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CLOSED TOPICS IN LINGUOCULTURES: IDENTITY IN THE FORM OF DIVERSITY

Aleksandr A. Shuneyko

Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russian Federation

Olga V. Chibisova

Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russian Federation

Abstract. The present article deals with the meaningful and functional characteristics of the closed topics, that are the topics which are thought to be improper (taboo), and they are blocked in Russian, English and Chinese communication in a variety of ways. Their characteristics have not received a proper description in scientific works; therefore the study, based on the methods of semantic and communicative analysis, survey and comparison of the communication ways in different languages, aimed at filling the gap in probative identification of a list of closed topics, seems to be a current matter of interest. The authors use the term *closedness* and view it as an indicator of topic's irrelevance that manifests itself with various language means. The article demonstrates the presence of a commonly shared list of closed topics in the above mentioned cultures. The possibility of reference to such topics in conversation is regulated by communication format, purpose and the degree of contact's intimacy. The strategies of closed topic avoidance are marked with semantic replacement called mitigation and euphemism substitution. The study results ascertain that the closed topic list is shared by the Russian, English and Chinese cultures, but points to some differences in the way the conversations go. In conclusion the authors give a wide range of applications: from theoretical constructs that describe the mechanism of communication processes flow to the specific recommendations for optimizing communication in different spheres of human interaction.

Key words: communication, open topic, closed topic, taboo subject of conversation, courtesy, euphemism.

ЗАКРЫТЫЕ ТЕМЫ В ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРАХ: ТОЖДЕСТВО В ФОРМЕ МНОГООБРАЗИЯ

Александр Альфредович Шунейко

Комсомольский-на-Амуре государственный технический университет,
г. Комсомольск-на-Амуре, Российская Федерация

Ольга Владимировна Чибисова

Комсомольский-на-Амуре государственный технический университет,
г. Комсомольск-на-Амуре, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. В настоящей статье рассмотрены семантические и функциональные характеристики закрытых тем, то есть тем, которые считаются неприличными (табу) для обсуждения и блокируются различными способами при общении носителей русского, английского и китайского языков. Эти характеристики до сих пор не получили подробного описания в научных трудах, поэтому исследование, основанное на семантическом и коммуникативном анализе, сопоставлении особенностей коммуникации на разных языках, установленных в результате анкетирования, и направленное на восполнение пробела в доказательственном выявлении списка закрытых тем, представляется актуальным. Авторами предложен термин *закрытость* – показатель неуместности темы; доказано наличие в языках различного строя единого списка закрытых тем. Пока-

зано, что возможность беседы на такие темы регулируется форматом общения, целевой установкой и степенью близости коммуникантов. Установлено, что к стратегии уклонения от их обсуждения относится семантическая замена, называемая смягчением и эвфемистическим замещением. Результаты исследования позволили утверждать, что список закрытых тем одинаков для представителей русской, английской и китайской культур, но тождество общего набора не отменяет различий в формах выражения, избираемых в том или ином случае путях обхода прямой номинации и насыщенности каждой из тем. В статье определен широкий спектр применения полученных в исследовании результатов: от развития теоретических положений, описывающих механизм протекания коммуникационных процессов, до конкретных рекомендаций по оптимизации коммуникации в различных сферах человеческого взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: коммуникация, открытая тема, закрытая тема, запретный предмет разговора, вежливость, эвфемизм.

1. Introduction

The nature of communication is determined by many factors, with the dominant place occupied by the communication components which define its transmission. These units comprise native speakers' stereotypes that fix what one can and cannot say in a given situation. Until now, these ideas have not received an independent holistic description. Their sequential analysis requires attention to the concepts of open and forbidden (closed) subjects. These concepts, being an effective tool for communication regulation, upon closer inspection, appear to be real, their realization exists outside the will of the researcher. This is confirmed by the observations of communicative behavior of any group of individuals. Everyone knows which topics are permissible to actualize in speech and which are not.

