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Expressing Ethnic Stereotypes from the Perspective of Anthropological Linguistics on the Basis of Attributive Ethnonyms

Abstract

This article aims at analyzing the linguistic aspect of ethnicity from the perspective of anthropological linguistics (Fedorak 2017). We interpret an ethnic stereotype as an idealized cognitive model (ICM) consisting of metonymic submodels containing properties stereotypically attributed to a given ethnic group. Each of the subset models can serve as a basis for creating an attributive ethnonym, *i.e.* an ethnic name that refers to a particular attribute assigned to the target group. Although contemporary attributive ethnonyms are mostly seen as dysphemisms, it is ultimately context—taking into account situational, social and cultural determinants—that determines their axiological charge.

Keywords: anthropological linguistics, context, ethnicity, metonymy, stereotype.

Introduction

There is nothing new in the statement that foreign cultures evoke certain associations. For example, in the collective consciousness of Poles and Americans, Arabs are associated with camels, Italy is seen as the homeland of pasta, while the name *Ivan* is seen as typically Russian. Such stereotypes may find their way to language and take the form of attributive ethnonyms, *i.e.* ethnic names whose structure alludes to a specific attribute associated stereotypically with a given target group (see Kudła 2010, 2012, 2016). Thus, members of the aforementioned groups may be described—respectively—by the Polish *wielbłąd* (lit. "camel"), *makaroniarz* (lit. "pasta-eater") and (Stomma 2000) *Ivan* and by the American English *camel driver*, *macaroni* and—similarly to Polish—*Ivan* (Dalzell, Victor 2008). Such terms may be easily dismissed as ethnic slurs or ethnophaulisms, yet in order to understand why they are perceived as derogatory a wider perspective is needed—a perspective that reaches beyond language. This is where anthropological linguistics may prove useful, as it explores the relationship between language, humans (society), reality and culture (Anusiewicz 1995: 10, Fedorak 2017). Transferring the above postulate into

linguistic research, Alessandro Duranti (2003) enumerates three major paradigms: **documentational**, **cultural-linguistic** and **transformational**, to which Piotr P. Chruszczewski (2011) adds another one—**communicational-discursive**. The last two paradigms are most relevant in the study of linguistic manifestations of ethnic otherness because they highlight the importance of socio-linguistic phenomena (such as for instance Halliday's (1976) notion of anti-languages) and context, respectively.

It should be noted that the notion of context, which is crucial for the analysis of attributive ethnonyms, does not refer merely to situational factors, but also to social and cultural ones (Dijk 1997). In particular, the first type is embedded in the second, which—in turn—is embedded in the third type (Chruszczewski 2011: 216-217). There is another element that binds the rest. As Franciszek Grucza (1992: 41) observes, culture is an "intellectual construct". In other words, everything that surrounds us must be processed in the mind before it is described in words. Thus, before moving to the analysis of individual examples of attributive ethnonyms, along with their contexts, it is instructive to take a closer look at the role that the mind plays in the perception of ethnicity.

A cognitive approach to stereotypes

Stereotypes are commonly defined as simplified perceptions of other people judging them through the prism of the group they belong to. Contemporary research in the field of social psychology shows that stereotypical thinking is embedded in the human mind, and consequently ethnic stereotypes may to some extent be seen as natural to humans. Specifically, they fulfill important cognitive functions— thanks to them, the complexity of the world is reduced to a size that is accessible to the human mind (see Hogg, Vaughan 2002: 60). Thus, stereotypes are mental shortcuts which enable us to categorise and make sense of the environment. In other words, they function as energy-saving devices (McGarty *et al.* 2002: 3-5), especially in situations of being "under pressure of time or information load" (Perry R. Hinton 2000: 69). Yet stressing the cognitive aspects of stereotypes does not belie their social functions. Thus, McGarty *et. al* (2002: 2) add that stereotypes function as "aids to explanation" and that they are "shared group beliefs". The former means that categorisation is not a neutral process. In particular, Tajfel's (1981) analysis proved that people categorize and separate themselves from other groups by accentuating those differences and similarities which are relevant. This self-categorization includes the creation of linguistic elements such as specific vocabulary, expressions, slang words *etc.* to distinguish the in-group from other speech communities. As far as the third above-mentioned principle is concerned, McGarty *et al.* stress that the more the stereotype is shared, the more fixed it becomes and thus "(…) useful for predicting and understanding the behavior of members of one group to another" (2002: 5).

As has already been stated, social categorisation involves the selection and accentuation of certain group characteristics. This, in turn, leads to the consolidation of one's own group (see Stangor, Schaller 1996, Blaine 2017). The key element in this process, which constitutes the basis of stereotypes (not only ethnic ones), is the division into "us" and "them". In social sciences this division was noticed for the first time at the beginning of the previous century in the work of the American anthropologist, sociologist and historian William G. Sumner (1906), who coined the term **ethnocentrism** to describe the natural tendency of human communities to divide the world into "us" and "them" and at the same time to treat the in-group as a benchmark for judging the norms and traditions of other groups. As a consequence, any

foreign habits that differ from one's own are, by definition, suspicious and may not only be perceived as surprising but also silly, sometimes shocking or even abhorrent.

