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CROSS-NATIONAL RIVALRY: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SPORTS (A CASE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN)

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Abstract. Nationalism and sport are often interwoven and, subsequently, the competitive nature of sport competition can also mirror the contentious nature between international athletes. Evidence of such inter-group conflict may manifest itself through ethno-linguistics and is reinforced through social identity theory. Data analysis for the English and Russian languages was evaluated in four categories. Data includes Word Association Network entries for the four opposites of the sport event schema in Russian and English: 1) strong – weak; 2) success – failure; 3) ahead – behind; 4) winner – loser. Semantic analysis established asymmetries of the lexical oppositions relative to sport competition, which reinforce the manifestation of social identity in ways that elevate the status of one group while degrading the perception of the other. The authors believe that this study exposes that the congruence between semantics and ethno-linguistics which is rooted in social identity. The four authors have equally contributed to this study. The contribution included a literature review on the subject of the study and showing how rivalry in sport is influenced by social identity and ethno-linguistics, which helped to identify the dearth of research into cultural implications underlying sports. The authors also collected dictionary definitions of the items of the sports event schema and performed analysis of the data in the English and Russian languages.

Key words: sport, competition, social identity, English, Russian, semantics, ethno-linguistics.

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СПОРТИВНОЕ СОСТЯЗАНИЕ: ОТРАЖЕНИЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ И РУССКОМ ЯЗЫКАХ

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Аннотация. Актуальность темы исследования обусловлена тем, что национализм и спорт зачастую оказываются тесно связанными, вследствие чего природа спортивного соревнования отражает противостояние между спортсменами из разных стран, которое облекается в разные формы, в том числе речевые. Межгрупповой конфликт в конкретном языке изучается авторами статьи в русле этнолингвистики и теории социальной идентичности. Охарактеризованы ключевые лексические оппозиции, вербализующие концепт спортивного состязания в русском и английском языках: 1) сильный – слабый; 2) успех – провал; 3) впереди – позади; 4) победитель – проигравший. В результате семантического анализа установлена асимметрия лексических оппозиций, представляющих способы реализации социальной идентичности. Показано, что благодаря такой асимметрии в языковой картине мира носителей данного языка статус одной группы повышается, а другой – понижается. Материалом для анализа послужили словарные статьи электронного словаря Word Association Network. Авторы внесли равный вклад в исследование: И.С. Морозовой подготовлен структурированный обзор литературы по теме исследования; Б. Росс исследуемая в статье проблема освещена в аспекте теории социальной идентичности и этнолингвистики; Е.А. Смольяниной выполнен сбор лексикографических данных и проведен их дефиниционный и семантический анализ; Т.М. Пермяковой проанализирован английский и русский языковой материал в сравнительно-сопоставительном аспекте.

Ключевые слова: спорт, соревнование, социальная идентичность, английский язык, русский язык, семантика, этнолингвистика.

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Introduction

Serving as “a vessel through which nations and people assert political independence”, “express a distinctive identity” and “argument their position on the world stage”, sport “creates spill-over effects that go beyond sporting results” [Cha, 2016, p. 139]. It plays an important role in nation-building and influences socio-economic, political and cultural processes of any modern society as well as education, medicine, science, art and fashion. Sport is believed to create friendships and unity, however, at the peak of athletic competition, when sport becomes an exclusive force for national unity and pride, the universal human value of sport can be easily deflated. Serious sport can be seen as a source of conflict and fierce rivalry of opposites [Weisel, Böhm, 2015].

The concept of rivalry is likely to be as old as a competitive sport, but it has become popular for scholarly research only over the last decades. Sports rivalry is given various definitions depending on the study context and theoretical lens applied.

Social identity theory is often referenced in team sports rivalry, including cross-national sports competitions, as the competition gives participants a boost in their self-esteem and reinforces their own self-image through utilizing group-based comparisons of themselves (the in-group) and others (the out-group). Hence, rival groups, i.e. competing teams are perceived as distinct and posing an acute threat to the in-group’s members and their identity [Tyler, Cobbs, 2015].

The rivalry of opposites in social identity theory is reinforced through cognitive linguistics. The subjective nature of group linguistics favors one group while discriminating against the other [Tajfel, Turner, 2004]. By way of example, the term ‘ethno-political division’ is used to describe the deep-rooted conflict between Catholic and Protestant football clubs in Northern Ireland [Mitchell, Somerville, Hargie, 2016, p. 981]. These deeply divided groups are often considered pro-British or pro-Irish. This is one example of an event schema representing the cognitive framework that ties the perception to the group (either positive or negative). In linguistics, an event schema is a

sequence of states or processes identified due to key semantic components of lexical units describing the event [Meichun, 2015]. Thus, the event schema shows the way that people perceive, and then describe an event using their national language.

