ТЕОРЕТИЧЕСКАЯ, ПРИКЛАДНАЯ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНО-СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНАЯ ЛИНГВИСТИКА / THEORETICAL, APPLIED AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

THE ROLE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE IN SONG DISCOURSE

Research article

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Abstract

This article deals with background knowledge and its role in song discourse. Background knowledge implies mastering of cultural and social experiences of a language spoken, as lack of it accompanied by differences in cultural values may lead to the wrong interpretation of an utterance and the author's intentions. Song discourse extensively uses precedent phenomena, actualizing background knowledge of the audience and expand their individual picture of the world. The conducted analysis indicates the prevalence of precedent names and situations over precedent statements and texts. As for the sources of precedent names, they are usually connected with famous people's names, popular or legendary songs, gameshows, films, websites, board games, etc. Names of streets, book characters and Bible references are rare in number. It should be emphasized that lyrics tend to be rather emotional and thought-provoking due to the fact the authors express their concerns and worries in their song, implicitly referring to the pandemic and its consequences. Thus, precedent situations in lyrics being analyzed describe mostly some personal issues like depression, isolation, loneliness as well as some social issues like accusations and lawsuits.

Keywords: background knowledge, cross-cultural communication, song discourse, English songs, lyrics, precedent phenomena.

РОЛЬ ФОНОВЫХ ЗНАНИЙ В ПЕСЕННОМ ДИСКУРСЕ

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Данная статья исследует фоновые знания и их роль в песенном дискурсе. Фоновые знания подразумевают овладение культурным и социальным опытом языка на котором говорят, поскольку его недостаток, сопровождаемый различиями культурных ценностей, может привести к неправильной интерпретации высказываний и замысла автора. Песенный дискурс широко использует прецедентный феномен, актуализируя фоновые знания слушателей и расширяет их индивидуальную картину мира. Проведенный анализ указывает на преобладание прецедентных имен и ситуаций над прецедентными утверждениями и текстами. Что касается источников прецедентных имен, они обычно связаны с именами знаменитых людей, популярными или легендарными песнями, игровыми шоу, фильмами, вебсайтами, настольными играми и т.д. Названия улиц, герои книг и ссылки на Библию используются реже. Необходимо отметить, что тексты песен достаточно эмоциональны и наводят на размышления по причине того, что авторы песен выражают свои проблемы и заботы, косвенно ссылаясь на пандемию и ее последствия. Таким образом, исследуемые прецедентные ситуации в основном описывают некоторые личные проблемы, такие как, депрессия, изоляция, одиночество и некоторые социальные проблемы, такие как обвинения в суде и судебные иски.

Ключевые слова: фоновые знания, межкультурная коммуникация, песенный дискурс, английские песни, тексты песен, прецедентный феномен.

Introduction

Background knowledge represents a complex, multilevel system involving both a unique structure and a specific content. For a linguist, it becomes very important to provide a common framework and background knowledge structure as a system, as well as the semantic composition of background knowledge of a particular linguistic culture.

Gudykunst W.B. and Kim Y.Y. [1] and others define the term «background knowledge» as our all world knowledge. Vereschagin E.M. and Kostomarov V.G. at the same time focus on cross-cultural and linguistic and cultural nature of background knowledge.

According to sociolinguistic terms' dictionary, background knowledge is «mutual awareness of physical life, situational and connotative realities by communication act participants who stand behind denoting them linguistic signs, necessary for adequate and full interpretation of generated statements. Background knowledge form the basis of national and cultural level of language mastering. They play a special role in intercultural interpretation when the communication act participants serve as different mother-tongue speakers and different culture representatives. For example, the phrase «Anna was buying clothes at

Marks & Spencer» doesn't give the majority of Russian readers any idea about Anna's well-being as they don't know that this is a relatively cheap shop in London, so they have no command of sufficient background knowledge» [9, P. 234].

In the dictionary of linguistic terms by Zherebilo T.V. the emphasis is put on the fact that background knowledge can be justifiably thought as the basis of national and cultural language mastering and plays a profound role in the process of intercultural communication [5, P. 189].

According to Kramsch C. the process of communication involves the usage of particular behavior patterns by communicants which are characteristics of any given society and are assimilated during the socialization and enculturation. These patterns include:

· rules of behavior in day-to-day scenarios, including people of different ages and status;

· understanding of person's communicative intention;

· expectation of specific actions from a person (greeting, smile, handshaking, etc.) [3, P. 58].

