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Cognitive Linguistics Explains What Happened to the Russian Tank

ABSTRACT

Usage-based models that underlie cognitive approach to language and grammar imply investigation of language as a dynamic tool used in interpersonal communication rather than as an abstract system of signs. Hence the linguists' interest in the language of social and mass media, with its focus upon real current situations and events.

One of such events, reported by journalists and widely commented upon, was an incident that occurred in Ukraine shortly after the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022. In one of the villages in the battle zone a group of Ukrainian civilians seized a tank from the Russian army. On the Internet, the news soon became a hit and was translated into several languages.

Focusing upon Polish, the analysis presented in the paper will show the relation between the form of those messages and their epistemological value. In the case study I will use the concept of the linguistic worldview combined with that of conceptual integration, thus substantiating the claim that theoretical framework offered by Cognitive Linguistics can be profitably used to describe, to optimize and to operationalize acts of linguistic communication.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistics, Usage-based models, linguistic worldview, conceptual integration

1. Introduction

Usage-based models constructed within cognitive approach to language and grammar imply investigation of language as an instrument used in dynamically changing acts of interpersonal communication rather than as an abstract system of signs. In literature, the constitutive metaphor is built around the notion of “tool”. However, “instrument” seems preferable: the Google search machine (and who could resist using Google, even in a text that aspires to the status of a scholarly paper...) defines “instrument” as “a tool or implement, especially one for precision work”. Effective communication is exactly that: a precision work.

With language users aiming at effective communication, special interest of pragmatically minded linguists is in the language of social and mass media as well as in the focus upon situations and events that take place in what the media

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perceive as current reality. One such event has inspired the present discussion and provided material for the analysis. In agreement with basic tenets of Cognitive Linguistics I will assume that:

- i) One of the basic cognitive mechanisms that shape and condition the use of language is metonymy; it underlies a more general process, defined as conceptual integration (blending);
- ii) Since language expressions are inherently metonymic, processing extra-linguistic contextual information is essential for understanding linguistic messages;
- iii) The context, conceived in a wide sense, is fed by a particular worldview;
- iv) Effective communication requires that the worldview is shared (at least to some extent) by senders and receivers of the message¹.

Obviously, all these issues will sound trivial to anybody conversant with the foundations of CL. In view of such lack of originality, the purpose of the analysis presented further in this paper is not to support statements that have already been amply evidenced; its aim is rather to demonstrate how the interrelation between “the said” and “the unsaid” shapes the overall meaning of the message.

2. The timeline

The incident which is discussed below reportedly occurred in Ukraine shortly after the Russian invasion of 24 February 2022: in one of the villages then in the battle zone a group of Ukrainian civilians seized a Russian tank. The event was reported by journalists and then widely commented upon in various public contexts. On the Internet the news soon became a hit.

In what follows, some reports will be analysed which appeared in the social media at the end of February and beginning of March 2022. The items discussed were representative of general trends. Rather than carry out a statistical analysis, a shift in the attitudes of the netizens will be described, such as it was manifested in the messages published on the Internet in the first weeks following the Russian invasion.

On February 27, just three days after the Russian aggression, the online version of *Głos Szczeciński* (GS) brought a sensational piece of news, provided in (1):

- (1) Podczas trwającej agresji wojsk Kremla na Ukrainę, we wsi Lubimowka nieopodal miasta Kachowka w obwodzie chersońskim (południowa Ukraina), lokalni Romowie ukradli Rosjanom czołg [During the invasion of Ukraine by the Kremlin army in the village of Lubimovka near the town of Kakhovka in the Kherson region (southern Ukraine) local Roma people stole a tank from the Russians]² (Rabiega, 2022).

¹ For discussion, see e.g. Evans (2019).

² All translations from Polish are made by the author of this paper.

(1) specifies the spatio-temporal setting and the participants of the event (ongoing aggression with the Kremlin as perpetrator and Ukraine as victim; the Roma locals and the Russian tank), with the transitive construction employing canonical (unmarked) word order (SVO: subject – verb – object). The indirect object, the Dative “Rosjanom” [Russians-DAT], marks the stolen tank as situated in the “sphere of influence” of the Russians: it expresses the conceptualization of the object as being affected by the action referred to by the verb³. The *pars pro toto* metonymic reference to “Kreml” [the Kremlin] implicates Putin and his Kremlin entourage as the aggressor. As in all instances of this type of metonymy, it appeals to the readers’ background knowledge.

The next day, on February 28, 2022, the You Tube channel issued a 54-second documentary, showing an instance of civilian resistance against Russian invaders; the film included a brief footage of what was commented on as “a carrier being stolen and hauled away with a tractor”.

