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GRAMMAR AND HISTORIOGRAPHY, OR THE LINGUISTIC
WORLDVIEW IN A HISTORIAN'S ACCOUNT*

Abstract. Despite growing interest in the relationship between language and culture, studies in the field of cultural linguistics and ethnolinguistics are dominated by analyses of the lexicon. This essay is an attempt to provide evidence for Humboldt's idea that "grammar reflects spiritual identity of nations more intimately than lexis". The subject of the present analysis is one of the important aspects of historical narrative: the influence of the grammatical category of tense in English on the linguistic worldview emerging from English-language historical narrative of a certain type and changes of this worldview in Polish translations, which result from systemic differences between English and Polish. Theoretical considerations focus on the domain of time, the basic dimension of historiography.

As the starting point, it is argued that conceptualisations of time reveal significant differences between languages and cultures, also relatively close ones, for example in the system of grammatical tenses and their relation to physical time. This is a problem of linguistic worldview: its roots lie on the one hand in divergent ways of understanding time, while on the other hand in its relationship to people who experience and speak about (the flow of) time.

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The article discusses the ways of conceptualising and expressing time in the two languages, as well as defining the basic types of historical narrative, distinguished with the aid of Langacker's notion of subjectification. The empirical part discusses selected excerpts from the book by the British historian Norman Davies *Beneath Another Sky. A Global Journey into History* in the original and in its Polish translation, *Na krańce świata. Podróż historyka przez historię*.

KEY WORDS: historical narrative; perspectivism; Present Perfect; *res gestae*; scientism; *scriptor rerum gestarum*; Simple Past; subjectification; time; tense

Historical truth is not what has happened; [...] it is what we judge to have happened. (Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*)

When it moves away from us, history becomes mythical; this is natural. (Anna Janko, *Mała zagłada*)¹

Introduction

In the “mainstream” linguistic theories of the twentieth century,² the role of grammar in building interpretations of reality was not among the leading themes. However, linguists and philosophers of language had long been aware of the relationships that link a given language with the culture of the community where it has emerged and where it continuously develops. Today the existence of these relationships is accepted by most theories of language. No wonder, then, that both the concept of linguistic worldview, for example as Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Weltansicht* and *Weltanschauung*,³ as well as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, discredited by twentieth-century scientists, are back in favour, with a pivotal position in today's cultural linguistics and ethnolinguistics. Although the majority of research projects and publications in the area focus on lexical semantics, the Editors of the volume 30 of *Ethnolinguistics* remind us of Humboldt's ground-breaking idea

¹ Unless stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish translated by Agnieszka Gicala. [editor's note]

² I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the earlier version of this article for their insightful comments and suggestions. Obviously, I am responsible for all errors and shortcomings that have remained.

³ Humboldt mainly uses *Weltansicht* and only very occasionally *Weltanschauung*, which becomes associated with ideology and mindsets rather than individuals and nations thinking and feeling and expressing themselves. [editor's note]

that it is “grammar [that] reflects spiritual identity of nations more intimately than lexis”. One hundred years later, this statement might have been the leitmotif of Benjamin Lee Whorf’s reflections on language, whose goal was to disprove the belief that concepts fundamental for human cognition are intuitive and “natural”, and therefore the ways of their linguistic expression should be treated as universals. According to Whorf, such concepts are space and time, to which he dedicated his famous works on the language of the Hopi Indians, pointing out that the falsehood which underlies the universalistic ideas results from the insufficient knowledge of languages that do not belong to the category of Standard Average European (SAE).

Space and time are two basic cognitive domains; they are present in the natural interaction of humans with the environment and are shaped under its influence; at the same time they are internally differentiated as a result of factors that determine that environment. Obviously, both are also the key factors of a narrative defined as “historical narrative”, the focus of this study. Of course, the observations below are neither comprehensive in their presentation of the problem, nor complete in terms of strategies employed by language speakers in the process of constructing such a narrative. Rather, I aim to show how the linguistic worldview entrenched in the grammatical category of tense in English influences the shape of the worldview emerging from a certain type of historical narrative and what changes of this worldview appear in the Polish translation of the English original as a result of systemic differences between English and Polish.