To make the previous classification more complete, we can suggest another classification by Haslett B. which includes:

· ordinary knowledge (naïve worldview);

· knowledge of culture which is closely connected with cultural values of a mother tongue;

· knowledge about norms of behavior in language interaction situations;

· knowledge of linguistics (linguistic competence) [2, P. 64].

From our perspective, background knowledge includes different types of knowledge which can affect the process of communication in any case. This knowledge is added into the process of communicative behavior interpretation and significantly influences the expectations emerging during communicative situations. Consider it necessary to define background knowledge as finished meanings which vary according to social status, personal experience and other factors.

We believe that cultural determinants are the most significant characteristics of background knowledge. First of all, linguocultural mechanism of background knowledge is noted by Scollon R. and Scollon S. Wong, who pointed out that background knowledge has different structure in various cultures [4]. Furmanova V.P. also says that «background knowledge is a historical and cultural ground including records about social environment in the process of its historical development; sociocultural ground; ethnocultural ground including information about everyday life, traditions and holidays; semiotic ground containing information about symbolics, names and peculiarities of a foreign language environment» [10, P. 19].

Research methods and principles

The theoretical and methodological basis of the study are the results described in the scientific works of Russian and foreign scholars in linguistics, cultural linguistics and cross-cultural communication, such as Karaulov Y.N., Gudykunst W.B., Kim Y.Y., Haslett B., Kramsch C. and others. The methods used in research include comparative analysis and interpretation of scientific sources, practice-based sampling method of factual material and its synthesis and analysis. The aim of the article is to study the role of background knowledge in understanding and interpreting English song discourse.

The factual material was collected from «Lyrsense» website https://lyrsense.com/ [11] providing translation of songs as well as definition, translation, cultural dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Main results

Songs are musical compositions accompanied by lyrics, i.e. text represents the secondary aspect of song perception. For a person who knows little English the sounding takes the first place. Most certainly the hearer needs the gist without losing the meaning or the idea of the song aiming to preserve the ability to analyze the text.

If looking more deeply into the history, it can be noticed that a modern English song formed in 1980s and is known by its countercultural angle, when social topics first appeared in lyrics: loneliness, protests against war and technology, self-perfection, generational wedge, etc. English songs were the first to touch topics which attracted a greater attention from society. Nowadays English-speaking countries manifest a keen interest in tolerance having been originated in songs of 1980s. from this perspective, we can make a conclusion that a song helps solve important problems in society as the main function of the song is information transmission through the song lines.

English songs with their values and ideals serve as a powerful means of English and American culture promotion. Lyrics possess the so-called «cultural consistency» as they exist in cultural space. One of the main reasons of their consistency is relevancy in some certain political and social situations and a massive public outcry of particular songs. Some songs have even had some associations with certain social movements so far.

A traditional song consists of two or three verses and a chorus, i.e. it has the so-called binary structure. Lyrics often reflects emotional and sensual content, narrates a story (a narrative text), describes a scenery (a descriptive text) or conveys the author's point of view, evaluation or his argument (an argumentative text).

These texts are characterized by a free metrics of a different number of stressed syllables. This heterogeneity is related to the fact that during the performing shorter lines can be «extended» or longer lines can be «compressed» by a quicker singing as «melodic lines» longer than poetic ones.

In English lyrics a rhythmic structure of melodic component dominates and the rhythm of verbal component depends on this structure. Standard methods of rhyming such as double rhyme and interlaced rhyme are often used here. From a syntactic point of view English songs are rather heterogeneous. They represent both elevated and informal or simplified style, being able to coexist in one and the same text. A parallel structure together with various repetitions and also a high occurrence of interrogative sentences are considered to be the brightest features of English lyrics that shows there is dialogueness [8, P. 23].

Linguocultural components were taken into consideration when dealing with text processing as the following examples clearly show.

The song «Good day» by Twenty one pilots [12].

Low-key I'm alright

Would you say you depend on the weather?
My sunshine is a buzz and a light, I'll be singing out
I know it's hard to believe me, it's a good day

The first line refers to «Star Wars» film as in Thench's universe the nine bishops symbolize symptoms of depression, and their religion, Vialism, signifies the feelings of hopelessness and isolation that can accompany depression. People who believe are surrounded by neon lights, so «a buzz and a light» most probably mean the sound of that neon lamps when switched on. The second line refers to the first stage of grief in Kubler-Ross model identified as denial when a person clings to a false hope and lives in a preferable reality rather than an actual one. Interestingly, it is denial and shock that help a person to cope and survive the grief event.

