The Role of Comparative Analysis in Foreign Language Learning (German and Russian languages)
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Abstract
In this article we will examine the importance of cultural studies when learning foreign languages. For this purpose we have chosen the comparative analysis between Russia and Germany. We will study the influence of the language’s grammar and of different geographical and other factors on people’s mentality. We will compare the forms of politeness in both countries and see how languages interact and develop, and how new borrowings enter other languages.

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1. Introduction

The learning of one or two foreign languages has become a norm in modern education. It belongs to the educational minimum and stands alongside mathematics, history, geography and other subjects.

When we learn a foreign language, we immerse ourselves in a completely different world, filled with its own traditions, customs and another way of thinking.

It’s not correct to consider a language as a number of words and sentences, or as a row of grammar rules, that one has to know for a successful communication. “Foreign language learning… is accompanied by a peculiar splitting of one’s personality, which means that one acquires qualities of the second language personality” (Gural, 2012). So besides learning a foreign language, we should also study and analyze various subtle cultural differences. The latter can help us to understand in a better way other people, who live according to their own, unusual for us, rules.

Especially in the beginning it is not easy to immense in the culture of the target language, because it possesses different customs, and people of other countries react in a different way to the same situations. S. Gural wrote that “this necessity to modify one’s way of thinking and rebuild one’s worldview according to a strange and

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unusual pattern, presents one of the main difficulties (also psychological) in the foreign language acquisition” (Gural, 2012).

The importance of the language comparison has been underlined by S.G. Ter-Minasova: “We can clearly see a barrier between languages, but a barrier between cultures can be only seen when a native culture collides… with another, different, culture” (Ter-Minasova, 2000).

In the thirties and forties of the last century there emerged an idea to look at the comparative method from a linguistic point of view. The following scientists contributed to its development: E.D. Polivanov, L.V. Sherba, S.I. Bernstein. In 1951 the academician V.V. Vinogradov wrote: “Alongside with a comparative and historic learning of similar languages, it is possible and even necessary to compare the languages belonging to different systems” (Khairulina, 2011).

In the sixties, the comparative language investigation was intensified. Numerous languages of ex-Soviet Union as well as the languages that were taught at universities, namely the West European languages were compared. This fact contributed to the « enhancement of the language culture as a part of people’s culture (Yartseva, Klimova & Zhuravliov, 1990).

Nowadays in linguistics there exists a big interest in the comparative approach in foreign language learning, that’s why investigations in this area are very significant. All these pieces of information demonstrate us the importance of our article theme.

The purpose of this article is to analyze some cultural differences between the German and Russian cultures that should be known in order to avoid unpleasant situations.

2. What does it mean “to be polite” in Germany and Russia?

Germans use in their speech the word “bitte” (please) much more often than Russians. Even when talking to a child they tend to say: “Hör bitte auf!” (“Stop it, please!”) or “Steh bitte auf!” (“Get up, please!”).

When Russians address their friends or children, they often use the imperative form of the verb without the interjection “please”: “Get up!”, “Sit down!”, “Move!” - and these forms are not considered impolite. On the other hand, when addressing an unknown adult person, they express their politeness by saying: “Excuse me, please”, “Tell me, please”, - which corresponds to the norms of the German language as well.

When Russians want to utter their benevolent attitude towards relatives or friends, they often use the diminutive form of a word, showing their positive emotional disposition: “Танечка” (diminutive form of the name “Тания”), “мамочка” (diminutive of “мама” – “mom”) “сыночек” (from “сын” - son), “доченька” (from “дочь” - daughter), “лапочка” (translated into English like “sweetheart”).

S.G. Ter-Minasova noticed that “The worse a people’s prosperity in different areas, the more noticeable their striving towards beautiful… or just nice, be it clothes, fragrance or furniture – it does not matter. Severity of life has been reflected not only in the big amount of cuss words in the language (Russian), but surprisingly there developed a big love for diminutive words and for active usage of special politeness forms. People were buying and reading not just книги (books) but rather книжечки (diminutive of “books”), they were eating огурчики, помидорчики (diminutive of “cucumbers” and “tomatoes”)” (Ter-Minasova, 2000).