On the same day on the website of the farmers’ magazine *Top Agra* the journalist Dorota Kolasińska reported, as listed in (2), that:

- (2) Dziennikarz Oleg Baturin z herson.depo.ua podał krótką informację, że Romowie w miejscowości Lubimówka uprowadzili rosyjski transporter opancerzony. Ponieważ film rejestrujący to zdarzenie jest słabej jakości, niektórzy mylnie sądzą, że to czołg. W późniejszym komunikacie poinformowano, że również szybko rozebrali go na części. [The journalist Oleg Baturin provided on herson.depo.ua website brief information that in the village of Lubimovka some Roma people highjacked a Russian carrier. As the film on which the event was recorded was of poor quality, some people were mistaken in thinking that it was a tank. In a later report it was said that it was quickly taken apart] (Kolasińska, 2022).

(2) is a matter of fact report: it refers to verified, authored information and identifies the event as a case of highjacking. The mistake made when identifying the object is explained in a reasonable way, the carrier is described with the neutral adjective “Russian”, as is a probable sequel of the incident, the subsequent taking the carrier apart. The report sounds true and objective. Had it appeared on a more frequently visited and more popular website, it might have well influenced the attitudes expressed later on the media.

On March 1st, 2022, the website of the trade union *Solidarność* passed on the message of the Ukrainian website 24tv.ua, which had reported “in disbelief,” as given in (3), that:

- (3) We wsi Lubimowka Cyganie ukradli czołg. Jeszcze raz. Cyganie. Czołg. Ukradli. W ruchu. [In the village of Lubimovka Gypsies stole a tank. Once again. Gypsies. A tank. Stole. On the move] (Tysol.pl, 2022).

³ For a comprehensive discussion of this aspect of the Polish Dative semantics, see e.g. Rudzka-Ostyn (2000, pp. 97–178).

According to the website, the news was “subsequently confirmed by the Ukrainian Press Agency UNIAN” (Tysol.pl, 2022).

In contrast to (1) and (2), (3) departs from standard grammatical rules. The simple affirmative sentence appears twice (and the repetition is openly announced: “jeszcze raz” [once again], and then it is broken down into individual phrases; each phrase ends with a full stop corresponding to the falling intonation speech contour. As a result, (3) is strongly iconic: spelling mimes intonation, and intonation mimes beating a drum, which in its turn is a conventional metaphor for forcing something to be learned by someone not able and/or diligent enough, as in the expression “to drum something into someone”. Moreover, the politically correct “Roma people” is absent; it is replaced by the colloquial – and less correct – “Cyganie” [Gypsies] – a choice that will be discussed in more detail below (Section 3). All in all, the background knowledge (the war) makes the news difficult to believe (and thus requiring “drumming in”), but there is no suggestion of the item being fake news.

On March 3rd, the homepage of the TVN24 television station brought the following news, given in (4):

- (4) Ukraińska telewizja podała, że - we wsi nieopodal Chersonia na południu kraju – Romowie ukradli rosyjskim wojskom czołg. [...] Przekazała, że informacje pochodzą od lokalnych mieszkańców. W mediach społecznościowych pojawiło się nagranie, na którym widać cieszących się mężczyzn. „Okupancki czołg będzie służył Ukrainie” – mówią. [Ukrainian television reported that- in a village near Kherson in the south of the country – the Roma stole a tank from the Russian army. It said that the information comes from the local people. In social media a recording appeared showing some men enjoying the news. “The occupant tank will now serve Ukraine”, they say] (TVN24.pl.).

(4) provides less explicit information than (1) or (2), since – in view of the date of its publication - some background knowledge could be expected. The names of the village and the neighbouring town are not given (probably because they are considered identifiable or insignificant). The owners of the stolen tank are not just the “Russians” but “the Russian army”. This is a minute and seemingly insignificant change, but it announces a more relevant shift in public opinion, which was soon to appear in the ongoing public debate: the responsibility for the heinous atrocities falls on the military (of all ranks) rather than on “the Russians” at large. However, it should be pointed out that at the same time some texts that appeared in the press and other social media called for boycotting works by great Russian writers or composers.

Such is the timeline that places the Internet news selected for the following analysis in the chronological order. But there seems to be more to it than mere chronology: the data shows ways in which the formal structure of messages reflects the underlying changes of netizens’ attitudes. In the cognitivist parlance,

it shows the way in which linguistic expressions correspond to the changing perception and the resulting change of conceptualizations.

