CULTUREMES, AGENTIVITY, CONTYRASTIVITY

Liliana ALIC*

*Faculty of Letters, Transilvania University, Brasov, Romania

Abstract: The three concepts mentioned in the title of the article, Culturemes, Agentivity and Contrastivity have been used and studied in various domains of linguistics, such as syntax, semantics, semiotics and cultural studies. The language and the culture of certain peoples can be investigated trough many and various methods, but if we choose a method that leads to identify some language universals, all the results and researches could lead to conclusions benefiting to human knowledge, generally speaking. Languages and people are not so different; the study may highlight common thinking, common experience of life, or quite the opposite, in the same circumstances. That is why we need various approaches of the phenomena and different theories to analyze fact of life and facts of language.

Keywords: cultureme; agentivity; contrastive approach; phraseological units

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of cultureme is relatively new in the field of language sciences and it is claimed by intercultural studies, linguistic studies, social studies, translation studies, language acquisition studies. We end the list here, because many other domains my find some interest in that concept.

Trying to define the concept, we will not be surprised to find that the concept fits to each domain, but in each domain it has a different meaning and it covers different areas: culture, civilization, language origin, language structure.

In point of language and civilization, we intend to approach two cultures and two civilizations that are not so distant, from a geographic and a linguistic point of view, being both Indo-european languages. We intend to contrast English and French culturemes, obviously not all of them, in order to identify similitudes, if any, and differences, if any, between these two cultures and languages. As thinking and knowledge is expressed in language, we intend to find if there is some connection, influence or difference in point of culturemes. The linguistic form of some culturemes are phraseological units, so we intend to compare linguistic forms of culturemes and their structure in both languages, English and French. The most appropriate theory to be used seems that of Agentivity across languages. The common ground of all these concepts will be that of phraseological units. Phraseological units may contain different approaches of reality through language by different languages, but it also may reveal common points of view in different languages. It is not only a matter of culture, but also a matter of language structure.

2. CULTUREMES AND AGENTIVITY. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPTS

2.1 Culturemes. The concept of cultureme is a transdisciplinary one, being used in literature, in cultural studies, in the theory of translation and in foreign language acquision.

If we compare the numerous definitions given to that concept, we find something in common, whether it defines the concept as "the minimal, indivisible unit of culture: rituals, values and stereotypes" (Jaskot and Ganoshenko, 2019) or as "cultural facts and cultural interferences" (Motoc: 2017) in the field of cultural studies, or as "atoms of culture" (Moles, 1967, in G. Lungu Badea, 2009), or as "cultural references or cultural markers" (Pamies: 2017), we find differences and similarities in point of approach and methodology. In addition to these fields mentioned above, there is another one, that of translation studies. Within this domain, a cultureme is considered to be the minimal unit of culture, the smallest unit of cultural reference or cultural information (Lungu Badea, 2009) to be transferred from one language to another through the process of translation. In the same field, some other related terms and concepts appear, such as cultural allusion, cultural terms,

ethnonymes and folkloremes, as well as frozen sequences, proverbs, proper names or surnames. These terms covering the respective concepts are approached, by some linguists (Coman, Selejan, 2019), from the point of view of translatability or untranslatability. Indeed, it is difficult to translate from Romanian into English "De 1 martie i-am oferit un martisor" (For the 1st of March I offered her a gift/a trinket/a symbol of spring and renewal.) The word *gift*, according to an English dictionary Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) is too general (something that you give someone on a special occasion or to thank them); the other suggestion, *trinket*, is closer to the meaning of *martisor*, denoting a piece of jewellery or a small pretty object that it is not worth much money. Again, the English equivalent is only a partial one for the following reasons: in point of meaning, some sememes are missing. The small object is offered in Romania only on the 1st of March and only to women, regardless of the age. It is, therefore, a matter of translatability caused by some cultural differences between Romanian people and British people.

Another example is that of "Babele de martie". Let us say that we can translate this collocation as "The old women of March", so, from the translation point of view, the problem is somewhat solved. A foreign visitor in Romania will not be able to understand the meaning of the respective collocation without a proper explanation concerning this old custom, well known within the area inhabited by Romanians. How can a foreigner know that, in Romania, people use to choose one day between the 1st of March and the 9th of the same month and thus they are able to predict whether the following year is a good one or a bad one, according to the weather of the very day they have chosen?

