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THE RELATION BETWEEN THE SYMBOL AND THE WORLD: THE STUDY OF SOME CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF BURYAT LANGUAGE USE

The pre-referential state of language is commonly assumed to be inherent to archaic cultures, where de Saussure's spheres of *langue* and *parole* were not separated (Bińczyk 2007; Kmita 1998). However, some contemporary languages still evince many aspects of non-referential language use. This is the case with the Buryat language, whose “pre-referential” characteristics, often ignored by scholars, influence much on the way the language is used. In this article, I would like to consider how language and other symbols interact with the universe without referential relation, but as an active part of this universe. The paper is the result of my field research (2012–2014, mainly the historical regions of Khori Buryats¹) among Buryats coming mainly from rural areas, who are considered to be the representatives of the traditional Buryat culture (in whatever way it is defined), in order to reveal some cultural contexts of their use of the language. This can give a further perspective on bilingualism and the study of language shift in this cultural area.

The referential function of language implies that the subject uses nouns and pronouns for naming objects. In this respect, words *mean* something external and distinct from what they *are*. This external reality – the other side of discourse – guarantees the sustainable relation between referential tokens generated by the mind and the things of the objective world. Hence, reference could not be possible without the category of substance standing beneath the apparent world perceived by the subject. The reality described with language is therefore determined by the logic based on the *external relation* principle. This relation is taken for objective. The belief that this relation (and its terms) exist objectively, in turn, brings about the need to adopt the idea of substance as the ground of their emergence. In this regard, the world is seen as a scope of separate entities and their intrinsic properties. The relation between these entities does not necessarily modify the nature of each and lets words and other referential tokens distinguish particular objects.

Instead of the logic relying on external relation with environmentally-independent phenomenal states, many Oriental cultures are characterized by the presence of the

¹ Khori is one of the major territorial groups of Buryats in Transbaikalia.

so-called *internal relation*². In this relation, the terms are determined by relations in which they appear. At the same time, these relations do not exist independently of their terms. Such world model does not need the category of substance while the reality is perceived as the entirety of all possible relations. The logic based on the internal relation principle implies that the essence of things is not a sum of their intrinsic properties, but of properties which could be distinguished only in relation to all other possible properties. Accordingly, the subject deals not with separate things, but with a set of experienced properties distinguished anew in any other spatio-temporal context. This eliminates dualism between the discourse and the objective world, merging these levels into a single indivisible wholeness. The problem of reference in this regard is irrelevant, since the world is given as a direct consistent experience.

In fact, the idea of the existence of language as independent from external world was strange to the Buryat thought. The world in Buryat cosmology is conceptualized not as a substance, but rather as movement, a constant succession of transformations verbalized with the words *orsholon*, *sansar*, *üngete yurtemse*, *khорboо* and others. The word *orsholon*, commonly translated as “world” or “universe”, shall be understood not as substantial object, but as cyclical motion: cf. *orsholo*- “rotate”, “spin”, “revolve”. The other term, *sansar*, which is of Sanskrit origin, as well as *üngete yurtemse* (a motley world) mean the sequence of reincarnations, the circulation of existence. The flow of the universe’s transformations is not random, but turns according to particular regularities which in Buryat are called *yohon/yosun*. The *yosun* principle cannot be clearly described, as it does not possess any substantial characteristics. This concept, which is usually translated as “tradition”, “rule” or “procedure”, is, in fact, very similar to the Chinese *Dao*, if we agree with Marcel Granet that “every interpretation of Dao includes the concepts of order, universality, responsibility and efficacy” (Granet 2008: 209). Unlike *Dao*, the Buryat concept *yosun* was less formalized and is rarely considered by scholars, though it seems to shed light on many important concepts of this culture.