This essay is therefore not an attempt to modify the existing descriptions of the grammatical category of tense; it is a contribution to translation theory. Moreover, considering the type of narrative discussed here, I will focus on the domain of time, leaving any observations concerning space for another occasion.

The domain of time, i.e. “actions and events which exhibit the properties of chronology (or progression) and duration” (Evans 2007: 213), constitutes the basic dimension of historiography and is the main subject of interest for historiographers. For a translator of historical texts, the understanding of time is a source of grammatical problems that arise at the interface between two different languages: their lexical resources, morphology, and syntax. However, the translator’s struggle with language does not have to concern discrepancies as large, and as significant, as those that occur in the case of the SAE and non-SAE languages. Conceptualisations of the domain of time in individual languages within the SAE group also reveal significant differences, for example within the system of grammatical tenses and their relation to physical time. This is a problem of linguistic worldview: as I will

try to show below, it concerns the diverse ways of understanding time as an element of the (conventional) linguistic worldview, as well as understanding its relation to people who experience and speak about it.

Time: conceptualisation

The problem of the relationship between physical time and the linguistic system of grammatical tenses is naturally a complex one. In the linguistic worldview entrenched in the two languages discussed here, English and Polish, there are two identical basic conceptual models: the moving time model and the moving ego model (Evans 2007: 64, 147-150, 214). Both are egocentric because both meanings are located in relation to the present, which is always “someone’s” present, and therefore perceived as such from a certain vantage point. In the first model, the immovable viewer, hidden or explicitly coded in a linguistic expression, experiences events from the vantage point anchored in their “present”; the observed event emerges from the future, passes by the viewer, and disappears in the past. The passage of time is therefore conceptualised as movement (subjective and abstract).

Similar egocentric subjectivity characterises the moving ego model: here the viewer moves in time conceptualised as an area in which individual moments are points with a specific location. Also in this case, the viewer conceptualises events from the vantage point corresponding to their own subjectively understood “present”. This time, however, it is possible to adopt the universal perspective, and hence the vantage point devoid of any reference to a particular viewer (or viewers) and, consequently, to understand time in absolute terms (cf. Radden and Dirven 2007: 202). This is a case of “spatiotemporal displacement” (Langacker 2008: 75). This model finds its implementation in objective measurement systems of time: the division of the “time space” into conventional units. At the source of both models, however, lies the belief that time has the nature of a physical entity, a substance that flows smoothly and uninterruptedly from the future to the past. It is a smooth movement in time and space, an “evolving reality” (Radden and Dirven 2007: 202ff.), which in everyday communication is relativised to the viewer who either follows the flow of the stream or swims against the current.

Time: linguistic expression

On the plane of linguistic expressions, the domain of time is captured through the grammatical category of tense: the basic function of grammatical

tenses (in languages that have them, such as English and Polish) is to ground an event or situation in (physical) time. In the prototypical act of communication, grounding is effected by the time of the speech event. The relationship between speech time and event time is aptly captured in Langacker's Cognitive Grammar (see e.g. Langacker 2008),⁴ which I will refer to below.