2. Open and closed topics as communication phenomena

Open topics, when touched upon in speech, initiate conversation; the interlocutor almost always will participate in the open public discussion, that is, an accessible to actual or potential unauthorized listeners' polylogue, or in the personalized dialogue, thought inaccessible to strangers. The participation shows itself in supporting, continuing, developing, neutral or benevolent listening, the interlocutors do not try to put blocks or barriers in the way of the topic's expansion.

The duration of the open topics' transmission is limited not by their direct substantial characteristics but by the external conditions of communication, for instance, by the availability of time to continue the conversation in a certain social environment. Their transmission can be arbitrarily long, regardless of exhaustion, the presence of novelty and information events. They are like music tracks, put to endless replay. Their actualization is an evidence that the interlocutors find themselves in a comfortable communication space, they avoid awkward silence and demonstrate sociability. Accordingly, these topics can be used for establishing contact, relieving stress, simulating friendship, exchanging information. No replacement tools in topic nomination are required; no leveling or avoidance of some type is involved. These are open polite interactions that presuppose direct nominations freely used in any communication format. Touching upon them is perceived as a manifestation of politeness and tact. Society approves and supports the implementation of such topics.

Closed topics are semantic information systems that are to be avoided in speech interactions. The interlocutor is practically never willing to participate in the open public polylogue and selectively participates in the format of a closed intimate dialogue. The refusal to participate shows itself in ignoring, denying, lining up blocks and barriers, switching, interrupting contact, declaring the partner an uncivilized person.

The extremely short, as a rule instantly suspended at its triggering in one way or another, duration of the closed topics' transmission is defined by their substantial characteristics and external conditions. Their transmission in the format of public polylogue is always brief. They are like instant immediately diminishing flashes. Their actualization leads to the feeling of getting

in an uncomfortable communicative space, they produce awkward silence, lead to comments and point to the lack of manners. Accordingly, these topics can be used for interrupting contact, challenging a negative reaction in the interlocutor, destabilizing his / her state, creating tension, hostility, etc. Touching upon them is perceived as a manifestation of incivility in its soft, that is permissible, and extreme, that is unacceptable, forms, the lack of education and tact. They are not used in the formats of official and public interaction. Society expects hindering implementation of such topics and does not approve or support them. However, there are language means that help to avoid the inconveniences; the unpleasant nominations are being replaced, special tool allow topic directness leveling or avoidance.

A set of open or closed topics may be relevant to a person, to any social group or linguistic community. Personal closed topics are connected with the preferences of a person, the presence of irritants, comfort or discomfort from mentioning the facts, negative information which is unpleasant for recalling or positive information which is undesirable for jinxing. For example, a woman may follow the rule not to be frank about her pregnancy even with her best friends lest she should miscarriage or a boy may feel ill at ease at discussing the forthcoming school outing to the forest as he is afraid of spiders.

Group closed topics are connected with the priorities of the group, the way it represents itself in the surrounding space, the principles of internal interaction it follows. For example, at work it is recommended to avoid speaking about hardships at home or health problems as they may be seen as factors distracting from doing the job. In a first-time meeting a professional should not comment on a person's appearance even positively because it's too personal. Bikers may omit such a topic as fashion as they are outside the context of fashion trends because they stick to a certain dress code.

National closed topics are common to all members of a linguistic community. For example, in the English culture it is considered extremely rude to launch an inquiry about someone's income (unless the person offers up the information) as such questions make people feel as if they were being judged. In Russia it is not polite to ask a person, especially a girl, why s/he isn't married (as if there is something wrong with being single) because they may feel like their space is being invaded.

Certain topics are taboo subjects at an international level. One of them is references to a person's age (except for little kids who show with their fingers how old they are), as adults tend to dislike being asked about their age since age related discrimination is an actually existing problem in the social and work spheres worldwide. Another one is blasphemy which is the derision of whatever a culture believes about religion or spirituality: in most Islamic countries it is a crime for which a person will face the death penalty. The request to prove the historicity of Jesus, addressed to a believer, can cause an inner anger in him, because it is contrary to the Christian dogma and can be perceived as an insult to religious feelings.