Some other examples are to be found in Romanian literature, in the well-known stories of Romanian writers, for instance Ion Creanga's stories. Any Romanian is able to understand a sentence like: "Asta e ca povestea cu drobul de sare", (This is something like in the story with the lump of salt), an allusion to Ion Creanga's story from "*Human stupidity*", with reference to a young mother's fear that the lump of salt placed in the kitchen could fall and kill her baby, while the danger invoked was not real or imminent.

Some of these phrases, sentences or cultural allusions are difficult to understand outside the area they originated in. Some other phrases are known and used in various cultures, languages and geographic areas. Anyone understands the French sentence "Cherchez la femme" in the context of searching for the reason why a murder was committed and having as a supposition that a woman is at its origin; or "Time is money", referring to the fact that an action worth doing should lead to money earning, otherwise it is not worth doing it at all.

What we have to bear in mind while reading various approaches to the concept is that the cultureme is specific to a language, to a culture, to a community of people sharing the same values, habits or customs, and more often than not, the same historical past, the same geographic area and civilization.

In this respect, it appears as an obvious fact that people from various geographic areas perceive facts from reality in different ways, and this is reflected in various linguistic forms. Dealing with the concept of cultureme, scholars tried to classify them (Molina: 2001, in Motoc: 2017, Jaskot and Ganoshenko: 2019, Lungu Badea: 2009), taking into account that they are difficult to understand for an obvious reason, that of cultural differences. The categories of culturemes identified by the authors mentioned before vary in number, but they generally overlap, covering all the fields and aspects of extra linguistic reality. These categories are (Molina: 2001): (1) Natural environment: wildlife, climate, atmospheric phenomena; (2) Cultural heritage, such as real or fictional characters, historical events, religion and religious beliefs, occupations; (3) Social culture, habits, forms of address, politeness, moral values, greetings; (4) Linguistic culture: proverbs, sayings, usual metaphors, interjections, insults, cursing.

To these four categories, Jaskot and Ganoshenko (2019) add two other categories, the denotative culturemes, which overlap those mentioned by Molina, and the connotative culturemes, those related to associations and personal experience.

As for her, Lungu Badea (2009) suggests an association of formal criteria and functional criteria. The linguist chose as formal criteria simple culturemes (common or proper nouns compound nouns) and compound culturemes (syntagms and phraseological units); the functional criteria are, according to this linguist: historical criteria and current criteria.

As we can see, the differences identified in the three attempts of classification are the result of the choice of criteria and of their possible combinations.

2.2 Agentivity. Agentivity is a concept that can be approached from the syntactic point of view and from the semantic one. The syntactic point of

view was first discussed in Tesnière's *Eléments de syntaxe structurale* (1959) and his metaphor concerning the structure of a sentence is well known and well noted by future scholars. Briefly, Tesnière compares the sentence to a drama, in which we have an action, expressed by the verb, some actants, expressed by nouns, and circumstances expressed by circumstantial determiners. In Tesnière's view, the verb is the central and most important part of the language and of the sentence, and all the other constituents, the actants and the circumstantial determiners depend on the verb, being situated at an inferior level. This conception is not too far from that of traditional grammar. According to traditional grammar, there is a logical opposition between subject and predicate, a fact that makes impossible to consider subject and predicate as being on the same level. The subject and the objects are on the same level, depending on the predicate, and they are interchangeable. Lucien Tesnière goes further on with his theory, identifying types of verbs according to the number of actants surrounding them. He identifies verbs having no actant (the verbs describing meteorological phenomena), verbs having one actant (Alfred tombe./Alfred falls down.), verbs with two actants (Alfred frappe Bernard./ Alfred hits Bernard.) and verbs with three actants (Alfred donne un livre à Charles./Alfred gives a book to Charles.)