3. Stereotypes

Even though the analysis that follows is limited to a few Internet websites, using Polish in Polish social media, it points to the evolution of social response. The first days after February 24th left the Poles – as well as people all over the world – shocked and stunned. In this early period, social media provided fact-based reports, conforming to norms and conventions of the genre. Factual information was clear and explicit, as was the linguistic structuring of the information. Such are the items given in (1), (2) and (4) above. However, it might be noticed that they differ in the proportion between “the said” and “the unsaid”, i.e. the textual vs. contextual or background information.

Considering the general scale of the events, the single Lubimovka incident might seem unimportant. Yet it was quite exceptional: we all know (i.e. we share the particular element of the worldview) that during the war enemy tanks are captured and/or destroyed by the military, rather than stolen by a group of civilian villagers. Thus the information naturally provoked disbelief: Could it be a piece of fake news?, the suspicion already apparent in (2), whose author takes precautions, attributing the news to the “local people”, and expressing astonishment felt by Ukrainian reporters and most probably shared by Polish users of Internet at large.

However, from the point of view of a linguist interested in pragmatic aspects of (online) messages what is most interesting is the 31-second film, launched by the YouTube *Wujcio EDC-EkipaDuegoCiagnika Channel* on February 28. On March 1st it scored 2099 390 views; by March 3 the Internet listed 1446 comments. The film features a bearded man reporting on the Lubimovka event; the original sound track is Russian; Polish watchers are offered a Polish translation. The relevant fragment, given in (5), runs as follows:

- (5) Chodzą słuchy jakoby „Cyganie ukradli czołg”. Przyjaciele, to nie jest prawda, my go po prostu podpie**oliliśmy! [There are rumours saying that “[some] Gypsies stole a tank”. Well, my friends, this is not true: we simply fucking snatched it] (*Wujcio EDC-EkipaDuzegoCiagnika Channel*, 2022).

To begin with, one might ask whether it is a true report or fake news? The information is first classified by the narrator as rumour, but then he explicitly pronounces it to be false. But one should not jump to conclusions: at the end of the film the man admits that he “might have been or not have been” present on the stage of the crime... Interestingly, what is denied is not, as might be expected, the fact itself, but its verbal description. The verb “ukradli”, which in standard Polish conveys the idea of taking someone else’s property without permission and without the

intention to return, is replaced with its vulgar slang counterpart with an equivalent semantic load, that is, the verb “podpie**oliliśmy”. The agents are referred to as “Cyganie” – not a politically correct name, with derogatory racist undertones - in opposition to the neutral “Roma people”. The label evokes the ethnic stereotype of a Gypsy, which is enhanced by the looks of the man who appears in the film: he is a prototypical bearded, black eyed and dark skinned Roma. When describing the stereotypical image of Roma people in modern Polish press, Adam Bartosz (2007) claims that the most frequent picture of a Gypsy man in contemporary Polish media is that of a petty criminal, thief and thug; Gypsy women are believed to possess secret knowledge, e.g. to be able to tell people’s future (p. 98). In general, the stereotype is negative.

“Yet it is not merely through our own stereotypes that we look at the Gypsies; to a large extent it is the Gypsies themselves who know their image and who show themselves to us in a way in which we wish to see them” (Zambrzycka, 2010; see also Czachur, 2011, p. 89, translation mine). This is precisely the case in (5), expressing ironic self-reference and selecting a substandard verb to describe the action: the verb might be used either by the Gypsies themselves or by those upholding the stereotype.

Early on, the netizens comment on properties constitutive of the stereotype, as listed in (6) – (11):

Gypsies (but not the Roma!) steal things:

- (6) A już zacząłem się przyzwyczajać do tego, że Cyganie nie kradną... [And I was just beginning to get used to the idea that Gypsies do not steal];

Gypsies sell stolen goods:

- (7) Hej kolego, po ile masz te pojazdy, chętnie bym kupił jakąś terenówkę wojskową, ale nie czołg tylko coś mniejszego, może być bez papierów. [Hey, buddy! How much for those vehicles? I would be willing to buy a military truck, something smaller than a tank, no official documents required];

Gypsies manufacture frying pans:

- (8) Tylko nie przeróbcie go na patelnie! [But don’t make it into frying pans!];

Gypsy women are fortune-tellers:

- (9) kwadrans wcześniej jego żona wróżyła załodze tego czołgu (oczywiście nie za darmo), że wrócą do Rosji pieszo. [a quarter of an hour earlier his wife told the crew of the tank – not for free, to be sure – that they would go back to Russia on foot].