In this paper, we address the issue of cultural implications of sport via a frames approach in linguistics, particularly, in semantic analysis and its relation to the social identity theory. The research question is which semantic features encode stereotypes about winners and losers in Russian and in English. We analyze the representation of Russian and English lexical oppositions included in the 'sports competition' event schema [Strugova, 2011] through dictionary entries. Our contention is that international communication is further illuminated through understanding how specific cultures use lexicon that categorises athletes into the groups of winners or losers.

The literature review has shown that studies of the kind are not known either in Russian or other languages. Sports management and public relations may have a better understanding of issues of concern such as stereotyping, conflicts or discrimination, arising in international sports competitions. This work could be the basis for future similar comparison of other cultures. The paper is structured as follows: 1) the literature review on the sports discourse and how it is influenced by social identity; 2) a more empirically oriented description of the research data and methods; 3) the results section, which reveals the semantic features qualifying winners and losers in sports competition in Russian and in English; 4) the discussion section, which summarizes the findings, outlines the limitations of the study and puts forward suggestions for further research.

Literature review

The literature review briefly describes theoretical and empirical studies on sports discourse through the prism of social identity theory, semantics, cognitive linguistics, behavior patterns and language originality of modern sports community.

Sport and socio-cultural studies

Recent years have seen the growing body of literature focusing on the socio-political and cultural implications of sport. In general, socio-

cultural research on sports discourse focused on stereotypes and bias in sports context such as gender identity and gender inequality [Billings, Angelini, Duke, 2010; Cashman, Raymond, 2014; Feasey, 2008; Ponterotto, 2012; Thorpe, Olive, 2016], or racial bias [Schmidt, Coe, 2014]. A more subtle display of prejudice and threat posed by rivals was surveyed by Cobbs, Sparks, Tyler [2017], who compared animosity toward rivals across five major professional sports leagues based on four variables: schadenfreude, disidentification, prejudice, and relationship discrimination against rivals. Aggression and deviance in the sports world were investigated by Lewis [2007], Marasescu [2013], Sakamoto [2017] and Young [2015].

Another line of research is the culture of sport, "the panoply of innovations, articles, qualities, peculiarities, and other characteristics that we have developed around sport and the effects sport has had on us" [Cashmore, 2002, p. ix]. Authors studied sports morals, products, and behaviors in different countries [Kaplan, Akkaya, 2014; Kutintara, Min, 2016; Yamada, 2015]. Cultural issues in sports were also addressed by sports psychology, shedding light on constructing sports stereotypes and distributing identities in society [Clark, 2018; Merkel, 2014]. There has been an ever growing interest in cross-cultural research on sport, i.e. understanding the nature of the sports event from the standpoint of the culture people identify themselves with [Aldridge, Islam, 2012; Burger, Lynn, 2005; Kim, Gill, 1997; Kriska, 2000; Muneer, 2014; Okayasu et al., 2016; Park, 2005; Si, Rethorst, Willimczik, 1995]. Nevertheless, scant research was done on sports in Russia making it under-investigated [Alfermannet, Stambulova, Zemaityte, 2004]. Western literature and news on Russian sports tend to restrict to doping scandals about Russian athletes [Noland, 2016; Russia is..., 2017] or focus on negative issues surrounding the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi [Taras, 2017; Petersson, Vamling, Yatsyk, 2017]. All this emphasizes the necessity and importance of original research on Russian sports language.

Sport and language studies

In many ways, it is the communication and its subjective meaning that reinforce the social

identity theory. Thus, sports discourse has been increasingly studied within the frame of linguistics. Researchers tended to focus on the peculiarities and functions of various linguistic units in different languages [Almeida, Sousa, 2015; Balteiro, 2011; Berisha et al., 2017; Nurweni, 2013; Rafaelli, Katunar, 2016; Stramljič Breznik, Voršič, 2011; Tuguz, 2014; Vásquez et al., 2015]. The research of sports discourse was mostly done on media texts: sports advertisements [Beasley, Danesi, 2010], sports sections of newspapers [Szemberska, 2013; Khabirov, 2015], or sports broadcasts [Chovanec, 2016; Lee, Kahle, 2016].