The mysterious rules of the universe were understood by generations of ancestors and this knowledge was granted to the descendants so as the latter would not have to *explore* the world. The concept of the universe differs from the Aristotelian substantial model, as it is based not on that what moves, but on the movement itself (Morokhоеva 1994: 108). In this light, the problem of reference could not appear, since the world was perceived not as a static substantial wholeness, but as dynamics which was not distinct to the human mind. The division between “nature” and “culture” could not appear, nor could the sphere of human activity stand in a polar opposition to the rest of the environment. In this cosmology, there is no borderline between the objective world and subjectivity. The Self is nothing but the crossing point of relations in which the individual is functioning. This can be illustrated by the enormous amount of proverbs and songs which indicate that the mind has the same regularities as the rest of the world and is not conceptualized as an autonomous entity: *a man tells a lie, a horse tries to throw off its rider, a man doesn’t know the sufferings of others, a goat doesn’t know the sufferings of a kid*, etc. On the other hand, this parallelism does not

² For the external and internal relations, see more in: Zapašnik 2006; Morokhоеva 1994, 2011.

construct any formal rule which could be similar to the Western concepts of regularity or objective law. It refers rather to the moments in which objects are transforming according to a principle which does not exist apart from the context. Any form of abstract regularity or an objective law could hardly be imagined, since meaning is nothing else but the moment in which the relation is established. As it can be seen from the above, *yosun* does not concern exclusively the macro-level processes, but it likewise regulates and interacts with the human everyday activity. Thus, the role of tradition and ritual, which are both denoted with the same word *yosun* (*yoho*, *yoho zanshal*), is to organize life in correspondence with universal processes. Granet's statement referring to the Chinese thought can be equally applied to the Buryat way of thinking: "...they conceptualize the universe as if it was regulated by a protocol and want to fine-tune it on the order of a ceremony – this was the main goal of their activity as they argue. Their morality, physics, logics are only different aspects of the efficient knowledge which is the etiquette" (Granet 2008: 335).

The world is a dynamic wholeness which does not contain any gaps or empty spaces; hence every single action, gesture or word has the power to transform it. A perfect illustration here is the mechanism of prayer wheels having holy mantras inside: the turn of the wheel causes further changes of the universe in the positive way. Accordingly, one may think of sin (*nügel*) not only as an obvious wrongdoing, such as murder, adultery or theft, but expand the notion to include acts which can be treated as disrespectful to the universe and which bring undesired effects: stepping over objects, sitting in the wrong position, giving or receiving with the wrong hand etc. Everyday behavior (including speaking) is not performed in vain, but can trigger particular events, so the way of living the life is ramified in multiple sets of rituals according to *yosun* in order to guarantee the proper "positive" effect. The sphere of language use (*parole*) is not separated from other kinds of activities and that is why it is similarly regulated by cultural practices.

If we assume that the language is an action with immediate effect, it cannot be separated from the rest of the *physical* world. It has the same status as ritual behavior practiced in everyday life. At the same time, other symbols or images are not separated from the objects and have the same ability to act and exert influence on the universe. Symbols are not indexes which simply refer to objects or symbolize them; they have the same ability to act as objects, since they appear as aspects of them. Therefore the Buryat reality is constituted of things and symbols which can act and speak of themselves. This excludes the necessity to use language at any other time, since the context has the same status as the speech. A community existing in the common cultural environment did not have any reason to get involved in an intensive verbal activity, as everyone could understand of what the things were speaking. Things of human environment were not considered as objects for manipulation, but as active subjects in their relation with the environment. The categories of animate and inanimate nature³ are not relevant

³ This division became possible only with the invention of the Western concept of the soul (*animos*) perceived as a compulsory element of vitality. Thus the term "animism" is not applicable, since the concept of the soul was unknown in this culture (Tangad 2013: 91). In this holistic worldview it is hard to

in this cultural reality, since inanimate objects equally participate in the transformation of the universe. The ability to change (or to move) is inherent to things and not realized through participation of an “animate” subject. Therefore objects possess the same status as any other living creature; this gives us an insight into the way Buryats understand the relations between persons and material objects.