Describing the category of time in relation to the moment of speaking, Cognitive Grammar distinguishes three simple grammatical tenses (called deictic tenses), whereby users capture their understanding of physical time: past, present, and future. The present tense places an event in the time of speaking about it, the past tense does so in the time prior to the moment of speaking, and the future tense – in a time later than the moment of speaking. Thus, the present tense signals the reality present *hic et nunc*, the past tense signals known reality, while the future tense symbolises projected reality (Radden and Dirven 2007: 204). An objective historical narrative is by definition a story of a known reality, therefore it is the domain of (grammatical) past tenses. Here the repertoire of the English language offers a choice between the deictic Simple Past tense and complex tenses, especially the Present Perfect tense.⁵ The Simple Past tense has three semantic properties: it focuses attention (the author's, the recipient's) on events belonging to the past (established from the vantage point of both of these instances), situates them in the "known past" and, significantly, it is assumed that "[t]here is a time gap between a past situation and the present, i.e. past situations are felt to be 'exclusive' of the present time" (Radden and Dirven 2007: 219). In contrast to the Simple Past tense, the Present Perfect as the only one among the English past tenses shows a past event as having significance and consequences for the present. Hence, it focuses attention on the present; it does refer to past events but makes an assessment from the vantage point of their present significance. "The present" is the author's deictic centre, and the choice of the described events and their assessment are subjective (cf. Radden and Dirven 2007: 212-214). In the formal category structure (in such expressions as, for example, *have experienced*) the verb *have* is regarded as a remnant of the original meaning, expressing the subjective sense of physical control (Langacker 1999: 187).

⁴ This model confirms the validity of earlier intuitions of linguists and philosophers of language, cf. e.g. Reichenbach 1947.

⁵ The fact that the English Simple Past involves the past tense of a verb in simple aspect, whereas the Present Perfect construction is in fact a combination of the past tense and the perfective aspect is not directly relevant to the present discussion.

Historical narrative

Historical narrative has been the subject of a vast number of theoretical studies; a brief summary of just the most important of them exceed the scope of this essay. Let us therefore make the following, perhaps banal assumption: the historian's goal is to present past facts, while the goal of the narrative created by the historian is to combine them into a coherent and intelligible whole.

Historical narrative is not unique in its relation to non-linguistic reality: this relation always depends on how we understand the world around us. Historical narrative is described in the literature of the subject in the context of several dichotomous categories. Thus, it can be assumed that events are in themselves deprived of a narrative structure. This is an assumption close to the Hopi understanding of the universe and reflected in their language (Whorf 1956), but also, for example, consistent with the postulates of a major theoretician of historiography, Hayden White (e.g. 1973), which underlie the narrativist philosophy of history. However, it may also be assumed that facts in their very essence constitute a chronological story. In this approach, represented by most contemporary historians, an understanding of the world is expressed in the grammatical structure of such languages.

The distinction between *narrativist* and "*anti-narrativist*" history (a realistic attitude, according to Tokarz 2005), is related to another dichotomy, defining the possible attitudes of historians and distinguished by theoreticians of historiography. The Israeli historian Ilan Pappé writes about this difference of attitudes somewhat radically: "historians are divided into those who believe that they reconstruct the past objectively and those who present their own interpretation of events" (in Smoleński 2017). This is the opposition that the theoretician of historiography Jan Pomorski (2004) describes as the difference between the *scientific* and the *perspectivist* stance.

The former stance aims at objectivity, which requires that the historian be totally absent in their own narrative: the historian allows facts to speak and the powerful forces of history will emerge from behind by themselves (Leopold von Ranke, in Pomorski 2004: 13). This seems totally unrealistic: like every human being, the author of a historical narrative has a certain body of knowledge and is capable of perceiving connections between facts, so as to produce his or her understanding of reality in all possible time frames. Each description of events necessarily becomes his or her interpretation, and in this sense is a translation *sui generis*. Therefore, in opposition to scientism, an attitude that is sometimes regarded as postmodernist has emerged, where the assumption that a historian has no religion, no homeland, and no family is considered completely unrealistic (Martin Chladenius, in Pomorski 2004: 12).

At this point, it is worth noting that the perspectivist stance in historiography is similar to the assumptions of the theory of language known under the name of linguistic cognitivism, which in place of twentieth-century scientific “meticulous objectivism”, proposes that language be considered in terms of an “art of interpretation”. Anyone who uses language for the purpose of constructing a narrative (and therefore also for the purpose of everyday communication), similarly to an author of a historical narrative, combines knowledge with imagination. Like any narrative, historical narrative has a subjective character and is an individual creation of a historian: the historian “transmits their own vision of the world and of people” (cf. Tokarz 2005).