The German language has as well its own diminutive suffixes: chen andlein (“Häuschen” — diminutive of “house”, “Schäflein” — diminutive of “sheep”) But they are more often used when addressing children or in fairy-tales.

Unlike in Russia, in Germany it is common practice to greet and say goodbye to each other in public places, for example, at the cash register or in a café. Especially elderly people are accustomed to greeting all their acquaintances, including people that they just meet regularly near their house. Germans say “Lieber einmal zu viel gegrüßt als einmal zu wenig” (It’s better to greet one time too much, than vice versa). But as well there are situations when Russian people would always say “Hello!” whereas Germans could leave it out. When German students meet their teacher in a school corridor, sometimes they are too “shy” to say hello or they think it is
unnecessary to do it. In the beginning this fact surprises teachers from Russia who are used to this form of politeness. When greeting a student, a Russian teacher says “Здравствуй!” (“Hello!”), as a response he or she hears “Здравствуйте!” (the polite form of “Hello!”), one could translate it like “Good morning!”). Before leaving, a teacher says “Пока!” (“Bye!”), and the student’s answer to it will be “До свидания!” (polite form of saying goodbye). In Germany there is no such difference, both teachers and students say to each other “Hallo!” (“Hello!”) and “Tschüss!” (“Bye!”).

3. Influence of the surrounding factors

Every country has its own special features due to different historical, geographical, political and others factors.

When comparing Germany and Russia, one can see enormous differences. Germany is the most populated country in Europe: it covers an area of 357 021 square kilometers and it has over 80 million inhabitants. In Russia about 143 million people live on an area of 17 125 187 square kilometers. As a result, Germany is known for its punctuality and striving to organize their lives according to rules. It’s impossible to create such order on the enormous Russian territory, where one can spend years walking along the Siberian Taiga. But far away from Russia’s borders, one knows about the wide Russian soul and hospitality of its people.

All these special features are reflected in the languages of these two countries.

When we look attentively at the German grammar, we can notice a fixed word order. In a declarative sentence a verb stands normally on the second place. It’s like an anchor, around which other words are swimming. One can say: “Ich gehe nach Hause” (“I go home”), “Jetzt gehe ich nach Hause” (“Now I’m going home”), “Nach Hause gehe ich jetzt” (“I’m going home now”). The verb is always on the second position.

Subordinate clauses have also a fixed word order. At the beginning we find a word that introduces a subordinate clause (for example, the word dass – “that”), then comes a subject and at the very end stands a predicate. Subordinate clause elements are considered as a “stuffing” between a subject and a predicate, something like a sandwich. “Ich weiß, dass er heute nach Hause kommt” (I know that he will come home today).

In the Russian language one is more flexible in changing the word order in a sentence. Therefore, one can say “Сегодня я поиду в гости” (Today I’ll be on a visit) or “Я сегодня поиду в гости” or “В гости я поиду сегодня”. The verb position (in our example it is written in italics) can be changed several times.

Language grammar influences people’s mentality. German’s view of life is rational: they feel well, when everything goes according to plan. And vice versa, they feel uncomfortable when something unexpected comes in between. Their advantage is that they strive to fulfill all their tasks within a fixed period.

Russian people are spontaneous; their plans can be changed according to circumstances. The advantage of this view of life is that they possess an important quality of flexibility.

“How the whole, the lingo-philosophical analysis of a language is connected, in one way or another, with the nature of being, fixed in this language” (Gural, 2012). Every country interprets the term “being” in its own way. German’s “being” is different from the Russian one. “When one translates the word ‘being’ into Old Russian, it means ‘а во семь’ (I am here), and it sounds like the Russian word ‘авось’ (translated into English as “with luck”, “by guess and by God”). So the nature of being for a Russian person means: ‘With luck we will manage it’ (“авось как-нибудь выкрутишься”)” (Gural, 2012). Maybe that is why Russian people try to find a way out of every situation and do not want to give up, even when according to all rational reasons there is no visible solution to a problem.