In short,

(10) ... niektórzy ludzie mówią że prawdziwych cyganów już nie ma to się mylą bo oto prawdziwi cyganie. [some people say real Gypsies don't exist anymore and they are mistaken because here are real Gypsies for you];

(11) Pozdrawiam serdecznie i życzę samych sukcesów. W Polsce jesteście bohaterami. [Best wishes, and I wish you all success. In Poland you are heroes].

4. Blending

Stealing, considered reprehensible, turns the Lubimovka Gypsies into war heroes. In the first week of March, this assessment came as the result of what is defined as conceptual integration, or blending, that is, meaning construction that involves creation of an integration network, in which different mental spaces, which belong to a common and more abstract domain (called generic space), are merged to produce an emergent structure endowed with a new meaning⁴. The meaning thus created is novel in that it is not contained in any of the mental spaces that are blended.

In the case under discussion the mechanism can be represented as given in Figure 1:

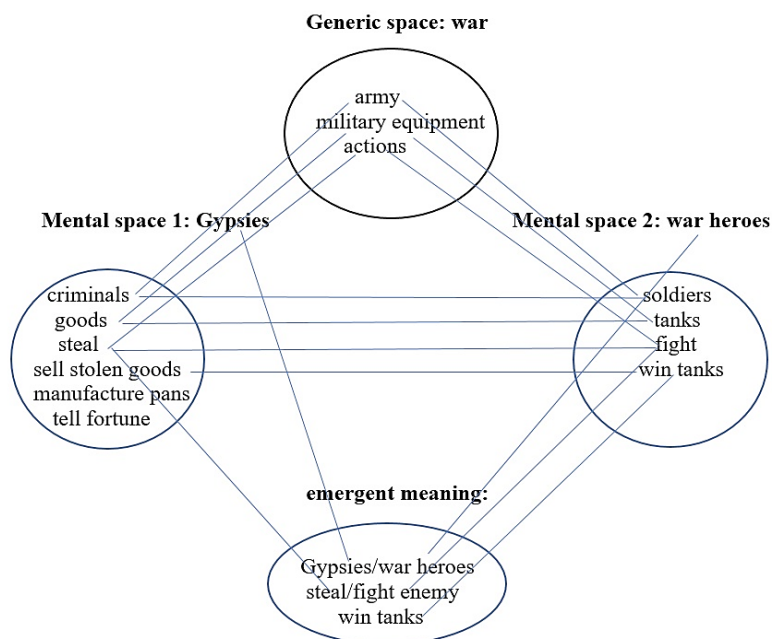


Figure 1: Blending model with 'Gypsies' and 'war heroes'

⁴ The reader is assumed to know the rudiments of the conceptual integration theory. For explanation, see e.g. Relevant chapters in Evans (2007).

By stealing the enemy tank, the Gypsies fight the enemy and become war heroes. In agreement with communicative strategies, irrelevant elements of the Gypsies' stereotype do not enter the blend.

(5) was meant to poke fun at the incident, and nearly all watchers treated it as a joke; it is precisely the axiological clash that accounts for the humorous effect, as illustrated in (12) – (13):

(12) Na pewno jest to pierwsza kradzież ciesząca się tak powszechną sympatią. [it is certainly the first theft that has become so popular].

(13) Chwała cyganom nie za to , że pod.....li czołg. Chwała za to, że rozbawili cały świat. [Glory to the Gypsies not because they fucking snatched the tank, but because they made the whole world laugh].

Online communication is interactive, and the discourse in which the netizens become engaged has a number of aspects. Some commentaries develop the joke, contrasting the Gypsies with the Russian tank soldiers, as illustrated in (14) – (15):

(14) no dobra, ukradłem, ale tylko frajer by nie skorzystał, trzeba było pilnować. [oh well, I did steal, but you should have watched it].

(15) Ruskie tankisty wracają do czołgu z kradzionymi komórkami, a tu бляд, куда ушел наш танк?" [The Russian tank soldiers come back with the mobiles they had stolen, and, lo and behold: "where has our fucking tank gone?"]

(14) and (15) express the new blended meaning, as illustrated in Figure 2.

The emergent meaning is that of Russian tank soldiers behaving according to the Gypsy stereotype.

Some Internet users (who have no sense of humour?) protest because they find the message to be factually erroneous, and therefore reject the information as a piece of fake news, given in (16): Prawda jest taka że czołgu nie ukradli tylko pojazd opancerzony. [the truth is they did not steal a tank but a troop carrier].

However, a more significant twist came after a few days, as people in Poland were getting more news about the atrocious behaviour of Russian troops in Ukraine. The netizens vent their protest because they find it improper to poke fun at the war, as illustrated in (17): Ludzie giną za wschodnią granicą, a Wy macie ubaw z filmiku. Brak słów na Wasze komentarze. [People are dying at the eastern border, and you have a blast watching a little film. Your comments leave me speechless].