One of the distinctions proposed in this approach is that into the historian *sensu stricto* and the historian as chronicler. The former adopts the perspective of *a fait accompli*, the latter assumes the vantage point of *hic et nunc*. The former results in a factual report: *res gestae*; the latter in *scriptor rerum gestarum*, at the basis of reportage and a hybrid genre called literary reportage. The journalist Mariusz Szczygieł refers to these two strategies as, respectively, factography and a description of “states of the soul” (Szczygieł 2017). The states of the soul are, of course, very personal states, and this type of narration reveals the author to the reader, along with the former’s feelings, knowledge, system of values, socio-cultural determinants, etc. In other words, “[r]eality creates facts but a text is created by the author’s attitude to these facts” (Stefan Kozicki on reportage, quoted in Szczygieł 2017).

It seems that this last opposition is a good characterisation of one of the main traditions of English-language historiography. In a dispute with Mariusz Szczygieł, the journalists Ludwika Włodek and Artur Domoślawski point out that “English-style reportage is written in the first person: the narrator is visible but downplayed because what is important are the characters, the circumstances, and the story” (Włodek and Domoślawski 2017). It seems that, *mutatis mutandis*, this statement is also true of a significant part of the British historical narrative, constructed in the tradition of great historians, Alan John P. Taylor or Edward Gibbon, who wrote literary reportages of their own kind. Such is also the work of Taylor’s outstanding student, the British historian Norman Davies: indeed, his work has been the inspiration for this essay and provided illustrative examples for the analysis.

On the basis of those criteria, it may be assumed that Norman Davies’ historical narrative is perspectivist and chronicle-like, which makes it similar to the “ordinary” narrative as an element of colloquial everyday communication. Its shape, similarly to that of most stories language users produce for the purpose of communication, is significantly influenced by a category as fundamental as it is difficult to define: point of view.

Point of view: subjectification

Like perspective, point of view or viewpoint, occupies a prominent place in contemporary descriptions of language, especially those with a cognitivist orientation. In Ronald Langacker's *Cognitive Grammar*, vantage point (Langacker's term for point of view) is defined similarly to Bühler's *origo*: as the place where the sender of the message is located, determined and defined by the parameters of space and time. As in the process of creating a historical vision (which, of course, grammarians are not concerned with), the same objective situation, a (historical) fact, can be observed and described from various vantage points, which determines the shape of the emerging narrative. In a standard communicative situation, i.e. *hic et nunc*, the vantage point is the current position of the narrator in space, whereas time is defined in relation to the moment of speaking.

In Langacker's model, the categories of perspective and vantage point are closely related to the opposition between the properties of grammatical structures, captured in terms of subjectification.⁶ Structures subordinated to the principle of maximum subjectification put the speaker in the position of someone whose presence is not in itself an object of conceptualisation (simply speaking, the speaker is not talking about themselves). Such a "mediated" presence is not tantamount to absence (Langacker 1999: 297 ff., 2008: 77). The journalists Włodek and Domośławski clearly recognize what for Langacker is one of the essential features of language: an act of speaking can be constructed in a way that the narrator is visible though at the same time s/he remains hidden. As I will try to show below, such an indirect way of constructing a message is characteristic of the kind of narrative that can be called *perspectivist-chronicle*.

A linguist cannot, of course, claim the right to a comprehensive description of the *perspectivist-chronicle* stance in historical texts. We see the narrator not only *via* the language of the author, but already in the choice of the topic or the selection of the information obtained. According to Tokarz (2005), "history depends on choice", but a description of the criteria for such choices exceeds the bounds of a linguist's competence and interest, as does the presentation of the hierarchy of facts, cause-and-effect relations, principles adopted for the construction of narratives or the broad socio-cultural context. These aspects have to be left to specialists. A linguist's possibilities

⁶ In this discussion, I adopt Langacker's understanding of subjectification (e.g. Langacker 1999). Arguments for such a choice, rather than for selecting an alternative approach proposed by Elizabeth Traugott, are presented by Langacker himself (1999: 393–394, fn. 1).

are much more modest in nature. However, by treating the selected illustrative sample as a representative of “narrative as such”, a linguist can show that:

a) the presence of the author in the narrative, especially in the perspectivist-chronicle historical narrative, is marked through specific linguistic means;

b) the British quasi-reportage tradition preserves contemporary English linguistic worldview, in its British variety.