The linguistic makeup of Russian sport was studied by Abrosimov, Bogdanova [2015], Bobyreva [2016], Gavryushina [2016] and Sharykina [2014]. The research addressed the employment of phraseology, jargon, eponyms, and special language units. One of the most comprehensive studies on Russian sports discourse was carried out by Malysheva [2017]. Based on an array of Russian sports newspapers and magazines texts, sports television documentaries, programmes, broadcasts, and Internet sources, the study investigates linguistic, cognitive, and cultural perspectives of contemporary sports discourse in Russia. Strugova [2011] analyzed sports discourse through building the event schema – a sequence of states or processes identified on the basis of the key semantic components of lexical units describing the event [Meichun et al., 2015]. The event schema defines the way people perceive and describe an event using a national language.

The event schema of the sports competition, in which athletes compete with each other to find out who is the best, comprises participants, processes and athletes' states. Built on the words of the national language, it reflects how the nation perceives and structures relationships in the sports sphere. Thus, comparison of the event schemas in the two languages will allow to see distinctiveness of one nation's identity from the other.

Sport, social identity and semantics

Sport is one of the key spheres of social identity which manifests the way we understand and associate ourselves in terms of similarity and difference to others [Weeks, 1990]. Modern social identity theory [Hall, 2012] asserts that identity is

expressed through language. It is an active linguistic and semiotic negotiation of the individual's relationship to society and its constructs. National language determines identity construction as it is an effective 'othering' tool; that is a tool with which we can convert others into the sociological 'not us' (the other). So, the use of a particular language helps demarcate a group and its culture from other groups [Barbour, Carmichael, 2000] and serves as a marker of difference and in-group membership. But being a powerful semiotic means, language not only plays an important role in identity formation and negotiation, but is part of an identity as it expresses human understanding and meaning. And very often this meaning is differently or even uniquely expressed in different languages [Fishman, 1991].

Sportsdom is a particular form of social identity, where athletes from one country see themselves as 'us' opposing athletes from other countries as 'them'. When people's sense of who they are is defined in terms of social identity (as 'we' and 'us') they strive to see 'us' as different from, and preferably as better than, 'them' [Burns, 2014; Cikara, Botvinick, Fiske, 2011; Gwinner, Swanson, 2003; Sanderson, 2013]. Members of one group typically engage in competition with a view to defining themselves as superior. All this is evident in sporting rivalries and competitions in which athletes and teams vie for superiority knowing that a higher-status position is possible. This makes the position of the winner stand out among others.

Sport is rarely, if ever, a purely personal pursuit. Rather, it draws upon and enriches the human capacity for collective endeavor. It is for this reason that the social identity approach to sports discourse is so much sorely needed. At heart, our study centers on linguistic stereotypes around a sports competition in English and in Russian as they help perceive the values and behaviour of athletes who define themselves in terms of a particular social identity. Social Identity Theory has clear relevance for understanding athletes' behaviour and identification. It is nevertheless true that, until relatively recently, the potential usefulness of the social identity approach has been largely neglected in sports research, which makes this study both novel and fresh.

To summarize the above, being globalized by the media, sport has become one of the most

powerful agents of social cohesion and platform of cultural life. Sport not only reflects individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but "extends from individual values like discipline, asceticism, and self-control to collective values like sportsmanship and fairness" [Beck, Bosshart, 2003, p. 3]. Analysis of cultural norms and values of sport can show the main trends in the social context of its existence. This study analyzes the semantics of winning and losing in the Russian and English languages using contributing features of social identity and ethno-linguistic theories. We based on the premise that *winner* and *loser* in sport form lexical opposites, which might be asymmetrical not only between different languages, but also within one language due to the absence of a binary pole or linguistic structural patterns. The etymological opposites also affirm fundamental features of social identity affirmation.

Research data and methods

According to S. Strugova, the frame of sports competition includes two polar slots – the *winner* and the *loser* – as well as relationships between them [Strugova, 2011]. In axiological terms, the winner is a positive actor in the frame, and the loser is negative. The modification of the opposites during a sports event produces opposite lexical items. The schema describes changes for the actors during the event along three data items: qualities of the participants, performance, and location, the post-condition of which qualifies the outcome of a competition.

In pre-condition, 'equal' participants are involved in physical exertion against each other with the purpose to surpass. In reaching this goal, one of them reveals the qualities of being stronger than the other who reveals weaker qualities. The result of this activity is success in surpassing the other (and consequently, the other's failure). Finally, in the process of surpassing, one of the participants is ranked ahead of the other, whereas the other is ranked lower or behind. And the post-condition of the change is qualifying the participants as winners or losers.