Thus, the fundamental principle of the world order was its dynamics and metamorphosis, where objects changed their identity depending on the relation in which they were engaged. Thus, the words could form a kind of an immediate aspect of an object in a particular context, but they could not form any abstract semantics separate from the case. There is no distinction between the *word (uge)* and the *speech (uge)* – in Buryat culture it is not possible to separate the level of de Saussure’s *langue*, as words do not possess semantics apart from the context of speech and any constant referential relation between the world and the word can hardly be constructed. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the modern outlook on Buryat language was influenced much by the referential theories; but it seems the shift was in the substantive, not in the causal scientific belief. Similarly, comprehensive scientific explanation of some aspects of nature did not change the traditional attitude toward sky, sun, earth and other elements of the environment. These two theories not necessarily disagree or are in conflict.

SOME CULTURAL PRACTICES OF VERBAL BEHAVIOR AND THE NON-REFERENTIAL SYMBOL

The general stereotype of the reserved verbal behavior of Buryats is also connected with the maintaining the order of the universe. It is generally believed that speaking may become a risky act, as it can change the state of things in an undesirable way. This concerns not only verbal activity, but also any kind of activity that produces active symbols. For example, in rural areas bringing in a single piece of firewood is considered to cause orphanage, as the log resembles a lonely man, and it also brings bad luck, as the person carrying just one log resembles a vagabond with a stick. The fear of loneliness results in the prohibition to sing songs, especially mournful ones, as this is what orphans do: *a poor man is a storyteller, an orphan is a singer*. Many traditional songs, called *urtiin duu*, have a mournful character; some of them sound very close to the mournful wolf song. I have met some persons who would sing all kinds of songs, but only outside and in the absence of adults; this was because they were prohibited to “mourn” inside the house. It must be noted that this kind of restrictions was usually addressed mainly to children, because due to their young age they had the power to “see the things” (*yume kharadag*) which were closed to adults and to “foresee” or to “make things come” (*zugenekhe*), very often in the negative way. Watching a child’s behavior is said to be a kind of fortune-telling – making predictions about wealth, having children and the length of life.

separate the spheres of the *sacrum* and *profanum*, the animate and inanimate, the rational and irrational, since these dual categories were invented in the Western cultural context.

There exists a special category of “negative” words and phrases, usually termed “words of bad luck” (*yoro uge*). For instance, Buryats avoid verbalizing the figure “one” (*nege*) or other related words as “single” or “only” (*gansa*), as this can directly influence the flow of life. For instance, when somebody is asked how many children they have and he or she has only one, the answer should not contain any of the above-mentioned words, as the phrase can immediately react and change destiny, so the person in question will be left with only one child for the entire lifetime⁴. The proper answer in this case is just “a boy / a girl”. Also, a person can be criticized for saying, for example, “my child”, because this way of expressing oneself is believed to cause the death of one’s spouse. Thus, the proper way is to use the pronoun “our” all the time: “our father”, “our mother”, “our sister” and even sometimes “our husband” (*manai nukher*). This concerns not only verbalization, but any form of expressing the symbols which cause lonesomeness. Similarly, any expression of laments and complains was generally disapproved, since they were believed to bring further complications. Thus, a person who complains about health will always be ill; a person who complains about people will never be on good terms with them.

Words of bad luck, along with the category of words “having great power” (*shanga ugenüüd*) such as curses and swear-words, were tabooed in Buryat culture. However, these taboo words are less connected with degrading human dignity than they are in European cultures. Swearing was a kind of ritual which was a part of a shaman’s ceremonial; it was not safe for an ordinary man to perform it. Saying swear-words (Russ. *matershina*, Bur. *beling*) is also generally assumed to be typical of Russians (although many Buryats use them as well). Russian curses (*mangad kharaal*) are considered to be especially “poisonous” (*khorotoi*) because they can easily wish death or mutilation on the person against whom they are uttered⁵. In fact, I have many times heard the opinion that one should avoid conflicts with Russians because they can cause harm by using “their bad words”. Moreover, it is believed that misfortune can be brought on either by other people’s evil tongue (*khara khele ama* – “black tongue and mouth”) or by their praise (*sagaan khele ama* – “white tongue and mouth”). Constant appreciation of something has the power to corrupt it, even if no bad intention is involved. Uttering *uryel*, “best wishes”, traditionally spoken during festivities, may achieve an opposite effect. As in the case of swearing, it is a shamanic skill; wishful thinking is a matter which belongs to the man (*yuröölshе*) who has the grant (often the ancestral one) to perform the act of wishing.