Personal, group, national and international closed topics may not coincide in some local cases, but they actively correlate. It will be seen further that the topics mentioned as closed in a corporate environment partly coincide with national closed topics (ex. of disease and external characteristics); personally closed topics of pregnancy and phobia can be included in a larger group of national closed topics of physiological states and negative characteristics; international closed topics of age and blasphemy belong to the group of national closed topics of old age and religion. The present work analyzes only forbidden subjects functioning at the level of the national language cultures.

Any topic can be open and closed, which depends on the situation of communication. The *situational closedness* of the topic is determined, for example, by the presence of a third party, to whom the participant of the conversation does not wish to disclose certain information, by the time and place of communication. Thus, in a situation of patient's visiting the physician, as a separate script of information and communication events [5], the topics associated with age, physical characteristics and life circumstances become open. And vice versa in the conversation of an adult with a kid, most open topics become closed because a child cannot understand, for instance, such widely discussed issues as doping in sport or construction of gas pipeline "Nord Stream 2" via the Baltic Sea.

Between opened and closed topics there are transitions with varying degrees of openness / closedness: with the course of time some of them transform into others; there may appear new ones. The book "Mrs. Grundy: Studies in English Prudery" [4], according to N.A. Rubin's comments on it, represents a fascinating story of such a transition in Western society. In the Victorian era the legs of pieces of furniture were covered so that the ladies would not be offended by the spectacle of their nakedness. In 1963, in order to shield the eyes of Americans from animals' sexual organs, there were designed petticoats for cows, bikinis for stallions, and shorts for small animals. Today's media serves people an almost limitless supply of frequent casual sex, so it has become trivialized and routinized to the point where no one believes it to be an act of mystery. WorldPride promoting LGBT issues at an international level is a clear corroboration for it.

The usage of topics essentially depends on the degree of the intimacy between the participants of the communicative act. For people who are in constant contact there can be no closed topics at all. For people who are persistently distancing themselves from each other, all the topics are closed. However, for any synchronous state of any linguocultural community the set of open and closed topics is determined and relatively static.

The openness and closedness of the topics is flexible and can be the result of some natural development of linguistic consciousness, it can be artificially imposed by the authorities. So in totalitarian and authoritarian states specific topics are purposefully closed by the power for political reasons: these in particular include the positive achievements of other countries, the facts of their outdistancing pace of development.

The existence of closed topics is always recognized by the community. This is manifested in many ways. In folklore – Buddhist parable "It is impossible to say it frankly" (http://www.thetales.ru/buddiyaskie-pritchi/ob-etom-nelzya-govorit-pryamo/): *And when I closed my eyes, he realized that no one can speak about the Superior. Ony can only remain silent about it; and in this silence It is learned*. Or a frivolous song currently popular in Russia "About what nobody speaks": *For your husband not to cheat you, deprive him of his beauty. When he is asleep, cut off his mustache. And something*

else, and something different, about what they don't say and what they don't teach in school. In literature – the poem by F.I. Tyutchev "Silentium!" (http://www.ruthenia.ru/tiutcheviana/publications/trans/silentium.html#1): *No word, keep secret and withhold your feelings and your dreams untold*. The book by G. Marcus "A tale with a happy beginning" (https://books.google.ru/books?id): *How should she know! Probably, her grandmother christened her. Such things are not spoken about in the country of victorious socialism*. The book by K. Sites "The things they cannot say: stories soldiers will not tell you about what they've seen, done or failed to do in war". In the cinema – the documentary Russian film "What men do not say" and the feature film by Alex Melli "Things You Do not Tell". There are numerous Internet sites on what you cannot tell children, on the things that no one should discuss in public, on what questions should not be asked at a job interview, and on what people should talk about (RIA Novosti, http://ria.ru/columns/20120531/661397233.html#ixzz4HTApTd4E): *The Americans have the list of topics for public conversations among which there is a generally reconciling topic "about the weather", a unifying one "about the sport"; always appropriate "about the latest news" and never offending "rumor-mongering about celebrities"*.

