

ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ
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CULTURE-SPECIFIC VOCABULARY IN SIGN LANGUAGES (BASED ON AMERICAN, BRITISH AND RUSSIAN
SIGN LANGUAGES)

Research article

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Abstract

This study explores the realia present in the Deaf community, which are reflected in the vocabulary of sign languages. The aim of this research is to identify groups of culture-specific vocabulary which is observed in many sign languages and to compare the realia of the Deaf communities in the USA, the UK and Russia. The research material includes culture-specific signs, selected by sampling from online sign language dictionaries and obtained in the surveys conducted among native speakers of Russian Sign Language. The conclusion drawn from the research findings points to the similarity between some groups of signs, which share the same meaning, while also pointing to culture-specific signs typical of only one sign language.

Keywords: Russian Sign Language, culture-specific vocabulary, realia, non-equivalent vocabulary.

КУЛЬТУРНО-СПЕЦИФИЧЕСКАЯ ЛЕКСИКА В ЖЕСТОВЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ (НА МАТЕРИАЛЕ
АМЕРИКАНСКОГО, БРИТАНСКОГО И РУССКОГО ЖЕСТОВЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ)

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Работа посвящена рассмотрению реалий сообщества глухих, которые отображены в лексике жестовых языков. Цель данного исследования — выявление групп культурно-специфической лексики, встречающейся во многих жестовых языках, и сравнение реалий, существующих в сообществах глухих США, Великобритании и России. Материалом работы послужили культурно-специфические жесты, выделенные путем выборки из специальных словарей и выявленные путем опроса носителей русского жестового языка. На основании исследования делаются выводы о схожести некоторых групп жестов между собой и присутствии жестов с одним значением в каждой из них, а также указываются культурно-специфические жесты, встречающиеся только в одном из рассматриваемых жестовых языков.

Ключевые слова: русский жестовый язык, культурно-специфическая лексика, реалии, безэквивалентная лексика.

Introduction

Culture-specific vocabulary is crucial for understanding the culture and language of a nation or society. The cultural aspect of a language has already received unwavering attention from linguists for centuries since it was first addressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt [6]. In his opinion, the language and the perception of reality are interconnected. Thus, the language influences people's mindset and the way they interact with the rest of the world.

Edward Sapir's hypothesis made a considerable contribution to the studies into the connection between the language and culture. The hypothesis lies in the idea that the structure and vocabulary of a particular language influence the perception, worldview and cognition of the native speakers of that language [7].

Benjamin Whorf's well-known contribution to this field is his emphasis on the connection between language and worldview. He argued that the structure of a language reflects a particular understanding of the universe [10].

Therefore, in order to understand the way culture affects the language, it is essential to explore its realia and other culturally important aspects of society, such as its customs and traditions. It means that the understanding of culture-specific vocabulary is essential for both professionals and ordinary people who want to have a better understanding of a certain language and culture.

It is also important to mention that the main approach used in this paper is the cultural approach to deafness. Unlike the medical perspective, which, according to N. V. Bolshakov, states that deafness is a disability caused by hearing loss, the cultural perspective describes deafness as a different way of perceiving life and experiencing it without any exposure to sound [1]. In compliance with this approach, we distinguish between the two terms: 'deaf' and 'Deaf', first proposed in the papers by P. Ladd [9]. The former is used to refer to a medical concept of deafness, while the latter is used as a cultural definition and self-identification of deaf people. However, it is noteworthy that such a distinction only exists in the countries with English as

the first language. Thus, in the Russian Deaf community there is no differentiation between these two terms linguistically, and the word “глухой” is never capitalized.

Since many deaf people usually share the same status in society, all these factors manifest themselves in the Deaf culture, which is reflected in the culture-specific vocabulary of every sign language. However, each Deaf community has its own history and its own organizations. It could be seen from the terms specific to the Deaf community of a particular country. This paper discusses the communities of the Deaf in three countries — the USA, the UK and Russia.

When discussing the US Deaf community, it is also noteworthy that American Sign Language (ASL) is currently one of the best-studied sign languages. The works of the American linguist William Stokoe made a considerable contribution to the field [8] and are still used as a basis for research in many countries, including Russia. Thus, the works by William Stokoe provide a foundation for the linguistic and cultural analysis conducted in this article.

Research methods and principles

The research material for the present study — 30 culture-specific signs — was primarily obtained from the four online dictionaries of American [5], British [3], [4] and Russian Sign Languages [2].

Notably, unlike ASL, British sign Language (BSL) has fewer online dictionaries. Thus, the problem of lacking resources still exists even in well-studied sign languages.