The power of words is also revealed in the name one bears. Some names, the so-called “heavy” names (*khünde nere*), can be improper for some people. An example is a boy I have met, called Sayan⁶, who had serious health problems because his name was oppressing (*darakha*) him; he had to change it. Similarly, names like *Chingis*, *Baigal*⁷ can be heavy since, they are symbols of great power.

⁴ In a traditional Buryat community, childlessness is considered to be the greatest misfortune.

⁵ It should be added that while Russians use such phrases, their reaction is very different. They seem to be much more relaxed and to take such phrases easy both while saying and while hearing them.

⁶ Sayan – a mountain range in South Siberia and Northern Mongolia.

⁷ Baigal (bur.) – Lake Baikal.

The way in which society is organized and function directly influences the process of keeping the universe in proper order. To prevent the improper changes of reality, one should keep the “tradition of forbiddance” (*seerlekhe yoson (seer)*) which regulates everyday behavior. It includes taboos on various actions which are contradictory to the order of the universe, because improper human activity can evoke changes even in natural environment. An interesting example is the landslide which happened in the locality of Arshaan in Tunka Valley in June of 2014. People tend to think of the disaster’s cause not as a “natural” process usual for mountainous regions, but rather they search for the reason in the way the local society functions. The popular news portal ARD (www.asiarussia.ru) published an article which considers the disaster to be the consequence of multiple confrontations between municipal leaders and local population which “bring people nothing but negative emotions and divide them into opposing camps”. “When tens or hundreds, or thousands of people at one time chance to experience some kind of emotional stress, this can disrupt the balance of nature. And then a similar disaster which recently struck Arshaan is awakened”. Further on, the author gives another example of how human community influenced nature: “In particular, there was a major earthquake during the unrest [caused by] hundreds of thousands of people in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China”. This is an example how the concept of social order can begin to be interpreted as a very important factor of natural balance.

The Buryat words *udkha*, *udkha ushar*, conventionally used in language theory to denote the terms “meaning” or “sense”, should in fact be translated as “cause”, “reason”, “root” or even “initial power”. A man’s *udkha* lies in his genealogy, which determines his character and predispositions; so the clans were “qualitatively unlike one another, in that they possessed a different supernatural ability (*udkha*)” (Humphrey 1983: 53). Thus “meaning” is not a mental reflection of static *designatum*, but an active reason, a cause of things, which forms as a momentous event in the transformation of the universe. This implies that a symbol is the result of processes which can have a further impact on reality. A symbol has the power to construct the environment; that is the reason why symbols should be accessible only to a limited number of people. In this context, the precise date and place of birth, the names, dreams and plans are information one should keep in relative secret – not because of its “private” character, but because a person who can read these symbols and knows how to use them has the power to influence the flow a man’s life.

THE “INNER” WORLD AND THE WAY OF SPEAKING

The inner world (*dotor*) is associated with smelly inner organs. Concepts usually associated with the Western “soul” or “spirit” do not have the function of constructing the individual emotional or moral sphere. The multiple Buryat souls can fly out, be eaten by spirits, received in the course of proper rituals and inherited from ancestors. They are a complex field of vitality which is dependent on the ritual behavior and