The existence of the closed topics is due to two global factors: taboos and social agreements. Traditionally, these two concepts are differentiated, taboos acquiring the aura of mysticism, antiquity, mystery and lack of control. Perhaps, within the frames of history of culture there are some intrinsic reasons for this delimitation, but there are none of them within the framework of the theory of communication. Taboos and social contracts are inherently identical systems of norms that regulate this or that side of human social behavior. They are the sets of binding regulations, but with what they are connected – with the ancient rituals, with the gods departed in the shadow, with lost knowledge, with social experience or with modern conscious stipulations, fear, shyness, tendency to look prestigious – does not matter for simultaneous description. It is logical to assume that with all of them in various proportions and ratios.

Social contracts are expressed in the written and oral etiquette. Their observance is implemented in politeness. It is a totality of ritualized acts and it is perceived differently in different cultures, but ultimately it comes down to the ability to balance between the strict formality and free familiarity of behavior. Etiquette fixes the social hierarchy and provides conflict-free behavior and courtesy embodies them in practice. As part of this problem it is important that the selection of topics should be directly related to both components of politeness and etiquette. In this sense, the division into open and closed topics is one of the foundations of etiquette and politeness.

Taboo, social contracts, etiquette, and courtesy, in what order one may arrange them, designate only the system of norms, static or process embodied. Among other things, they define what is considered acceptable for discussion and what should be avoided. The correlation of the system of norms and the distribution of topics are in constant strict bidirectional interaction, where one determines the other. Probably, in the diachronic perspective one can ascertain which of them was the first to appear or if they appeared simultaneously, but in synchrony we can only state the intrinsic relationship between the two. Its presence indicates that the idea of standards without a clear idea of topics is always incomplete. The choice for the analysis of the English, Chinese and Russian linguocultures is based on the fact that they are, on the one hand, characterized by relatively high prevalence, and on the other, by a binary and a total contrast in linguistic and cultural aspects. They help detect the invariant characteristics of the phenomenon, independent on the type of a language and culture type. The communicative phenomenon appears by itself.

3. The identification of the set of closed topics

The identification of the set of closed topics is a self-sufficient complex linguistic and communicative problem. In general, the difficulties arising here can be divided into semantic and source study.

Semantic difficulties are associated with the nominations of the topics and the impossibility to use existing semantic classifications. Currently in the world linguistics and the linguistics of Britain, China and Russia there are no generally accepted taxonomic systems. There have been attempts to create such systems, for example, dictionaries "Roget's thesaurus of English words and phrases", "Reverse Dictionary and Thesaurus", "Lexical basis of the Russian language", but they are controversial and are not appropriate for a consistent description of the material. Although structured in within the overall thematic vocabulary groups, it only partially deals with certain groups not allowing the use of nomination without specifications. The units under analysis, according to their parameters, can often be attributed to different groups depending on what part of their meaning is highlighted, perceived as dominant or as a basis for classification. The nominations of the groups may be more or less broad, and this determines their composition and disorients comparing the materials from different languages.

All this involves constant establishing equivalence with the reliance on specific units, but not on their classification compiled by this or that researcher. Next, we will not focus on the controversy, but simply point out the presence of other readings in some cases. We offer the most consistent, from our point of view, classification that lets to structure material meaningfully with a minimum intersection of the groups among themselves and at the same time with preserving their semantic centers.

Source study problems are related to the solution of the issues from what sources to construct a list of closed topics and on what sources to base it. There are admittedly three of the most optimal ways of overcoming and solving the source study problems: reliance on the available observations of concrete cultures, the thematic and informative analysis of euphemisms, a bi-directional cross-questioning. Each of these ways has its advantages and disadvantages; neither of them is absolutely accurate and exhaustively identifying.

The observations of cultures and verbal behavior of their natives fix closed topics in communications without naming them so, but referring mainly to prohibitions and taboos. In general, it is quite representative, but such observations are not devoid of significant

selectivity and subjectivity. Below are two different examples.