4. Language development

A language is a process that “lives” its own life, reacting to the surrounding world. Sometimes it is necessary to look at the historical development of a given country, in order to understand the emergence and disappearance of some terms in a certain language.
In France when one addresses an unmarried woman, he or she says “mademoiselle”, in Spain – “señorita”, in England – “Miss”. In Germany one used to say “Fräulein”. Why is this form out of use nowadays? What was the reason for such significant change?

Fräulein according to its structure presents a diminutive form of the word Frau (woman). In the beginning of the twentieth century, Fräulein were working women, who had a bad salary. After their marriage they normally stopped working (because their husband earned enough money or he did not allow his wife to work) and then they were called Frau. In the fifties, after the Second World War, there remained many unmarried women, who did not have children. They thought it was improper to be addressed with the diminutive suffix “lein”. They brought forward the argument that for men there exists only one form “Herr”. They achieved their purpose and in the seventies it was decided to address all women with Frau.

It has already been mentioned, that languages keep developing constantly. For example, in the recent years the German language has been borrowing a lot of English (American) words. Unconsciously Germans use a lot of anglicisms in their speech. For example, many English verbs are used with typical German verb endings –en and –ieren (to check — checken, to load — laden, to involve — involvieren, to realize — realisieren).

A lot of English adjectives are used in Germany in their original form. They have become a part of German sentences, preserving the English way of writing. (“Das ist echt cool”. — “It’s really cool”. “Clever gemacht”. — “Clever made”. “Er sah happy aus”. — “He looked happy”.)

Some English prefixes are used with German words. For example, one says “Ex-Frau” (ex-wife).

Anglicisms are used in different expressions: “nicht ganz fit sein” (“not to be fit”), “viel Power haben” (“to have a lot of power”).

5. German influence on the Russian language

When one starts to learn German, right in the beginning he or she notices that the Russian word “бутерброд” (sandwich) consists of two German words “Butter” (butter) and “Brot” (bread).

Actually Russian people use a lot of German borrowings without noticing it. For example, the widespread word “рюкзак” (backpack) comes from the German “Rucksack”. In order to see that it is a German word, let us analyze it: “Rücken” (back) and “Sack” (bag) – “a bag for the back”.

Such words as “парикмахер” (hairdresser) and “шлагбаум” (barrier) have a German origin, but in the modern German they have got other words for the same terms. For hairdresser one says “Friseur” (a borrowing from French), for barrier — “Schanke”.

Let us analyze some more borrowings from German:

Цейтнот — Zeitnot (Zeit — time, Not — need; “need for time”, translated into English like “shortage of time”).

Циферблат — Zifferblatt (Ziffer — figure, Blatt — sheet; in other words “sheet for figures”, in English “clock face”).

Курорт — Kurort (Kur — cure, Ort — place; “place to cure”, in English “health resort”).

Nowadays most borrowings in the Russian language come from American English. Many of them have to do with a computer theme (имейл - email, смска - sms, ноутбук - notebook, файл — file) or with sports (скейтборд - skateboard, мауэрхайк — mountain bike). Unfortunately, there are people who think it is more prestigious to use English words even when there are Russian equivalents to them: instead of исключительный — эксклюзивный (exclusive), instead of образ — имидж (image).

Today German influence can be only seen among Russian inhabitants, living in Germany. For example, there is a German word “Termin” (appointment). Russian people in Germany use it without translating it, so they say: “Today I’ve got Termin”. In the Russian language there is no equivalent to this word. One could describe it as “someone is waiting for you in a certain place at a fixed time”. But such words do not become a part of the Russian language, because they are not used on the Russian territory.
6. Conclusion

For successful foreign language learning, we should be able to analyze peculiarities of other cultures, as well as of our own one. People practicing comparative analysis have all the premises to understand language subtleties and to broaden their views of life.

References