which constructs a certain life context⁸. The soul has no relation to feelings, which are considered to be a direct expression of the self. The place of feelings and emotions is not on the spiritual level, but on the level of the mind and organs. In turn, it is difficult to determine what the “mind” is in this culture, when it hardly can be a rational sphere of human activity. It is the space where the worst sins take place, because in this worldview the sin is performed already on the level of motivation. Thoughts are always closed to others, so nobody can be sure what sins one bears inside. Thus “bad thoughts” (*muu hanaan*) can have dangerous karmic consequences in the “outer” world. Thinking constitutes the same way of changing the world as the physical act. Regular thoughts addressed to a particular person have enough power to influence his or her life – positively, but more often negatively. Feelings and emotions are not considered to be “inner” or “private”, as they too can influence the processes unfolding in the universe in the same way as other actions can influence them. The content of thoughts is a part of the environment in the sense that “external” observation is necessary for shaping an attitude. The vision of an individual who can function as an autonomous entity, independent from situation and particular relations with other people, is strange to Buryat culture, where these relations determine the human identity. This can be seen, for example, in ignoring or adjusting one’s own attitude in keeping with the attitudes of one’s seniors.

Having one’s own “character” or “personality” is considered natural in this culture, but any form of its manifestation is considered in adverse terms. Words for “character”, *ayag* or *zang*, bear negative connotations, thus to have one (*ayagtai*, *zangtai*) means to be capricious, headstrong or awkward. The worst thing is showing one’s character – *zang-aa gragakha* (“to take out one’s own character”), *zangaa kharuulakha* (“to show one’s own character”) – this means to show one’s own wicked, egoistic features. Thus, the word *zang* is mostly presented in negative combinations: *ayag zang* (“caprice”, “character”), *bardam zang*, *ööderkhüü zang* (“arrogance”) etc. *Zang* can be positive only when it is in a harmonious relation with the environment, both social and natural: *hain zang* (“good, compassionate character”), *uuzham zang* (“non-contentious character”, “great-heartedness”). Character and personality are directly connected with behavior: *abari zang* (“character and behavior habit”), *ayag aasha* (“character/caprice and behavior”), where the first term is neutral and the second one has the meaning of conflictive, egoistic behavior. Acting on one’s own will is viewed as improper: *ayaaraa* (“to act arbitrarily”, “to be self-willed”), *zol zorgoondoo yabadag hün* (“the one who is acting at his own will”). Being guided by one’s own will is treated as conflictive behavior. This answers to the principle of harmony in the society, where the interests of an individual are treated as inferior to those of the community.

Generally, having character (*ayag*) is seen to be a female trait and to call a man *ayagtai* (“capricious”, “changing opinion or mood”) is very offensive. Thus, a male is seen in Buryat culture as stable, neutral and non-conflictive, following the *arga-bilig*⁹

⁸ Inanimate things also can have a “soul”.

⁹ *Arga bilig* is most often associated with the Chinese *yin* and *yang*.

principle. A case which perfectly illustrates this opposition is as follows. One of my acquaintances, a forty-year-old woman, runs a souvenirs shop in Ulan-Ude. One day, she was busy arranging her workplace when a young Buryat man entered the shop and asked her to show him an item in the window display. As the customer was a young Buryat (sic!), she told him that she was extremely busy, too busy to do it, and asked him to look at the item through the window-pane. She did not like it that the young man was coming close to her side, but was truly shocked when he asked her to give him the book of complaints. Finally, she escaped from the shop and met me outside to tell me what happened. She reported to me her great disappointment that young Buryat men these days were capricious (*ayagtai*) and conflictive (*khederüü*) like women. One might think that the woman herself was acting improperly; but in her own view, she did not do anything wrong.