The concept identified by Tesnière as an actant, a participant to the action or the process described by the verb is to be found in Charles Fillmore's theory as a *case* (Fillmore: 1968). He considers his study "a contribution to the study of formal and substantive syntactic universals" (Fillmore, 1968:22-24) considering that "the grammatical notion 'case' deserves a place in the base component of the grammar of every language". His statement is based on the fact that "grammatical features found in one language show up in some form or other in other languages". He states that "The sentence in its basic structure consists of a verb and one or more noun phrases, each associated with the verb in a particular case relationship" (Fillmore: 1968:42). Assuming that case is a grammatical universal category and that each case relationship occurs only once in a simple sentence, Fillmore identifies a set of cases that appear most frequently as they are "a set of universal, presumably innate concepts which identify certain types of judgments human beings are capable of making about the events that are going on around them, about such matters as who did it, who is happened to, and what got changed". In this first

attempt of classification of the cases, he identifies cases such as Agentive, Instrumental, Dative, Factitive, Locative, Objective. Later on, he will refine the Dative case, distinguishing between the Beneficiary and the Experiencer, and the Locative case, which he dissociates in Source and Goal. Fillmore's study is important because, in a certain way establishes some kind of linguistic bridge between the syntactic approach and the semantic one. Another important fact to be mentioned about Fillmore's case theory is the difference he felt compelled to point out between "effectum" and "affectum" as it is revealed in the sentences:

(1) John built the table.
(2) John ruined the table.

Using the interrogation with *to do*, he concludes that, in the first example, the table is the "effectum" object, while the same test cannot be operated in the second example, referring to the table.

In the same direction, of trying to prove the existence of one of the cases, namely the Agentive, Cruse (1973) uses the same interrogation system with *to do* for the set of sentences:

(3) John punched Bill.
(4) The vase broke.

The same test leads Cruse to distinguish between a "do clause" (sentence 3) and a "happen clause" (sentence 4) and finally to identify the Agent in a sentence. John is quite a good incarnation of an Agent, because the test wit to do gives a satisfying result:

(5) What did John do?
(6) What John did was punch Bill.

Cruse makes it clear that John is o *doer*, being the animated agent of an action. What is not clear is if John is an intentional animate doer. He refines his analysis trying to introduce modifiers, such as "accidentally", "carefully", "automatically" and others cited from studies of his predecessors. His conclusion is that Agentivity is in a strict relationship with animateness and volivity.

Important advances on the study of Agentivity were made thanks to the works of Gilbert Lazard (1994) who continued the syntactic approach and offered a thorough view on what he calls the tools of Agentivity, consisting in morphemes attached to nouns, indications integrated in the verb form or word order. His study deals extensively on the structures of Agentivity and the conclusion is that this structure is to be found in most languages,

especially European languages. More than that, his research revealed that sentences describing actions are the most common in languages and these sentences are at the basis of a typology of Agentivity (Lazard, 1994:61). In his opinion, the most relevant criterion used to define Agentivity is the position the actant occupies in relation to the verb. He concluded that Agentivity is a language universal. A remark should be made about Gilbert Lazard's research. He extended the study of Agentivity markers, such as morphemes attached to a noun and Agentivity markers integrated in the verb form, beyond the limits of a sentence. He extended it to a complex sentences that includes, in most Indo-European languages, markers of continuity of actants contributing to accomplish the action, process or event described by the verb. It is also important to mention that Gilbert Lazard (1994:129-169) used in his study some concepts such as semantic classification of verbs, verbs having one actant, two or more actants and expressing a state, a process an action or an event. He could conclude that various types of process, action, state or event are in close relation to the number of actants necessarily required to their accomplishment or, in other words, with the Agentivity structure.

As we previously mentioned, Agentivity can also be approached from a semantic point of view, and in this case we speak about semantic roles. From this point of view, a semantic role consists of the semantic function assigned by the verb to its arguments (Neveu, 2010). The semantic roles are classified on the basis of combinatorial valences of verbs with possible arguments. Various theoretical frameworks lead to various classifications of semantic roles and that is why we chose the one given by Frank Neveu in his Dictionnaire des sciences du langage (2010:256-257). Thus, he identifies:

- the agent, animated, volitive, initiator of the action;
- the patient, animated, undergoing the action initiated by the agent, being affected by it;
- the theme, an entity continuously changing, moving, localized but unaffected by this localization;
- the source, the entity from which a movement takes place;
- the goal, the entity towards which the action is directed (the destination point);
- the place, the specific environment in which an entity is localized;
- the experience, animated, the place where a psychological, emotional or affective process takes place;

- the instrument, inanimate, used to perform the action, involuntarily;
- the beneficiary, entity, animated, benefitting from the action described by the verb.