The first, in the Russian linguoculture the synonyms of the word "*умереть*" are *отправиться к праотцам* (to go to the forefathers), *кануть в лету* (to sink into oblivion), *преставиться* (to pass away), *отдать Богу душу* (to give the soul to the God), *испустить дух* (to give up the ghost), *отойти в мир иной* (to move away to another world). In the English language there are such replacements of the word as *to decease, to pass away, to join the majority, to go west, to buy the farm, to take the ferry, breathe one's last, come to Jesus, depart this life*. The Chinese say 与世辞长 (sleep deep sleep), 天归 (return to the sky), 驾鹤西游 (to travel to the west sitting on a crane), 归真 (come back to the truth, to one's original nature), 谢世 (leave for a better world), 作古 (to move to another world). Therefore, one can conclude that the restrictions are imposed on using the word in speech.

The second, in ancient China there was a ban on uttering and writing emperors' names, the names of ancestors and Confucius. In England and Russia there were no restrictions of this kind, but at the same time, there are a number of fixed restrictions on the direct nomination and substitution of the names of emperors, carried out in various areas, for different reasons and at different times (Alexander II – Alexander the Liberator, Edward I – Edward the Longshanks). Therefore, relying only on the first source, one can say that in China there were closed topics related to emperors and ancestors. Embracing a broader field of information, one can state that in England, China and Russia there are closed topics related to politics (the names of supreme leaders are included in it) and personal sphere (the names of immediate relatives are included in it). Such a way cannot be considered identifying as it permanently needs to be clarified by taking into account the breadth of the context, the nature of the nomination and the degree of reliability.

The universal indicator of the closedness of the topic is the euphemism that is referred to in nominating the key concept related to the topic. It is used for overcoming the topic taboo by means of communicative bypass of the forbidden direct nominations, consciously or unconsciously used by the language community. Their inclusion into conversation directly points to a conflict between the prohibition of nomination and the need for naming it. It sounds paradoxically, but they hide nothing, they even formally open the way for evading closed topics, marking the fact of their presence in speech. E.A. Eysfeld [2] found out that euphemisms can be formed with such language tools as metaphors, generic words and phrases, litotes, oxymoron, borrowings, ellipses, and abbreviations.

Euphemisms, suggesting that people mention something without saying about it directly, are ambivalent language units in nature. They are different in many respects, primarily in their semantic power. They can simply mitigate the nomination or can completely replace it. But in any case they make a signal about the presence of closed topics. There are no closed topics that are not connected with euphemisms, which explains, that the analysis of euphemisms is the most reliable starting point in identifying the list of closed topics. Its reliability is provided by the fact that it is based not on personal views, but on the facts recorded in the linguistic consciousness.

The ambivalence of relation between the euphemisms and culturally forbidden topics states the necessity for mastering the invaluable skills of overcoming closed topics in intercultural communication. It is well known that the ignorance displayed by a foreigner in matters related to differences in culture is perceived by native speakers as bad manners of an interlocutor, since they are not aware of socio-cultural basis of these errors, which leads to resentment, hostility and prejudice that are directly opposite to the expected results of communication [1].

There are dictionaries of euphemisms for English, Russian and Chinese currently composed and getting popularity: "Dictionary of Euphemisms" by J. Ayto, "A Dictionary of Euphemisms and Other Doubletalk" by H. Rawson, "How Not to Say What You Mean" by R.W. Holder; "Semantics and Pragmatics of euphemisms. Short thematic dictionary of modern Russian euphemisms" by E.P. Senichkina, M.L. Kovshova, A.Y. Kudryavtsev, "English-Russian dictionary of euphemisms and taboo vocabulary" by G.D. Kuropatkin; "Dictionary of Chinese euphemisms" by Chang Gung. In addition, there have been some publications that accumulated wide experience of an isolated and

comparative analysis of euphemisms by a number of researchers (E.J. Golovanov, A.M. Nikitin, V.V. Pylakina, M.M. Staruk, E.A. Uvarova, C. Zhang, N.S. Mokhovikova, E.O. Miloenko, V.B. Kashkin, G.N. Mukhamedyanova, E.E. Tyurina, Adil Malik Khanfar, Katrin Schlund, Kim Ki-Sun and Lee Jong-Oh, Alireza Hojati and many others).