Some of the research material items were collected in the survey conducted among 50 native signers of Russian Sign Language. These signs are not registered in any sign language dictionary and may contribute to a better understanding of non-equivalent vocabulary in sign languages.

The method used in the research was primarily the qualitative analysis.

Main results

The study has shown that sign language culture-specific vocabulary can be divided into **two major groups**.

The first group includes the signs that are characteristic of all the three sign languages studied in this research (American, British and Russian Sign Languages), and the second group includes only the signs that are specific to a particular Deaf culture.

The signs included in the **first** group, which incorporates **the signs observed in all the sign languages under investigation**, have been divided into two subgroups:

1. The subgroup that contains the words related to the **peculiarities of visual modality** is almost the same in all the sign languages covered by the research (American, British and Russian Sign Languages). Such meanings as ‘lipreading’, ‘talking with your voice’, ‘signing’ are observed in all the three sign languages under investigation. The notable signs in this category include LIPREAD, FINGERSPELL, SIGNING (also referred to as ‘speak manually’ in some dictionaries). This could be explained by the fact that all sign languages exist in visual modality and therefore cannot help sharing certain modality-specific features.

2. The subgroup that contains the **realia that are important for deaf people** has signs that are present in one sign language and absent from the others. It can be connected with the fact that different societies developed differently. Even the organizations safeguarding the rights of the Deaf are different across the countries.

Thus, it is important to discuss some examples of realia specific only to deaf people in the United States. These signs are not present in British or Russian Sign Languages. For example, the sign BIBI, which is an abbreviation of ‘Bilingual-Bicultural’, referring to the type of education which uses American Sign Language. Another example of realia that do not exist in other sign languages, or do not have a specific sign for it, is the sign HANDSPEAK. It is the name of the website that has been functioning since the 1990s. It is an American Sign Language dictionary which is considered to be the oldest online sign language dictionary. These signs are not registered in the dictionaries of other sign languages. Thus, it can be suggested that these words are culture-specific for the Deaf community in the USA.

Nevertheless, some examples of signs reflecting important realia can be found in dictionaries. For instance, the sign for the Deaf Community itself is registered in British Sign Language dictionaries, while similar signs are absent from dictionaries of American or Russian Sign Languages. In addition to that, there is the sign DEAF CLUB that is not present in either American or Russian sign languages, since it depicts the realia familiar only to the Deaf Community in the United Kingdom. Deaf clubs in the UK are traditional cornerstones of the British Deaf community itself. As observed by P. Ladd, many of them were founded in the 19th century [9].

It is noteworthy that all the components of this subgroup share the same feature: they are not familiar to hearing people. Thus, these signs are also culture-specific, and it is essential to know them to understand the Deaf community.

The **second** group of signs identified in this research includes the signs that are **characteristic of specific sign languages**. For example, in Russian Sign Language one can observe a considerable distinction between ‘us vs. them’, i.e., the Deaf (us) and the hearing (them) communities.

This worldview is reflected in such signs as ГЛУХОЙ ЧИСТЫЙ, ГЛУХОЙ ГРЯЗНЫЙ, which are partially equivalent to their translations into written Russian, but still need an explanation. These signs show the degree of involvement with the culture of the hearing, particularly in Russia. If a person is actively interacting with the hearing community, they are considered to be ‘dirty’ whereas if the situation is reverse, the person is ‘clean’. It also appears relevant to note that some members of the Russian Deaf community do not use these signs to refer to the contacts with the hearing, and use ГЛУХОЙ ЧИСТЫЙ in the meaning of ‘totally deaf’.

A similar stance can be seen when the varieties of Russian Sign Language are described. When it is used in its original form, without mixing it with the Russian spoken language, it is referred to as ‘clean’ or ЧИСТЫЙ РЖЯ. Other sign languages under analysis do not have the same rather radical distinction between the varieties of the language. These signs are very informal and are normally used as part of the insider communication among the members of the Deaf community.

The above findings show that the Deaf community in Russia is more closed off and has certain unwritten rules about the interaction with the hearing people, which is inevitably reflected in Russian Sign Language. It can be regarded as a culturally specific phenomenon in the Russian Deaf community.

Conclusion

The present analysis of culture-specific lexical items in American, British and Russian Sign Languages showed a few general tendencies for sign languages, e.g. signs reflecting visual modalities. However, it also showed the difference between the realia and the attitude towards the mainstream community of the hearing.

We believe that our research findings may be used for compiling or expanding on linguocultural sign language dictionaries and educational resources.

The present paper also highlights the importance of further research into sign languages and their cultural and linguistic aspects. It can contribute to a better development of language policy as well as a better understanding of the Deaf community in general.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

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