Other theoretical frames may lead to other classifications, to other actants or names given to the actants. At this point, we may as well come back to Fillmore's classification (1968), since the classification we mentioned previously (F. Neveu, 2010) refines Fillmore's Locative case, discerning a Source, a Goal and a Place and introduces the case Theme, that could be useful from a contrastive point of view.

Regardless of the point of view of our approach, the actants can be identified in many languages, especially Indo-European languages, such as English and French. On these bases, we can establish common features and differentiating ones.

3. CONTRASTIVITY AS A METHOD IN THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE SCIENCES

Contrastive analysis is a method used to compare two languages in contact. Depending on the intended goal, contrastive analysis may be oriented towards language acquisition, towards the theory of translation, or, as in our case, towards identifying language universals.

In the context of language acquisition, the two languages in contact have definite positions: one is the source language and the other is the target language. Their comparison, in point of lexical units, in point of syntactic structures, in point of culture and civilization is meant, on the one hand, to lead to efficient methods in second language acquisition. On the other hand, this contrastive study is meant to give the student solutions to avoid his mistakes and to correct them. From this point of view, research is oriented especially towards the differences between the two languages in contact and it is the teacher who is supposed to find the most appropriate ways in his teaching activity to make it successful.

Contrastive analysis is also used in translation and, in this case, the comparison is supposed to point out the differences between lexical, syntactic or semantic structures of the two languages in contact. This time, the specific goal is to find the correct equivalent of a structure from the source language in the target language. In the theory of translation, the most important thing for the translator is to find the right equivalent, the one that corresponds from the point of view of the meaning, of the language register or from the stylistic point of view.

3.1 Contrastivity and Agentivity. Agentivity, being considered a language universal, can be the object of contrastive analysis, a means of identifying its various structures and linguistic expression in two different languages.

The following analysis will point out the various means in which Agentivity is linguistically expressed in French and English. In this comparison, Agentivity will play the part of *tertium comparationis*.

We chose to compare Agentivity as it appears in phraseological units, such as frozen sequences and proverbs. Phraseological units are specific to a language, to a people, to a human community and they are the linguistic expression of extra linguistic facts. Phraseological units are made up of several lexemes, they are characterized by idiomaticity and they are used by the native speaker of a natural language, being difficult to understand by a non native speaker of that language. The non native speaker of a foreign language is supposed to acquire not only a foreign language, but also a lot of facts and knowledge referring to the culture, the civilization and the customs of the people or the community currently using that language.

Proverbs are such an expression of a specific culture and they are "a particular case of a frozen sentence, characterized by a certain rhythm, by metaphorical features, by semantic and pragmatic ones" (Connena: 2000). It is considered that proverbs express general knowledge acquired by a community or a people sharing the same geographic area. Nevertheless, some of the proverbs are intercultural. We can find the same proverbs in both languages, if we compare facts related to facts of life, to friendship:

(7) A leopard cannot change its spots.
(8) Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop.

(9) Rolling stone gathers no moss.
(10) Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse.

(11) A friend in need is a friend indeed.
(12) C'est dans le besoin que l'on connaît ses vrais amis.

Analyzing proverbs from the point of view of Agentivity is not so simple, as proverbs are mostly complex sentences, unlike the examples used by most scholars. Though, we can take into account Gilbert Lazard's statement (1994) that in most Indo-European languages there is a continuity of markers of the actants taking part in the action, process or change of state that can be noticed in subordinate sentences. These markers can be pronouns, number markers identifiable in the verb form or in a noun form.

In order to find some linguistic manifestation of Agentivity, we need proverbs that contain a verb expressing an action, a process or a change in a state.

A lot of proverbs contain the verb *to be /être*, so, we are not going to take them into account. They denote a state, which is important in point of contrastivity, but they do not point out actants. *A friend in need* from example (11) or *les vrais amis* from example (12) do not perform any action, nor does *the leopard* (example 7) that has no animated equivalent in French, where the meaning is expressed by using a more general term (*le naturel*, a noun used to express habits, good or bad, especially bad, attributed to some persons from their first to their last day).