Frequently, language users want to express their attitude towards others by creating attributive ethnonyms. It seems that among the various linguistic schools, cognitive linguistics (Langacker 1987, Lakoff 1987, Geeraerts 2010) has the best conceptual apparatus to describe the phenomenon we are interested in. In particular, the mentalist approach to language, the dynamic, usage-based model of language, the encyclopedic concept of meaning, and finally the appreciation of the role of metaphor and metonymy in perceiving and describing the world (see, for example, Evans and Green 2006, Geeraerts 2010, *etc.*) mean that cognitive linguistics can draw on the contemporary sociological, psychological and anthropological research on stereotypes supplementing them at the same time.

Particular attention should be paid to the theory of **idealized cognitive models** (ICM) by George Lakoff (1987) and the theory of **conceptual metaphor** (most often including metonymy), initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). According to the former, the categories which language-users form in their minds which do not reflect reality accurately. Rather, they display **prototype effects**, which can be seen in the fact that individual categories are dominated by prototypical members, that is, those that are most numerous or most perceptually salient (Lakoff 1987: 70-71). This is very well illustrated by the example of ethnic stereotypes, which ignore the diversity of a particular community, reducing it to the prototypical representative[1]. The cognitive mechanism that is evident here is the metonymy of SUBCATEGORY FOR CATEGORY. This, in turn, leads us to conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), which assumes that metaphor and metonymy are not only stylistic means; they are cognitive mechanisms that help us to better understand the world around us, and which may assume a linguistic form (see Ungerer, Schmid 1996: 117–118).[2]

Thus, Lakoff (1987: 84–85) suggests that a stereotype is a type of idealized cognitive model. In principle, given the complexity of the concept of ethnicity, it is possible to interpret ethnic stereotypes as a cluster of metonymic submodels, each of which may provide access to the whole model (see M. Kudła 2012, 2016). Based on this interpretation, M. Kudła (2016) has identified fourteen submodels of the ETHNICITY model which led to the development of a number of attribute ethnonyms in the history of English.[3] Those are: LANGUAGE, NAME, PARAGON, BODY, CLOTHING, OCCUPATION, RELIGION, CUISINE, GEOGRAPHY, CHARACTER, INSTRUMENT, EMBLEM, SOCIAL STATUS, and NATURAL ENVIRONMENT. The above sub-models may be illustrated with the following examples, from different periods and variants of English: *oui-oui* ("French person", from Fr. "yes yes"), *Taffy* ("Welshman", diminutive of the name *David*), *Zorba* ("Greek", from a fictitious character taken from a novel), *redshank* ("Celt"), *kilt* ("Scotsman", from the traditional Scottish outfit), *cotton-picker* ("African-American"), *Red Sea pedestrian* ("Jew"), *bean-eater* ("Mexican"), *wop* ("Italian, Southerner", probably from It. *guappo* "bold"), *Norðman* ("Viking", lit. "man from the north"), *bow and arrow* ("Native American"), *harp* ("Irish"), *hick* ("Puerto Rican", literally "rural dweller with limited horizons") and *sand hopper* ("Arab").[4]

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1   In social psychology, it is referred to as the so-called outgroup homogeneity effect, which operates according to the principle: "we are diverse, they are the same" (Myers 1993: 400).

2   *Cf.* Black (1962: 37).

3   *Cf.* Fedorak (2017: 159–160).

4   Details concerning these examples as well as bibliographic information can be found in Kudła (2016).

Attributive ethnonyms and context

As we have mentioned above, ethnocentrism is a general tendency to perceive out-groups negatively. However, two important observations are worth making at this juncture. Firstly, ethnocentrism is not an inescapable principle; in some situations it will be more noticeable than in others. Secondly, foreign traditions may actually be viewed as attractive by a given group, which may even imitate them. Thus, ultimately it is the context, with its cultural, social and situational aspects, that decides which attribute surfaces in an ethnonym and what its range and axiological load is. Let us take a look at some of the already-mentioned examples.

There are three basic conditions which have to be met in order for an attributive ethnonym to develop (*cf.* Kudła 2016: 261):