The content analysis of the definitions of lexical items in English and in Russian is based on Gabrilovich and Markovitch's claim that basic units of meaning are verbally represented in semantic relatedness at various levels of organized

domains [Gabrilovich, Markovitch, 2007]. For the analysis, we transcribed English and Russian lexemes representing the sports event schema. The content of each definition was classified into units of meaning. The meanings were then ranged from related to common language or specific spheres and grouped according to common or different themes on the ground of the sphere of the word usage. Comparative analysis of the Russian and English categories and meanings allowed to draw inferences about patterns of interactions in the sports competition.

For our analysis we used 6 on-line dictionaries, selected from the <https://wordassociations.net> website due to their highly reputable lexicographic reliability and sustainability: 1) English: Dictionary Definition, Wiktionary; 2) Russian: Dal' Concise Dictionary of Great Alive Russian Language, Ushakov Concise Dictionary, WikiDictionary, Contemporary Concise Dictionary. 4 sets of English and Russian opposite words: 1A *Strong/Sil'nyi* – 1B *Weak/Slabyi*; 2A *Success/Uspeh* – 2B *Failure/Proval*; 3A *Ahead/Vpered* – 3B *Behind/Pozadi*; 4A *Winner/Pobeditel'* – 4B *Loser/Proigravshiy* – were analyzed.

Results

The analysis revealed considerable variation in the semantic structure of the lexical units under consideration. The English word *Strong* and the Russian word *Sil'nyi* describe physical characteristics of a person/object. Both of them refer to the domain of mathematics. Unlike the English word *Strong*, *Sil'nyi* is not used as a linguistic, chemical, military or medical term. The words *Weak* and *Slabyi* commonly denote psychological and physical characteristics of a person. In Russian, the word *Slabyi* is used to describe health and abilities, however, in English, it describes corporal or mental characteristics of a person. Besides, in English, the word functions as a term in linguistic, chemical, and political domains.

The common meaning of the English word *Success* and the Russian *Uspeh* is that of 'result'. In Russian, the word possesses specific meanings of 'gaining success and being lucky, especially in personal relationships', while in English, the lexeme bears the meanings of 'a person who gets results' and 'a state of prosperity'. The semantic analysis of the words *Failure* and *Proval* revealed

that they both refer to the process that fails or terminates. The Russian word also denotes an action and is used in geology and law, while the English word denotes ‘the failure of an event/happening or a person/mechanism’ and is used in banking. When employed in the domain of medicine, *Failure* is used to describe ‘a state of inability of an organ in the human body to perform a normal function’, while the meaning of *Proval* is restricted only to the memory function and denotes memory loss.

The words *Ahead/Vpered* share the semantic components ‘the future’, ‘an object’s location’ and ‘direction’. In Russian, lexeme *Vpered* also comprises the semantic components of ‘distance’ and ‘action’, while in English, the word *Ahead* possesses the semantic components of ‘time’, ‘development’, and ‘ranking’. Both the English *Behind* and the Russian *Pozadi* mean ‘location in space’. However, this semantic component is specified in different ways in the languages under study. In Russian, *Pozadi* denotes failing to reach someone who is ahead, while in English, *Behind* means staying in one place.

The analysis of the definitions of *Winner* and *Pobeditel’* revealed that they share a common

meaning: ‘a person who has succeeded or has scored off in the contest’. The English lexeme possesses specific meanings of ‘a gambler’ and ‘an object in sport’. The common meanings of *Loser* and *Proigravshiy* are ‘a person who acts and a person who loses something, especially in sports or gambling’. At the same time, in English, the lexeme has the meaning of ‘a person with certain characteristics (unfashionable, unsuccessful, etc.)’, while the Russian lexeme denotes ‘someone losing a battle or a war’.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the semantic analysis are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 shows asymmetries between the items of the sports event schema in the Russian and English languages. In Russian, *Uspeh* is taken as ‘a process’ and *Proval* is defined as ‘an action’. *Sil’nyi* implies an object, while *Slabyi* refers to poor health, meaning that a strong person is like an object, and a weak person is thought to be ill. *Vpered* is opposed to *Pozadi* as the result and the process, respectively. In other words, when a person is ahead, he or she has taken an action to

Table 1. Different meanings of 4 lexical oppositions in sports event schema

Positive change items		Negative change items	
English	Russian	English	Russian
1A Strong: a physical characteristic of a person	1A Sil’nyi: a physical characteristic of an object	1B Weak: a mental characteristic	1B Slabyi: a state of health
2A Success: a state of prosperity	2A Uspeh: a process	2B Failure: an ability of a mechanism	2B Proval: ---
3A Ahead: time; development	3A Vpered: action	3B Behind: remain in a classroom for punishment	3B Pozadi: a process
4A Winner: a person who has done something or has something	4A Pobeditel’: a person who has scored off (in sport)	4B Loser: an object; an action	4B Proigravshiy: ---

