semantic interaction of different languages in different domains of the comparative historical and present-day linguistics which data can be hardly processed by the cognitive methods in linguistics due to the interrelated problems within certain separate or generically related languages.

The time seems to be ripe when a synthesis of the two above-mentioned general approaches to the comparative study of linguistic meaning becomes a vital necessity. Surely, it seems premature to speak of any fundamental rules of the knowledge structural mechanisms on universal linguistic grounds; nevertheless, some deduction concerning particular, somewhat "hidden" universal models of the like structuring based on empirical semantic data seems quite consistent.

The like deduction gives us a possibility to state that some particular and at the same time important interrelated universal mechanisms of speech-formation within different languages' structure are conversity, reversity and contraversity.

The Main Part. *Some General Remarks on Terminology.* The terms *conversity* and *reversity* can be often met in the linguistic semantics. As for the term *contraversity*, we must claim its authorship. *Conversity* is the most recurrent among the three above-mentioned terms. One cannot but notice a certain degree of polysemy about the term, as it is used at least in two terminological meanings. First, it is a synonym to the term *functional shift* as one of the main ways of modern word-building in the most languages with analytical structure, say, English. In this respect, conversion means transformation of one part of speech into another realized in certain structural position (for instance, *a finger – to finger*). Another terminological interpretation of conversion applies to the sphere of semantic relations between words. As F. Palmer and M. Nikitin define this phenomenon, it is a presence of contrary sides, dimensions, directions within one entity (e.g. *buy* and *sell* represent the same action but viewed from different persons taking part in this action). In this respect one may define lexico-semantic conversion as a species of contraversion.

Here we see a necessity to clear up this terminological problem looking as some kind of discrepancy from the first sight. If we take two opposite in their meaning suffixes of Latin origin, namely *pro-* (*corresponding*, *compatible with*) and *contra-* (opposite), we may form two opposite terms pertaining to the domain of our investigation by joining them with the stem *–version*. Here *version* would mean that the real language structure (morpheme, word, word-combination or sentence) has been produced by some peculiar order of the constituent elements. Here we may apply the terms common to the practice of investigating metaphor as a universal cognitive phenomenon, namely, *source* and *target*, the former standing for the initial order of the constituent elements which is a language unit itself, and the latter being the resultant unit of a language system. Thus, we receive two opposite processes named *proversion* and *reversion*. *Proversion* denotes a process of forming a linguistic sigh out of other signs preserving the order in which the components of a source model are kept as a structure of thinking. Correspondingly, reversion is a process of forming a linguistic sigh out of other signs in which the order of the components of a source model is kept as a structure of thinking in a reverse way (hence the term *reversion*) as compared with the previous structure of thinking being a model for creating this new linguistic sign.

The best way to show the interrelation of proversion and reversion seems to apply to some peculiar

processes of word-formation. In particular, we would like to refer to the process known as the integration of compound words from the word-combinations. *Proversion* as a term describing the peculiarities of this process is explicit when a resulting compouнц word has the same order of its components that is inherent to the source combination of words, e.g. *green eyes → green-eyed*, *black bird → blackbird* and the like. Reversion is observed when the components of a target compound word are placed in the opposite order than those constituting the source word-combination, e.g. *time* of *life → lifetime*, *feeding* with *breast → breastfeeding*, etc. The mechanism and cognitive reasons for modeling compound words and choosing proversion or reversion models are a topic of separate investigation by itself, it promising very interesting and important for the cognitive linguistics results.

If we view the term *conversion* in its two linguistic applications it is easy to notice that they represent mental reverse relations, but these relations may be only analyzed by using them in certain reverse contexts and not in their form as linguistic signs proper. So, proversion and reversion, from one side, and conversion, from another, belong to different planes of investigation. But from another standpoint, reversion and conversion may be analytically united by the term *contraversion*.

Our point of research interest is the phenomenon of reversion.

The Main Structural Characteristic Features of Reversion as a Universal Phenomenon of Linguistic Mentality. The term *reversion* is used to serve the linguistic purposes on several occasions mostly using the adjective *reverse* from which the noun *reversion* has been derived. Some linguists view reverse verbs as those denoting an opposite or reciprocal action (e.g. pay – repay, tie – untie) [7; 8]. The terminological word-combination *reverse parallel construction* (alias chiasmus) is used by I. Galperin to denote the structures with two consequent sentences or parts of a compound sentence in which the word-order of the consequent element is the inversion of the word-order in the previous one while preserving all or most of the components of the initial syntagmatic structure [9].