Unluckily, the desired unity of description for euphemisms hasn't been found. Troublesome looks the choice of linguistic basis for classification or comparison. The taxonomic problems seem to be overcome by a scrutiny of individual units and allocating them into semantic groups with a strict meaningful definition of groups' boundaries. Thus, conducting a comparative analysis of Chinese and Russian euphemisms, C. Zhang [7] states that the Russian language lacks two thematic groups "wedding vocabulary" and "euphemisms of address" though they are present in Chinese. The Russian language demonstrates the bans associated with the wedding, they start from the stage of courtship when the matchmaker, coming into the house of the bride's parents, says, "You have the goods, but I have a merchant". The word *goods* means a potential bride, and the word *merchant* points to an eligible bachelor. The same restrictions are manifested in the fact that the bride is not called directly, but *молодая* (a young girl), *княгиня* (princess) and the eligible bachelor is addressed as *молодой* (a young man), *князь* (prince). Consequently, in the Russian language, as well as in Chinese, there is a group of euphemisms pointing to the topic "wedding", though not independent, but as a part of the topic "private sphere, personal life, private space, family, inner circle". The same may be noted for a group of "euphemisms of address": they may be found in the Russian language vocabulary, but they are referred to different semantic groups, their usage depends on personal characteristics of nomination object. For example, in the phrase *"The plumpest woman, I've ever met, is Anna Ivanovna"* the name *Anna Ivanovna* is likely to be replaced by *my neighbor* or *my colleague* (group "external characteristics"); a woman will never call her husband's mistress by name, she would sooner say *that woman* or would replace her name with some unflattering nominations (group "personal relationship").

Similarly, Z.R. Zhahanova [6] states that in English there is no prohibition on the use of animal names, the English only replace the names of the meat of certain animals. The farmers who grew and killed animals used the word *lamb* while the nobility said *mutton*. The English word *bear* is associated with the quality "brown", which lays the basis for an euphemistic epithet to the noun *bear*. People feared to pronounce it lest a terrible beast should appear. In the Russian language one can point to a similar case: there is an euphemistic epithet "he who eats honey" (*медведь*), that was replaced with other euphemism "grandfather" [3], hunters in Siberia superstitiously believed that if they would refer the animal to their family member it would not come to harm them.

As a starting point for drawing up a common list of closed topics, there was carried out a strict distribution of euphemisms in the Russian language into semantic groups. Similar classifications have already been done by S. Vidlak, L.P. Krysin, V.P. Moskvin and M.H. Sammani. Each of these classifications fully and fairly faithfully comprises the diverse bulk material. Being focused on a single set of facts, they overlap in many respects. However, since they naturally reflect taxonomic views and priorities of specific authors, they cannot be mechanically aligned. Mainly, due to the fact that the boundaries of particular groups, their total number and the size of each are perceived differently by different authors, that is, the same material is distributed and named not always identically.

A striking case in point of the discrepancies in the classification could be the fact that many scientists for unknown reasons underline an anthropo-oriented nature of euphemisms, although there is no more anthropic orientation in them than in the language as a whole. The semantic analysis of euphemisms shows that there are other groups aimed at replacing direct nominations of sexual characteristics, physiological processes, diseases, deaths, human character traits that are nominated through comparison with some objects, features and actions typical of animals, for example, there are common substitutions: *a bitch – a girl, a male dog – a boy*; coupling (mating): *to marry, bowel movement – go about their business*, etc., although at the same time we may allocate a separate group of nominations related to animals.