Table 2. Domains of specific meanings of Russian and English oppositions

Positive change	Negative change
English	
1A Strong: Mathematics, Linguistics, Chemistry , Military Science, Medicine	1B Weak: Linguistics, Chemistry , Physics, Speech Studies, Economy, Politics, Photography
2A Success: Business	2B Failure: Medicine, Banking
3A Ahead: Sport	3B Behind: Pedagogy
4A Winner: Sport, Gambling	4B Loser: Sport, Gambling
Russian	
1A Sil’nyi: Mathematics, Physics, Technology , Sport	1B Slabyi: Technology , Medicine
2A Uspeh: ---	2B Proval: Medicine, Law, Geology
3A Vpered: ---	3B Pozadi: ---
4A Pobeditel’: Sport, War	4B Proigravshiy: Sport, War , Gambling

be in advance, while being behind presupposes a situation when someone is failing to catch up with the others. In English, the opposition of *Ahead* and *Behind* implies that to be ahead of the others, a person needs to spend time on a particular activity or his/her development, while being behind is generally taken as punishment. Also, English *Success* is taken as a particular state, and *Failure* is thought as an attribute of mechanism. Interestingly, there is a complete symmetry between the poles of the competition post-condition: in both languages, the lexemes *Winner/Pobeditel'* and *Looser/Proigravshiy* denote a person.

So, we can conclude that in both languages, the lexemes that define the negative change in sports are associated with more domains as compared to those that define positive change.

Overall, our findings revealed an asymmetry in the semantics of the items in the sports event schema in the English and Russian languages. These allowed us to conclude that the English tend to focus on a person, while Russians seem generally percept sports competition as a process. These findings support the validity of the theoretical framework of studies on the importance of psychology and personal motivation in sport in the Western world. Moreover, the English words have more special meanings than their Russian equivalents, so the English perception of sport can be more specified than Russian. Through the prism of the English language, athletes are seen as strong in a military and medical sense, and weak because of economic, political, or speech status. Sports success is attributed to business models, sports failure tends to be explained by insufficient medicine and banking activity. Being ranked higher in sports is only due to the sports behavior, while falling behind is the lack of pedagogy.

Unlike the English, for Russians, the same terms are associated with technical proficiency. Associations with mathematics or physics produce the features of strength, while relation to medicine is linked with weakness. Russians do not seem to associate success in sport with specific domains; at the same time, the language has developed three domains – medicine, law, and geology – to explain failures. So, the Russian language appears rather pessimistic as it does not specify success but does specify failure.

Finally, the widest gap between English and Russian can be identified in the specific domains of lexical meanings of winners vs losers, that is gambling vs war.

Different categorizations of competition in the two languages may have practical implications for Russian- and English-speaking people in the field of athletics. The two groups will be aware of the difference in reasoning when speaking about disputable or conflicting matters. Improved perception of “Other” can help to reduce stereotyping and prevent conflict escalation. Most importantly, since the sport sector is largely globalized today, the knowledge of different conceptualizations can be beneficial for coaches, sports psychologists, transfer managers, PR and media spokesmen, government policy-makers in sport, healthcare and recreation. We also believe that the knowledge of concepts and stereotypes about winning and losing in sports, embedded in the semantics of language units, can help open a dialogue between athletes from different social groups, avoiding bias and eliminating threats posed by rivals, and generate social consensus in international sport.

This research has a number of limitations. The sample is limited to dictionary entries' semantics of the four lexical oppositions. This limitation can be addressed by an expansion of data for analysis using other linguistic items to deliver new evidence in sport perception. The second point is linked to sourcing from six on-line dictionaries only, which means a limited corpus of definitions and usages. Though this is justified for the purposes of this study, we realize that the enlarged scope of sources would have resulted in more pronounced differences.

Despite unavoidable limitations, the research provides new aspects of sport through the prism of linguistic social identity. The outcomes indicate that word semantics implies cultural and ideological values, which may be conservative, though. A more balanced and comprehensive view on sports competition might be provided by investigating a broader scope of perception of sports competition, for instance, by particular social or age groups. The shifts in perception of sports competition by sports professionals (referees, coaches, etc.) and non-professionals (fans, journalists, etc.) at different stages of the life/career-cycle might become another issue to

address in further research. The level of sports competition (national or international) can be another factor, affecting perception of competition, to research.

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