In the present article, we view reversion as a structure of thinking which denotes a certain return to the previous state of things expressed by means of a language but semantically denoting not necessarily actual return to status quo but leading to the further development of situation to make it more dynamic.

On the lexical semantic level the reverse relations can be traced only as the result of logical implication. For instance, these relations are present in a converse pair shoot – recoil, as any shooting of a firearm necessarily implies the reverse impact accompanied by an opposite reactive motion of a weapon barrel backward, and we call such an action in English *a recoil*. It is interesting that in some other languages, for example, in Russian, there exist several words to denote such an action. In particular, the Russian noun *отдача* fully corresponds to the English *recoil* as denoting the reverse movement of a fire weapon *of any kind*. But if any relatively heavy artillery where a barrel of a weapon is mounted directly on a wheel base, the Russian artillery men mostly speak of *откат*, i.e. the reverse movement not only of a barrel but the whole gun as well. Because of their implicational character the initial terms may receive the further semantic development showing the complete change of the initial ones. In particular, in the post-perestroika Russian language there developed a slang term named *откат* denoting paying for some illegal action, i.e. some kind of reciprocal action but without any trace of artillery shooting.

Reverse relations are also a mental basis for existing such pairs of words as *illness* and *recovery*, *sleep* and *awake*, open and close and many thousands of the like lexical semantic oppositions of words.

The category of reversion is explicit mostly on the syntactic level in the form of such a model traditionally viewed among the stylistic devices as chiasmus. It is the phenomenon of chiasmus that gives possibility to trace the essence of reversion deeply and to define its main semantic parameters. To our mind, the essence of chiasmus is most accurately shown in the following statement of the well-known Russian linguist B. Norman:

Хиазм по своей природе многогранен; в нем, как в фокусе, сходятся интересы различных языковых уровней и аспектов. С позиций речевой деятельности, это один из механизмов формирования лексико-грамматической структуры высказывания. Если подходить к нему с точки зрения синтаксиса, то он занимает свое место в ряду конструкций, построенных по принципу синтаксического параллелизма. Его можно анализировать также в связи с проблемой измененного (инвертированного) порядка слов. Если рассматривать хиазм под углом зрения лексики, то перед нами – специфическая разновидность лексико-семантического повтора: развертывание фразы происходит в таком случае за счет единиц, уже (только что) использованных говорящим [10].

This brief but rather a capacious citation shows clearly that chiasmus as a special reverse structure is based on a coincidence of several factors, the leading of them being semantic and structural ones. Chiasmus is a complex lexical, syntactic and semantic phenomenon, and no factor can be denied its place in creating such a device. To go further, there are grounds to speak of the morphological and phonemic factors in creating such an effect. For instance, in the Russian humoristic saying based on chiasmus *Женщины, мужайтесь! Мужчины, женитесь!* the humoristic effect is created by the complex of the above-mentioned factors plus changing of the initial sounds of the constituent words, and the last factor seems to be the leading one in creating such an effect. This may as well concern not only the units of the syntactic level but the level of word-combinations as well. For instance, such a set-expression of the Biblical origin in English as *to sell one's soul/birthright for a mess of pottage* receives a very effective reverse interpretation where a morphological phonetic factor is evident in the following example:

*"What Barbara means, 'Brett said, pouring more Don Perignon, 'is that I've sold my soul for a **mess of pottage**." He glanced around the apartment."Or maybe a **pot of messuage**" (A.Hailey. Wheels).*

Reversion on the syntactic level may also reveal itself in certain language structures neutral from the stylistic or otherwise expressive factors. Here we mean such typical for the English language structures as the disjunctive questions where the question part proper is structured on the principle of reverse word order of the main members of the sentence, e.g. **You haven***'t received my letter,* **have you***?* The reverse factors in coining the structure of general questions may be met in other languages as well. For instance, in Chinese alongside with the structure of the general question where a statement becomes such a question by putting the particle *ma* at the end of the utterance, a wide-spread is the model expressed by the reverse structure *V bu V* where V stands for *verb* and *bu* is a negative particle corresponding to the English particle *not*.