Case study

It might seem that the basic tense used in the historical narrative should be the “objective” Simple Past tense. This is indeed the case. However, in the narration analysed here, the “subjective” Present Perfect is also relatively frequent. The examples quoted below come from a computer printout of Norman Davies’s *Beneath Another Sky* (published as Davies 2017a), whose Polish translation appeared under the title *Na krańce świata* (2017b). They illustrate the differences in English- and Polish-language narratives that result from systemic differences in the system of grammatical tenses.

(1) a. Nonetheless, the fact remains that by far the largest and most horrific campaigns of violence **have been perpetrated** by Europeans at home rather than abroad. (ND_01, i.e., page 01 of the printout)

b. Pozostaje jednak faktem, że zdecydowanie największe i najstraszliwsze kampanie przemocy Europejczycy **prowadzili** nie poza swoimi granicami, lecz u siebie. (Davies 2017b: 63)

In addition to stating the historical fact that campaigns of violence in Europe took place, the Present Perfect tense in passage (1) expresses the author’s subjective belief that those campaigns had an impact on the history of various parts of the world. The Polish translation, despite the form of *frequentativum* (*prowadzili*, lit. ‘would conduct/pursue’), “objectivises” the narrative.

(2) a. ...almost all governments in the modern period **have sought** to promote a single language of state in opposition to all the other vernacular tongues that **happen** to be spoken (ND_01)

b. ...niemal wszystkie nowożytnie rządy **staraly się promować** jakiś jeden język państwowy, w odróżnieniu od wszystkich innych języków lokalnych, którymi **mówiła** ludność na danym obszarze. (Davis 2017b: 65)⁷

⁷ Words crossed out in the English text show corrections made by the author; words crossed out in the Polish text show interventions of the editor of the volume.

In example (2), the process of promoting individual languages of state still continues (or at least its effects continue) from the author's viewpoint. In the "objectivized" Polish narrative, this process appears to be finished. Moreover, the editor of the text changes the present tense in the subordinate clause to the past tense, ultimately "sealing" the objective character of the narrative.

Access to subsequent versions of the English-language printout allows for interesting observations. Consider example (3):

(3) a. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus Christ said "those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword." This is one of many precepts that nominally Christian Europeans **chose have frequently chosen** to ignore. (ND_01)

b. W ewangelii według św. Mateusza Jezus Chrystus mówi, że kto mieczem wojuje, ten od miecza ginie – jest to jedna z tych z zasad, które teoretycznie chrześcijańska Europa **często postanawiała** ignorować. (Davies 2017b: 64)

The author himself changed the "objective" Simple Past tense to the "subjective" Present Perfect, perhaps influenced by current reports (e.g. on Syria) which continue the chain of historical events.

(4) a. Many ~~regions of Europe~~ **have all been** relatively weak and poor, and many ~~European~~ countries of Europe **were** poor and weak, and **have often been dominated and exploited** by their neighbours, in ways very similar to those **suffered** by overseas colonies. (ND_01)

b. Wiele regionów i krajów Europy **było słabych i biednych**, często **zdominowanych i wykorzystywanych** przez sąsiadów w sposób bardzo podobny do wyzysku uprawianego w zamorskich koloniach. (Davies 2017b: 58)

In example (4), the author introduced an opposite kind of change, "objectivizing" the narrative, thus detaching the time of poverty and weakness of "many regions of Europe" from his own and the reader's present. In the original text, the Present Perfect forms referring to the domination and exploitation of the "regions and countries of Europe" had imposed a (subjective) interpretation, which links poverty and weakness with the policy of the neighbours-partitioners.