The song «Saturday» by Twenty one pilots [13].
Slow down on Monday.
Not a sound on Wednesday.
Might get loud on Friday.
But on Saturday, Saturday, Saturday,
We paint the town.

The first line refers to calmness before an approaching storm which will begin on Sunday when a surge of depression among most Americans is reported.

We   paint   the   town (*to   paint   the   town   red* – to   go   out   and enjoy yourself by drinking alcohol, dancing, laughing with friends, etc.). According to some sources, this expression appeared in 1919 (1920) when «Prohibition» was imposed, making all manufacture, purchase or sale of alcoholic beverages illegal. But some clandestine entrepreneurs began to transport alcohol across the border under a label «paint». So the red color became the symbol of illegal activity.

Lose my sense a time or two
Weeks feel like days
Medicate in the afternoon.

This line refers to Covid-19 pandemic as the author had to stay home in isolation working on his new album «Scaled and icy». Because all days passed with gigantic speed and resembled one another, it seemed they felt like days.

The song «Mulberry Street» by Twenty one pilots [14].
Get out of our way, we're moving sideways
*Welcome to **Mulberry Street**, yeah*
So move out of our way, we're pushing sideways
Keep sidewalk under your feet

The name of the song itself implies the need of background knowledge for its understanding. Mulberry Street is a principal thoroughfare in Lower Manhattan, New York City which is historically associated with Italian history and culture and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the heart of Manhattan's Little Italy. The street was named after the mulberry trees that once lined Mulberry Bend, the slight bend in Mulberry Street. The author uses the name as a metaphor, a place where you have never been before and where you don't belong.

The song «Holy Ground» by Taylor Swift [15].
And darling it was good
Never looking down
And right there where we stood
Was holy ground

The chorus is a play on words with a Biblical text: «God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning – the sixth day» (Genesis 1:31).

The song «Astronaut in the ocean» by Masked Wolf [16].
Y'all don't really know my mental
Let me give you the picture like stencil
Fallin' out in a drought
***No flow**, rain wasn't pourin' down*

The word «flow» here refers to a rapper's rhythm and rhymes on a beat. Flowing is following the beat with your voice at the perfect pace.

In the line *Flow was cool* again the reference is made to the double meaning of the word «flow».

*I'ma kill everything like this **purge***

The author refers to a 2013 American dystopian action horror film «The Purge». The films present a seemingly normal, crime-free America in the near-future. But the truth is that the country is a dystopia which celebrates an annual national holiday known as «the Purge», a day in which all crime, including murder, becomes decriminalized for a 12-hour period.

Swimmin' in the pool – Kendrick Lamar, uh

This line refers to Kendrick Lamar's «Swimming Pools (Drank)» released on July 31, 2012, where swimming pool symbolizes drunkenness.

The song «Supermodel» by Måneskin [17].
Alone at parties in a deadly silhouette
She loves the cocaine, but cocaine don't love her back
When she's upset, she talks to Maury
And takes deep breaths

Maury, originally titled *The Maury Povich Show*, is an American tabloid talk show hosted by Maury Povich that ran in first-run syndication from 1991 to 2022. The show has dealt with a variety of issues, including teenage pregnancy, uncommon illnesses, makeovers, transgender individuals, obese children, domestic violence, bullying, unusual phobias and others.

Alone at parties, she's working around the clock
*When you're not looking, she's stealing your **Basquiat***
*Low waisted pants on **OnlyFans,** I'll pay for that*
She's a 90's supermodel

Jean-Michel Basquiat (December 22 1960, New York – August 12 1988) was an American artist who first achieved fame as part of graffiti duo SAMO but later during 1980s as a very successful neoexpressionist.

Founded in 2016 by British tech entrepreneur and investor Timothy Stokely in London, *OnlyFans* is a subscription-based social media platform where users can sell or purchase original content. Creators can lock their content behind a paywall, allowing fans access for a monthly fee or one-off tip. It can be used by anybody including coaches, fitness instructors, musicians, etc.

The song «Butter» by BTS [18].

*Smooth like **butter,***
Like a criminal undercover.
*Gon' pop like **trouble.***
Breakin' into your heart like that (ooh).