These data of the different language speech facts show that reversion as some mental basis is inherent to the basic structures of these language and lies in the process of creating units on different language levels in them.

Some Remarks Concerning the Reversive Nature of Maxims. As it has been pointed out, the reverse mental structures form certain models of structuring language and speech units in different languages, many of them being not united by generic ties, irrespectively of their belonging to a certain family of languages. This consideration induces the following question: how relevant is the presumption expressed in the title of the article that reversion belongs to the plane of mentality and is not merely certain structural coincidence? The above-stated facts and examples have merely demonstrated some peculiarities of expression and not phenomena of a consistent systemic character.

One must admit rather a grounded argument expressed in the question. Another point of speculative character is whether the phenomenon of reversion is of universal character. If reversion is viewed as a mental structure, then it should be viewed as well in the terms of psychology and not of linguistics. But there is some point of intersection between these two main trends of the general anthropology, namely the linguistic view of the world.

The term linguistic *view of the world* is mostly applied to the study of a certain language.

To our mind, the grounds to define the reversion as an important structure within the linguistic view of the world should be looked for not only in the language structures and not only in the semantic features of language units but in the structure of thinking in general, irrespectively to which mentality is reflected in the like structures. We consider reversion to be the universal mental structure/ Surely, any attempt to prove the possibility to use the notion of reversion as a basis for existing of certain notions, judgments and conclusions from poorly the mentalistic psychological positions is immediately doomed to failure as nowadays there exists no unbiased instrument which could fix the phenomena of reversion, conversion, contradiction and the like in the form of immediately registered impulses. That is why the speech usage remains the only criterion for such structures' existing.

So, to prove the universal character of reversion one should apply to the linguistic structures that coincide both functionally and structurally and at the same time are structurally organized as reverse structures. Here we should return to the phenomenon of chiasmus, or, to be more exact, to the maxims which have been syntactically coined within reverse parallel constructions. As it is known, the maxims are some judgments of some prominent people or well-known characters of fiction that are aimed to make some didactic from the point of view of politics, moral judgments and world-outlook. That is, so to say, their main function. It should be admitted that maxims can be syntactically created not only within reverse structures.

But it is a chiasmus that makes thoughts contained in these structures be vividly expressive and easy to remember. That is why the most known maxims are structurally the chiasmus. They may have different sources. For instance, many maxims belonging to the paradigm described have the Bible as their source, e.g. *Judge not, that ye be no judged* (Matthew 7: 1). The reverse structuring of this maxim is of grammar character, as this is not the reversion of the notional character but the reversion of the Active and Passive Voice. The same phenomenon is evident in the Latin proverb *Si vis amari, ama!* (Love, if you want to be loved!).

Another grammar phenomenon, namely, reverse semantic valence of the subject and the object of the sentence, is evident in the following maxim of Jesus Christ *The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2: 27).

Reversion Within Other Linguistic Phenomena. Other vivid cases of reversion, or, to be more exact, reciprocal substitute of morphemes constituting a word is rather a recurrent phenomenon in some language. In this respect there are many cases of building the combination of morphemes that make a word in the Chinese language. For instance, the hieroglyphs *mi* and *feng* both may denote either 'honey' or 'bee'. But if combined in the form of one word, their meaning becomes more clearly-cut. *Mifeng* denotes 'honey', and *fengmi* denotes *a bee*.

Speaking of the Chinese language, one cannot but mentions the cases when the elements of structural character, such as particles, question words, conjunctions and the like, are constructed of the parts that semantically should be viewed in the terms of antonymy. The example of such combination is the question word *duoshao*, which is translated into English as "How much…?" and consists of the following two elements: *duo* "many/much' and *shao* 'little'. Surely, this is not exactly the reversion on syntactic level but one can see that semantic reversion is undoubtedly present within this word.

Findings: as it is seen from the interpretation of the given data the phenomenon of reversion as a mental structure which predetermines the form and functional peculiarities of many linguistic units on different levels within the system of linguistic hierarchy. It can be found in different languages, and that speaks in favour of its universal character. Surely, reversion represents some more or less general mental model which forms the mental basis for certain models of speech units that respectively may be named reverse. These reverse speech models may form the units of different language levels of meaningful character. Of course, the application of the term "reversion" to the conjoined system of language and thinking is at the very beginning of its study, but the problem seems to be perspective from the cognitive point of view.

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