In our studies we had to compel another variant of classification that took into account features of existing classifications, including levels of the discrepancies available in them, and we tried to relate them to our own material for investigation. It eliminates the overlap of groups as much as possible, substantively names them, fully considers them and consistently correlates them with each other. Having prepared a draft list of closed topics in Russian we sat to checking if there are any similar cases of euphemisms in the English and Chinese languages. The main purpose of the comparison was to answer two questions: *Are there any identical means of the Russian closed topics substitutions in these languages?* and *Are there any other semantic means of substitution which is not typical of Russian?*

The taxonomic and atomic comparison revealed that a set of semantic group is commonly shared by three languages. Firstly, English, Russian and Chinese have a similar list of semantic groups of euphemisms, secondly, the languages have a commonly shared list of the closed topics.

1. Exterior features: appearance, clothing, object features, beauty, weight, fashion line, the presence of personality, thus, for describing an unattractive woman the Russians can use the epithet *на любителя* (for a fancier), the British *homely*, *plain*, and the Chinese 普通的 (ordinary).

2. Race or ethnicity, features characteristic of the representatives of this or that nationality: in Russian they are *лица кавказской национальности* (persons of Caucasian nationality – Georgians, Chechens, Armenians, etc.), in English – *African Americans*, in Chinese foreigner – 老外 (an old chap who came from the outside) or 外客 (guest from outside).

3. Social status, related actions, evaluation and facilities, job, income: poverty and wealth, prestigious and non-prestigious professions, corporate actions, position on the promotion ladder, for ex., *оператор профессиональной уборки* (professional cleaning operator), *hygiene worker* and 环工人 (a person insuring environmental health) can be used instead of the word "cleaner".

4. Negative characteristics, associated with moral vices, deviations from the ethical norms,

norms of conventional and social behaviors that are manifested in the character, actions, behavior, appearance and features of the habitat: drunkenness, cowardice, greed, sloth, hypocrisy, selfishness, stubbornness, gluttony, sloppiness, untidiness, etc., in Russian a thief is a person *который нечист на руку* (whose hands are tainted with theft), a liar in English is the one *who is economical with the truth*. If someone behaved stupidly, the Chinese say 脑子进水 (the water has got into his / her head).

5. Personal relations: the presence / absence of the family, what happens in it; thus, the Russians can characterize the wife's adultery as *жена ходит налево* "the wife goes to the left"; the British that she *makes her husband a cuckold;* the Chinese that 红杏出墙 (apricot flowers extend to the other side of the wall).

6. Sexual interactions: the relationship between the sexes in all forms and types adopted and censured by the society, the nomination of participants, acts, the specifics of their exercise, venues and related activities; the idea of sexual relations can be expressed in Russian *находиться в интимных отношениях* (to be in an intimate relationship), in Chinese 眠花卧柳 (to sleep in the flowers under a willow tree), in English *grant the favor to somebody* (about a woman).

7. Physiological states and functions, body parts, objects and places connected with them: buttocks, female breast, genitals, burping, bowel movement, blowing the nose, gases, toilet, menstruation, contraception, etc.; the word *menstruation* can be replaced by *критические дни* (angry week), 大姨来了妈 (my mother's sister has come), *monthlies*, *courses*.

8. Diseases in the clinical sense of the word, including all their types of pathologies, specifics of mental, physical and sexual manifestations, treatment processes, rehabilitation places, etc.; *психиатрическая больница* – это и пристанище для душевнобольных, и клиника психического здоровья (*mental health clinic*), и дом желтого цвета (黄房子).

9. Age and old age. In the Russian and English languages, the words *старость* and *old age* are considered to be impolite; it can be replaced in Russian by the words the *third age*, in English *advanced in years*. In Chinese culture, the notion of the old and respected are inseparable and expressed by a hieroglyph 孝 (filial piety);

but the Chinese have an expression *winter of life* which corresponds to the Russian *autumn of life*.

10. Death, burial, destruction, related actions, objects and characteristics: the dead is *усопший* (deceased), *покойный* (late), *погибший* (fallen), *скончавшийся* (deceased), 去世 的 (late), 死者 (deceased), 灭亡 的 (fallen), 消逝 的 (defunct), *the deceased, the late, the departed, no longer with us*.