The first line refers to Michael Jackson's song «Smooth Criminal» released on November 14, 1988. *Trouble* is an American board game in which players compete to be the first to send four pieces all the way around a board. The most notable feature of Trouble is the «Pop-O-Matic» die container which was used by players to roll the die pressing the Pop-O-Matic bubble.

Smooth like butter.
Pull you in like no other.
*Don't need no **Usher**,*
*To remind me you **got it bad**.*

«You got it bad» is a song by an American singer Usher released on August 21, 2001 and topped the US Billboard Hot 100 for one week.

*Got **ARMY** right behind us when we say so.*
Let's go!

ARMY is BTS's official fandom name which stands for «Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth» and it carries quite some meaning behind it, given that «Army» is associated with the military, body armor, and how those two things are always together. The fandom name basically means that fans will always be together with BTS.

The song «Freedom» by Justin Bieber [19].

Big up to my brother,
Blessed sons and daughters
We all lookin' for the answers,
*We in search of **living water.***

Living water is a Biblical term referring to Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13 where the prophet describes God as «the spring of living water», who has been forsaken by his chosen people Israel.

The song «Tides» by Ed Sheeran [20].

Low fly zone, lawsuits, and film stars.
*Headline wrote the princess and **the face scar**,*

The line refers to the scar below the singer's right eye and as it was revealed in one of his interviews that Princess Beatrice had cut his face with a sword trying to «knight» James Blunt during a party prank.

The song «Stop the rain» by Ed Sheeran [21]

Holdin' an umbrella when the grey clouds come over again
*Tryna find somethin' real, but it's not **the game they play**.*

By writing this song the author referred to the trial he and his co-writers Snow Patrol's John McDaid and producer Steven McCutcheon during which they faced accusations of plagiarism infringing of particular lines and phrases from a 2015 song «Oh Why» by Sami Chokri and Ross O'Donoghue for his popular song «Shape of You».

*Another «**I, me, mine**» to blur the lines*
between love and heartbreak.

I Me Mine is a song by a world famous English rock band «the Beatles» from their 1970 album *Let It Be*. The song was written by George Harrison and is claimed to be the last new track recorded by the band before their break-up in April 1970.

Discussion

Every language reflects its picture of the world and a way of world perception which is characteristic of a particular nation. The conveyed meanings constitute a system of viewpoints, philosophy and a standard for all language speakers.

People speaking different languages define the world differently from the perspective of their own language. Therefore, song discourse represents a complex, multi angle and multi aspect phenomenon covering professional genres within the context of musical discourse.

It should be noted that studying the song discourse has a considerable influence on a foreign language learning as songs reflect the author's aspects of living and culture on the whole, and contribute to vocabulary expansion as well. For instance, all new and modern slang words can be learnt from lyrics as they are mostly aimed at younger generation who widely use them.

So, it can be noted that music is capable of influencing people and world in general. The message of the song remains a high priority as its lines can have an effect upon a person's world outlook, attitude and behavior.

Precedent phenomena play a special role in song discourse also being rather complex, multi-faceted and intertextual and turn it into multilayered, open structure. For the description of these phenomena, three main factors can be singled out: repeated references to the discourse of a particular language personality, known to the surroundings of this personality and being important for this personality in cognitive and emotive space [6]. These phenomena possess a sustainable set of differential characteristics, making it possible to understand them correctly and clearly, to identify them even if they have particular changes and to connect them with a cultural, historical and socially important text or situation. Their peculiarity lies in the fact that representatives of different linguistic cultures have minimized country-specific images of one and the same precedent names and situations. The differences in such precedent phenomena can often serve as a source of communicative failures and understanding complications [7, P. 847]. We cannot doubt that for getting a full and reliable picture of the discussed topic by the recipient, as a rule, background knowledge is required in this or that situation.

Conclusion

English songs released in 2021 were selected randomly as a factual material for our research. The research showed that in modern lyrics, precedent names and precedent situations are generally used. The sources of precedent names in lyrics under analysis are mostly names of artists, singers, references to famous songs, gameshows, films, idiomatic expressions usually in shortened forms but demanding some knowledge of their origin. Other precedent names like Bible, street names and names of literary characters were rarely used. As for precedent situations, it should be mentioned, that some authors refer to personal and social issues like depression, loneliness, injustice and isolation.

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