This case perfectly characterizes how the right defense can turn to a challenge to what a “real man” should look like. Indeed, in the modern Russian society people are generally convinced that the only way to be heard is by causing a conflict. This seriously threatens Buryat men’s role of being non-contentious, great-hearted, as it is told in the popular proverb: *Ere khün dosoogoo emeelte khazaarta mori bagtaadag* (A saddled horse can get into a real man’s soul). This also means that the contemporary society requires males to develop “female” features, thus adding further dissonance in relation to traditional cosmology. More often it is women who take the active social position, participating and “defending” their family rights in the public life and thus allowing their men to “save face”. Another “female” feature is the fact that modern social culture requires high verbal activity, which is contrary to the traditionally laconic style of men’s speech in public. The phrase *shashag ere* (“a talkative man”) bears an extremely negative connotation, as talkativeness is seen as a purely female feature. I noted this trait in most of my Buryat friends at school and at the university; they were rather poor in academic speech. It does not imply that Buryat men are incommunicative; on the contrary, they can allow themselves to be very talkative – but only within the private sphere. Outside it, speech is more about “behaving in the society” (*olonsoo yabadal, zonsoo yabadal*), where a man, who traditionally represents his group, should constantly control his behavior within the framework of “propriety”. This cognitive dissonance, triggered by the challenges of modern requirements for an individual and by the shift in economic activity, possibly created deep psychological complexes. More problems are added by the Buryats’ integration with the predominantly ethnic Russian community, in which behavior patterns are more in keeping with the individualistic Western style of activity and much distinct from Eastern style.

While the inner world of one’s personality is perceived in negative categories, the concept of self- (or group-) presentation has a much more positive meaning. The way one exists in the eyes of the community seems to be more important than the way one perceives himself as an individual. Thus the harmony of social environment requires one to generate conventional relations. The concept of “face” is known in many cultures of Asia, and it seems to be present in the Buryat community as well.

The words *shig* and *sharai* are used to denote the face as a physiognomic part of the body, which can indicate one's physical or psychological state. A person discovers the existence of "face" only when it is lost. Distinctively, *nyur*, another word for "face", apart from the abovementioned meanings, is also loaded with rich cultural connotations. A good face symbolizes the ideal way of presenting oneself in the community, but it is revealed only when one loses it. From our observations, "loosing face" (*nyurgui bolokho* – "to have no face", *nyuraa aldakha* – "to lose face") is more fitting to a situation when a person violates particular norms with regard to a closely related person or a group which is usually hierarchically superior: a relative, a related family, a teacher, an elderly person. A very important component of this behavior pattern is ignoring a person's emotional sphere, which results in low possibility of expressing one's individual emotional experience verbally. Feeling and thoughts are seen as human experiences which are irrelevant and potentially dangerous for the social harmony and which should always be hidden. Public demonstrations of affection, emotions and attitudes are considered to be rather comical and ugly (*muukhai*). One of my interlocutors told me that it was very difficult for him to express his feelings in Buryat, though he knew the language quite well. That is why he shifted to Russian, in which expressing such things sounds more adequate. This is how the beliefs of what the inner world is influence the linguistic behavior. Another concept closely related to face is "name" (*nere*). Unlike face, the term is understood as a broader communal reputation which is in danger of being broken (*nere khukhalkha*) by one of the community's members. "Breaking one's name" denotes a serious wrongdoing, which can be murder, theft or alcoholism. The way one "bears his name" is considered to reveal the quality of the whole community (family, blood-related group), since a part cannot function independently from the whole. One can even hear the opinion that a person who is guilty of breaking his name bears little individual responsibility: "He couldn't avoid doing that. His parents are faulty". These few examples reveal the principal importance of context in forming human identity.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic competence understood as a mastery of language (*langue*) seems not to be relevant in the Buryat culture as cultural practices of language use. This can be partly interpreted through the non-referential elements of the Buryat language, which implies that the discourse is not simply a mirroring, but an integrated part of reality. Thus a symbol has the power to construct the environment, not simply refer to it. Knowledge of these peculiarities of Buryat culture and language can be very useful in the further study of the language interrelation in Buryat-Russian bilingualism and culture contacts.

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Key words: Buryat language, Referential relation, Pre-referential language, Symbol and reality

The article considers some cultural contexts of Buryat language use in the light of the referential theory. The idea of language as distinct from the world it designates was strange to the Buryat thought, and thus the referential relation did not form in the way it did in the West. For this reason, the Buryat language has many elements of the pre-referential word-to-world relation, which have further implications on the use and functioning of language. The obtained data can be useful for further research on Buryat-Russian bilingualism and culture contacts.

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