One is reminded of McLuhan's idea: "the message of a newscast about a heinous crime may be less about the individual news story itself (the content), and

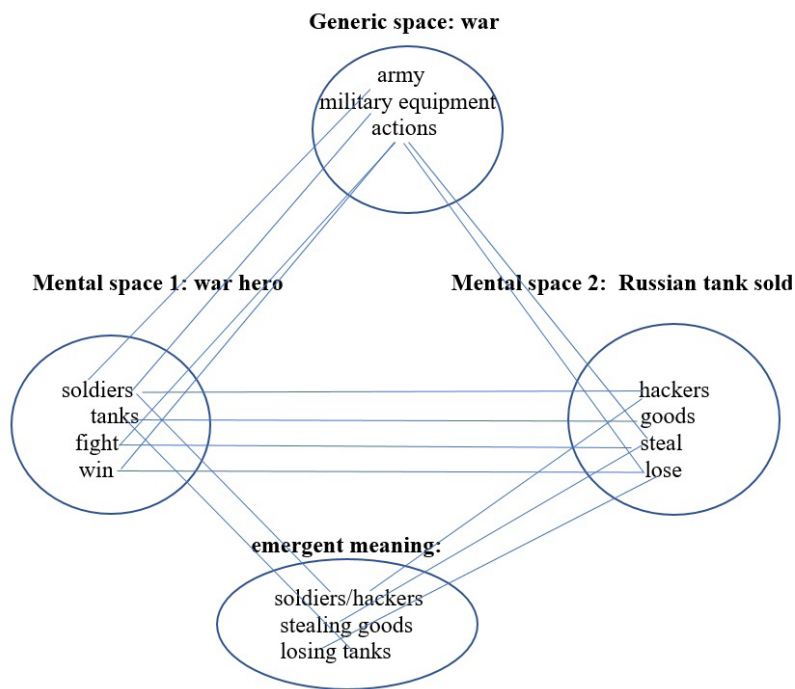


Figure 2: Blending model with 'war heroes' and 'Russian tank soldiers'

more about the change in public attitude towards crime that the newscast engenders by the fact that such crimes are in effect being brought into the home to watch over dinner" (McLuhan, 1964, as cited in Federman, n.d.).

Against the background of a large scale outrageous violence the Lubimovka incident becomes insignificant, both as a source of humour – nobody feels like laughing any more – and as a meaningful act of resistance. Frustration makes some of the watchers of the Gypsy film turn against the issue of political correctness and stereotypes that had provoked the joke, as provided in (18):

- (18) Cygan mówi o swej społeczności „Cyganie” a marksišci i poprawni politycznie z uporem maniaka powtarzają „Romowie”. Nie wiedzieć po co. AS Roma to porządny klub z Rzymu(Roma) a nie rolnicy z Dzikich Pól. [The Gypsy call their community “Gypsies” while Marxists and advocates of political correctness stubbornly repeat “the Roma”. Hard to say why. AS Roma is a decent football club from Rome (Roma), and not villagers from the Ukrainian Wilderness] (own source).

The film is now six months old, and the more recent You Tube comments are five months old, meaning that it is not commented upon, and probably not watched, any more. This is of course only natural. The question whether it has

played its role in shaping Internet users' attitudes towards ethnic stereotypes⁵, the Russian aggressors and political correctness remains open. Looking for a viable answer would require common efforts of linguists, media experts and sociologists, or, in other words, an interdisciplinary project.

Post scriptum 1. A project of this kind would profit from a contribution from the field of translation studies. The English subtitles to the "Gypsy Film" read, as given in (19): A lot of people are now saying that the Gypsies stole the tank. But friends, it's all not true: we just stupidly snatched it.

In (19) two lexemes seem objectionable: "all" rejects the original news in its entirety rather than refer to the character of the action (cf. above). The adverb „stupidly” runs counter the assessment of the tank-snatching act, made either by the agents themselves or by the general public (cf. above the comments of the viewers). Interesting as it is, a discussion of this aspect would mean going beyond the limits of this paper.

Post scriptum 2. I am sending this text to the editors on September 20, 2022. Today's *Gazeta Wyborcza* brings a report by Wieliński, entitled „Najnowocześniejszy rosyjski czołg wpadł w ręce Ukraińców” [The most modern Russian tank fell into the hands of the Ukrainians]. The tank is real, the piece is well documented, free of stereotypes. Full of hope.

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⁵ For a discussion, see e.g. Bartosz (2004, 2007).

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