The article deals with the Russian and German idioms involving the colours “white”, “black”, “red”, “blue”, “green”. The secondary meanings of the words have been studied to describe the specificity of the Russian and German understanding of the concepts of colour. It has been revealed that the Russian language puts the emphasis on the concepts of “white”, “black”, and “red”, while the German language is more likely to emphasize the concepts of “blue” and “green”. The outcomes of the research can be used by the teachers of German, as well as the interpreters.

Abstract

The concepts are understood by most linguists as the quantum of knowledge, which reflect a human’s perception of the world. It is noteworthy that linguists view the concepts of national languages as containing both a universal meaning and a culturally-specific component, which reflects the cultural memory of a nation.

THE CONCEPTS OF COLOUR IN RUSSIAN AND GERMAN IDIOMS

Keywords: concept, idiomatic expression, secondary nominative meaning, the seme.

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The idioms involving the colour “white” (белый/weiß)

Of all the secondary meanings of “white”, there are the following common semantic components:
- «the unknown», e.g. белое пятно – ein weißer Fleck auf der Karte (literally: the white spot, meaning the unknown territory);
- «peace, the chastity of the mind», e.g. поднять белый флаг – die weiße Fahne hissen (literally: to raise the white flag, meaning to give up). This meaning has a broader representation in German: eine weiße Weste haben (compare: иметь незапятнанную репутацию – to have an impeccable reputation), eine weiße Hemdbrust (compare: безупречное произволо – a clean sheet), ein weißen Blatt sein (compare: быть чистым [нетронутым] существом – be pure).

The peculiarity of the concept “white” in Russian is the meaning of “the best one”: белая кость (literally: the white bone, meaning the nobility), белый гриб (the white mushroom), белое духовенство (the white clergy), for which there are no German counterparts, and which are translated into German respectively, as: белое Blut, Steinpilz, weltliche Geistlichkeit. The sense of “openness” is also inherent in the Russian concept of “white”: на белом свете (in the world) – in/auf der weiten Welt, среди бела дня (in the white daylight) – am helllichten Tage.

The idioms with the lexeme “black” (черный/schwarz)

Concerning the secondary nominative meanings of the concept “black”, the idioms contain the senses of “dark” and “sad” in both languages, e.g. черные мысли – schwarze Gedanken (black thoughts), черный день – ein schwarzer Tag (a black day), черный юмор – schwarzer Humor (the black humour), рисовать черными красками – in den schwarzen Farben (ausmalen/schildern (to colour with the black paint), видеть в черном свете – schwarz sehen (to see everything through black-coloured glasses). Besides, there is the sense of «evil, unkind» in both languages, e.g. черная душа – eine schwarze Seele (a black mind), черная неблагодарность – schwarzer Umdank (black ingratitude), черный список – die schwarze Liste (the black list), черная магия – die schwarze Magie (the black magic). The sense of «illegal» is better represented in German: черный список – neue Zeile mit Absatz (new paragraph); ради красного слова – der schönen Worte wegen (just to sound smart, just for his effect); Красная площадь – der Rote Platz (the Red Square).

The idioms with the lexeme “green” (зеленый/grün)

The German language embraces a wide range of the secondary meanings of the concept “green”, like the meanings of “wellness, success” (auf einen grünen Zweig kommen, j-n über den grünen Klee loben u деже Wer sich grün macht, den fressen die Ziege) and “favourable, happy, nice” (sich an j-n grünen Seite setzen, j-n nicht grün sein), while there is a common secondary semantic component of “inexperience and immaturity” in both Russian and German, e.g. быть зеленым, зеленый юнец – der Grünschnabel/grüner Junge (to be a green man); unsere Bekanntschaft ist noch grün (we haven’t known each other for long enough). At the same time, it is often that “green” in Russian means „unripe”, but in the German counterpart idiom it means “new and fresh”, e.g. зеленые овощи, зеленый горошек – grünes Obst, grüne Fische/Herringe, grünes Fleisch.

The idioms with the lexeme “blue” (синий/голубой/blau)

The lexeme “blue” has more secondary meanings in German. These include such meanings as “enigma, mystery” (sein blaues Wunder erleben); “the unknown” (die blaue Ferne – голубые дали, Fahrt ins Blaue, ins Blaue hinein, etwas geht ins Blaue, ins Blaue schießen), “a tall story, fiction” (die blaue Märchen, j-m blauen Dunst machen, blau reden), «laziness» (blau machen (from blauer Montag)). The common meaning of “blue” in both languages is the sense of “a dream”: сныя тпца – der blau Vogel (the blue bird).

The study has shown that the meanings of the words denoting colour differ in Russian and German idioms. The Russian idioms display a wide range of the concepts of “white”, “black”, and “red”. Although there are some components of the meaning that the Russian language shares with the German language, there are distinctive Russian culture-oriented features. The Russian people associate the white colour with the best things, the black colour – with the worst things, and the red colour – with the beautiful things, which is reflected in the idioms. The concepts of “blue” and “green” prevail in the German idioms, with the corresponding meanings of “mystery, tall tales and laziness” and “wellness and favourability”, which are not to be found in Russian. The authors argue that it is important to know and understand the full range of the principal and secondary meanings embraced in the concept of a colour, for a professional to be able to maintain adequate Russian-German and German-Russian communication.
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