(5) a. Of the 45 member states of the Council of Europe, only a dozen, or roughly a quarter, **have** ever **enjoyed** overseas possessions. (ND_01)

b. Spośród 45 krajów ~~należących~~ **dziś do** członkowskich Rady Europejskiej tylko tuzin, a więc mniej więcej jedna czwarta, ~~cieszyło się posiadaniem~~ kiedykolwiek **posiadało** zamorskie posiadłości. (Davies 2017b: 57)

As in the previous examples, translating the original Present Perfect tense as the Polish past tense removes the subjective reference to the implied effects of possessing a colony. The editor's redaction, i.e. removal of the imperfective aspect of the verb *cieszyło się* (lit. 'enjoyed, were happy to')

and the time adverb *dziś* ‘today’, definitely shifted this part of the narrative to the past and annulled the indirect references to the present.

The examples analysed here come from just one text produced by one author and cover only a tiny fragment of the vast territory of grammar. No references are made here to other phenomena that endow a narrative with certain characteristic features, such as exponents of modality, the opposition between reality and the now fashionable *irrealis* in accounts of alternative history, iconicity as a semantic aspects of tenses, or the opposition between the external and internal perspective, expressed through verbal aspect. Discussion of these areas of grammar and their role in shaping the narrative must be left to another occasion.

Conclusions

Limiting an analysis to the works of just one author obviously does not entitle anyone to make wide-ranging theoretical generalisations. However, one does feel justified in hypothesizing that the English grammar (more precisely, the nature of grammatical tenses) favours the perspectivist-chronicle historical narrative and that specific features of that narrative type reveal not only the individual worldview of the author but also the conventional view, entrenched in the language of the author’s speech community.

At this point, only a fragmentary summation can be proposed. According to James Underhill, one of the pioneers of research on ethnosyntax, language is not a permanent product or tool, but the driving force of the emergence of both communal and individual worldviews (2012: 40). The constituents of a specific linguistic worldview are formed by two important elements of human interaction with other people and with reality at large: (i) the structure of the story of the world being told and (ii) the subjectivity of its author. The historical narrative is a good example of such a story. It seems that one of its types, the perspectivist-chronicle historical narrative (in English) reflects the position of the human subject as someone who wields control over the world and subjects it to their own judgment. The use of Present Perfect forms analysed above illustrates precisely that – as well as shaping the historical narrative in the British tradition *sensu lato*. Many other aspects of language conform this, such as the orthographic convention of capitalising the pronoun *I*, the subjective expression of judgments and emotions (*I think x*, *I am sad...*),⁸ etc. As can be seen in the Polish

⁸ Anna Wierzbicka draws attention to the fact that the multitude of “epistemic verbal phrases” such as *I suppose*, *I assume*, *I imagine...* is a characteristic feature of modern

translations of Davies' narrative, as well as in the intrusions of the book's editor, the Polish narrative is different: it is dominated by the (perfective) past tense, distanced from the present, while judgments and emotions "happen" to people who do not have conscious control over them (e.g. *zdaje mi się...* 'it seems to me', *jest mi smutno...*, lit. 'it is sad to me'). Those intuitions are corroborated in the course of reading professional narrative texts in both languages: while in English personal forms and subjective references to the present time predominate, Polish narratives contain many more impersonal forms and constructions that objectivise the account. Anna Wierzbicka (e.g. 2002, 2006) convincingly proves that certain meanings are so important to members of a given speech community that they do not only become lexicalised, and thus "attached" to individual lexemes, but undergo grammaticalisation and become entrenched in the structural patterns of the language.

On a lighter note, readers of Davies' books think of them as a "good read". Perhaps this is because, contrary to "academic" narrative, the colloquial narrative of everyday communication has a perspectivist and chronicle-like character, is conducted from a specific, individual vantage point, and directly relates to the reality as we know it. Let me finish with an anecdote. At a meeting with the author, one of Davies' fans asked him once if his narrative would be different if it were written in a language without the Present Perfect tense. So far, the question has remained unanswered.

Translated by Agnieszka Gicala

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