11. Religion and superstition: *Бог* is the creator; *Высшая Сила* – Higher Power; 上帝 – the king of heaven.

12. Foreign and domestic policy and the economy: power, its actions, its components, war, terrorism. The Russian euphemism for war is *миротворческая миссия* (a peacekeeping mission); the English euphemism for psychic injury in combat is *battle fatigue*, the Chinese euphemism for women trapped in sexual slavery for Japanese soldiers during the war is 慰 安 (comfort women).

The identity of a common set of closed topics in the English, Chinese and Russian languages does not eliminate the differences in the forms of expression and the ways of evasion of the straight nominations. For example, in Chinese the number of euphemisms in the semantic group of death exceed those in Russian and English, but such local differences, as a natural consequence of the specificity of cultures, do not cancel the fact that these cultures implement a single matrix with variations.

4. Closed topic in the estimation of the linguistic groups

At the final stage of our studies a bi-directional cross-questioning of the speakers of these languages was conducted. The student E. Shumaylova helped in carrying out the questionnaire.

In the first form three groups of the respondents (the English, the Chinese and the Russians at the age of 20-30 years) were given a list of 26 topics (12 closed and 14 open) and the task was to refer each of them to the headings: *topic permissible for communicate; subject unacceptable for communication; I find it difficult to answer*. The topic was referred to a specific category if it was considered such by more than 50 % of respondents.

All subjects scored from 55 % to 100 % of the votes, that is, they were classified as closed topics. No new closed topics were proposed. The representatives of all three cultures were united in their assessment of the closedness of the topics. The differences were observed only in the aggregate distinctness of the responses, that is, how many representatives of a culture voted for this or that topic, how much they were unanimous in their assessment. The British showed the greatest aggregate distinctness, followed by the Chinese, and then the Russians. It seems that this curious fact refers to the subject of this study only indirectly, as it does not deny the existence of a single list. Perhaps it shows the degree of perception of freedom in communication, factors of social adaptability or the degree of cultural conservatism and mobility.

In the second form the three groups of respondents were offered different questions. The British were asked what topics, in their opinion, should not be touched in the conversation with the Chinese and the Russians. The Chinese were asked what topics, in their opinion, should not be touched in the conversation with the British and the Russians. The Russians were asked what topics, in their opinion, should not be touched in the conversation with the British and the Chinese. This survey gave the same result as the first; the degree of certainty of the aggregate distinctness of the responses was similar.

Thus, the bi-directional cross-questioning of the English, Chinese and Russian native speakers is another proof of the identity of opinions on closed topics in three linguocultures.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of thematic variability and classification of closed topics confirms the theoretical propositions about euphemization being a conceptual-semantic mechanism of substitution with the aim to avoid unpleasant situations in conversation. The results have some practical value for the cross-cultural cooperation theory as the proposed scheme of the *closedness* analysis helped to discover both common and differentiating features in the ways the closed topics are viewed in every culture under study, it is thought to be useful in the practice of teaching the art of cross-cultural conversation at the universities.

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Information About the Authors

Aleksandr A. Shuneyko, Doctor of Sciences (Philology), Professor, Department of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Prosp. Lenina, 27, 681013 Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russian Federation, a-shuneyko@yandex.ru.

Olga V. Chibisova, Candidate of Sciences (Cultural Studies), Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, Komsomolsk-on-Amur State Technical University, Prosp. Lenina, 27, 681013 Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Russian Federation, olgachibisova@yandex.ru.

Информация об авторах

Александр Альфредович Шунейко, доктор филологических наук, профессор кафедры лингвистики и межкультурной коммуникации, Комсомольский-на-Амуре государственный технический университет, просп. Ленина, 27, 681013 г. Комсомольск-на-Амуре, Российская Федерация, a-shuneyko@yandex.ru.

Ольга Владимировна Чибисова, кандидат культурологии, доцент кафедры лингвистики и межкультурной коммуникации, Комсомольский-на-Амуре государственный технический университет, просп. Ленина, 27, 681013 г. Комсомольск-на-Амуре, Российская Федерация, olgachibisova@yandex.ru.