In very many cases, the actant has not a precise, definite reference in reality, in the extra linguistic world. Let us consider the following examples:

(13) As *you* make your bed, so *you* must lie on it.
(14) Comme *on* fait son lit, *on* se couche.

(15) You can't make an omelet without breaking some *eggs*.
(16) On ne fait pas d'omelette sans cases des *œufs*.

(17) As *you* sow, so *you* shall reap.
(18) Q*ui* sème le vent récolte la tempête.

In these examples, *you* (Eng) and *on* (Fr) or *qui* (Fr) do not refer to a specific person, they have a generic meaning, they refer to a generic person.

The examples in which we can find the same actants in both languages are very rare.

The case that appears most frequently in both languages, English and French, is the *theme*. It is that entity that moves, changes and is localized, without being affected by its localization.

(19) Don't put the *cart* before the horses.
(20) Il ne faut pas mettre *la charrue* avant les bœufs.

(21) Don't put all your *eggs* in one basket.
(22) Il ne faut pas mettre tous *les œufs* dans le même panier.

(23) Rolling *stone* gathers no moss.
(24) *Pierre* qui roule n'amasse pas mousse.

The contrastive approach of Agentivity could be further studied through another approach, that concerns the verb, its semantic features and its possibilities of accepting a varying number of actants.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study of culturemes and agentivity is a matter that concerns language universals. A language spoken in a certain geographic area is common to people who share a historic past, traditions, customs or mere habits. Peoples of various parts of the world may have different traditions for celebrations or mourning, religious or atheistic. It is important to know these aspects and to be able to understand them in the context of learning a foreign language, of translating from one language to another or in a more scholar purpose, of studying two languages and two cultures in contrast, in order to identify language universals. Contrast does not always mean that differences are to be expected. Similarities can also be identified, and this is to be investigated from the point of view of culture and language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Cruse, D.A. (1973). Some Thoughts on Agentivity. *Journal of Linguistics.* vol. 9, No.1
2. Coman, D. & Selejan, C. (2019). The Limits of (Un)translatability Culturemes in Translation Practice. *Transylvanian Review.* Suppl.no.1. 301-313.
3. Connena, M. (2000). Structure syntaxique des proverbs français et italiens. *Langage.* no. 139. 27-38.
4. Fillmore, Ch. (1968). The Case for Case. In E. Bach & R. Harms (eds.). *Universals in Linguistic Theory.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 1-88.
5. Jasjcot, P. M., Ganoshenko, I. (2015). Culturemes and non-equivalent lexis in dictionaries. *Cognitive Studies.* No.15
6. Lazard, G. (1994). *L'Actance.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
7. Lungu Badea, G. (2009). Remarques sur le concept de culturème. *Translationes.* 1(1).15-78.
8. Lungu Badea, G. (2010). Traduire les «effets d'évocation» des culturèmes: une aporie? *Des mots aux actes. SEPTET*, no.3.
9. Molina, L. (2001). *Analisis descriptivo de las traduccion de las culturemas*, Tesis doctoral. Bellatarra. Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona.
10. Moțoc, D. (2017). Conceptul de «culturem» în traductologia româneasca si spaniola. Similitudini si discrepante. In *Studii de traductologie românească. I. Discurs traductiv, discurs metatraductiv. In honorem professoris Ileana Oancea.* Timișoara: West University Publishing House. 152-169.
11. Moles, A. (1967). *Sociodynamique de la culture.* Paris-La Haye: Mouton.
12. Neveu, F. (2010). *Dictionnaire des sciences du langage.* Paris: Armand Colin.
13. Pamies, A. (2017). The Concept OF Cultureme from a Lexicographical Point of Wiew. *Open Linguistics.* 3(1).
14. Pillot-Raichoor. Ch. (2001). La typologie des structures d'actance. In *Language Typology and Language Universals. An International Handbook*, Vol. 1. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
15. Tesnière, L. (1959). *Eléments de syntaxe structural.* Paris: Klinksiek
16. ***. (1995). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.* Munchen: Langenscheidt Longman