      1. the awareness of the existence of a given ethnic group

      2. the emergence of a stereotype of the out-group

      3. the need to emphasize the differences by referring to an attribute

As we have seen, both for Poles and for the Americans Italy is stereotypically associated with pasta. The connotation, shared also by the British and other European cultures, dates back to the sixteenth century, when the foodstuff in question was not common outside Italy (Długosz-Kurczabowa 2008). Yet while in Polish, apart from the term *makaroniarz*, in use since the nineteenth century, we can only find the less richly attested twentieth-century *spageciarz* (Peisert 1992),[5] English has witnessed the appearance of eight pasta-based ethnonyms in its history. The terms in question are: *macaroni*, *spaghetti*, *spaghetti head*, *spaghetti-bender*, *spaghetti-eater*, *spaghetti-strangler*, *spag/spaggie* and *pasta breath* (see Spears 1991, Dalzell, Victor 2008, Simpson, Weiner 2009). Interestingly, only the originally nineteenth-century *macaroni* and the twentieth-century *spaghetti* are attested in British English. The remaining terms, all of which come from the twentieth century, are predominantly American English. The reason for the differences is that the United States, in contrast to Britain and Poland, witnessed a mass migration of Southern Europeans towards the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, it was most probably direct contact that inspired the creation of such a number of terms for a single ethnic group. Incidentally, this may also be the reason why the Americans no longer appear to use those terms. Indeed, nowadays—in the age of political correctness—Western civilization nurtures diversity, at least in public discourse[6]. Hence, attributive ethnonyms can now be found primarily in dictionaries of colloquial speech, slang, or insults[7], as well as on the Internet and as graffiti. This suggests that such terms belong to the lower registers of language, or even to something that Michael A.K. Halliday (1976) describes as **anti-language**, or the way of communicating within the **anti-society**, *i.e.*, people who feel excluded, rejected, or misunderstood by their fellow citizens or the authorities. In that case, the role of attributive ethnonyms would be to reinforce or replace physical aggression. We may therefore classify such terms as **dysphemisms**, words that, contrary to euphemisms, aim to aggravate an utterance (Allan, Burridge 1991).

However, this explanation does not account for the occurrence of all examples. An important clue about the context is the comment in one of the American dictionaries for the term *dothead* ("a person

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5   Lit. "spaghetti-eater".

6   Time will tell if the current migration crisis weakens political correctness.

7   See Spears (1991), Stomma (2000), Dalzell, Victor (2008), *etc.*

from India"), *macaroni* ("Italian", from the name of the type of pasta in the form of tubes), *spear-chucker* ("African American") and *taco* ("Mexican", from the name of a dish[8]). The comment reads: "intended as jocular, perceived as offensive" (Spears 1991). While this thirty years old explanation may no longer be valid for the Americans, it seems to hold true for many Polish people, at least in the context of *makaroniarz*, a possible reason being the fact that for most Poles direct contact with people of Italian descent is limited and thus they can hardly ever experience the reaction of the target group. What is more, the inhabitants of Poland do not harbour any resentment towards Italians, in which case bad intentions would be more likely. To conclude, while referring to the axiological load of attributive ethnonyms it is vital to distinguish between how such items are interpreted by source group and by the target group.

Obviously, this does not mean that the users of attributive ethnonyms always have pure intentions. In many (if not most) cases they are well aware of the negative connotations the use of such a term is bound to evoke in the target group. As a matter of fact, they may deliberately strengthen the term's derogatory load by modifying it. For example, while an air of scorn can be sensed in the above-mentioned twentieth-century Polish term *wielbłąd*, which alludes not only to the natural environment of the Middle East, but also to the alleged lower level of technology, it is not a match for the Am.E. *camel driver*, *camel jockey* and—especially—*camelfucker*, all of which developed in the last three decades of the twentieth century, when the U.S. got involved in the Middle Eastern affairs (Dalzell, Victor 2008). The latter term appears particularly offensive, since it adds a swearword and an innuendo suggesting a perverse sexual behaviour.

All of the above-mentioned ethnonyms have (or have had) their neutral, official counterparts. What happens, however, when two cultures that do not know each other meet? It turns out that in the lexicon of each of them is a gap that should be filled with an ethnonym describing the newly met community. Sometimes it is an attributive ethnonym ascribed consciously by a given group to the target group. A good example of this is the Slavonic ethnonym referring to Germany, which in the Polish language is *Niemcy*. There is no clear evidence concerning its origin, which may be the reason why it has an official status today. However, according to one of the most popular theories, the word was derived from the proto-Slavic **němъ*, which originally meant a mute person (see Boryś, 2005). Thus, from the point of view of ancient Slavs, Germans—originally Germanic people and perhaps foreigners in general—are those who do not speak (a comprehensible language). By contrast, Slavs would be those who use (comprehensible) words. While this interpretation of the origin of the latter ethnonym, which derives from the proto-Slavic *slovo* (ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European **kleu-* "hear, glorify") is not unanimously accepted (see Dove 2004: 257-263, Boryś 2005), it corresponds to the "us" vs. "them" opposition. Yet it may also happen that a culture takes ethnonym from another culture without being aware of its attributive origin. This happened in the case of the term which is the source of the Polish *Eskimos* and English *Eskimo*, which reached Europe in the sixteenth century thanks to Danish travellers. Interestingly, it does not come from the target group, but probably from one of the Algonquian languages, in which—according to the dominant theory—it meant "raw meat eaters" (Simpson, Weiner 2008). It was only in the 1970s that Canadian and American Eskimos, or *Inuit* as they call themselves, managed to replace the foreign term with their own in public discourse.

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8   This one has also sexual associations.

Conclusions

Language is a multi-faceted phenomenon and it seems that only an interdisciplinary approach allows for a better understanding of its functioning within a society. This is evident in the case of linguistic manifestations of ethnic otherness. Of course, this article contains only a handful of examples. They are, however, sufficient to show the role of cultural, social and situational aspects of context, without which it is impossible to make a comprehensive description of the analyzed phenomenon.

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