Cognitive Dominance as a Driving Force of Concept Evolution in Arthurian Fiction

Larissa Manerko, Anastasia Sharapkova
Lomonosov Moscow State University
wordfnew@mail.ru, warapkova@mail.ru

Keywords: Cognitive Semantics, cognitive dominance, conceptual domains, linguistic means development.

The complex multilevel concepts of a particular socio-cultural and historical importance evolve embracing new knowledge and restructuring the old one. The integrative cognitive analysis embracing cognitive semiotics and semantics as well as discourse analysis establishes that the stable elements of these conceptual entities form the core, while the variable ones – the periphery. This structure is repeated on the linguistic level with the core elements usually more prominent and frequent. However, after completing the cognitive analysis of a particular concept the question of concept identity in different periods as well as the driving forces behind its evolution arises. We aim to show how the concept develops and how its content could be operationalized through linguistic means.

In our presentation we analyze several works of fiction (T. Malory "King Arthur", M. Twain "A Connecticut Yankee…", B. Cornwall "Excalibur") featuring King Arthur – the legendary mythological hero. The analysis of adjectives, the balance between verbs of action and cognitive processes, the possessive case and other linguistic means portraying the main character are used in the key scenes, and allowed to come up with a set of major characteristics of this concept. The basic characteristics comprising this image (power, heroism, ability of being the ruler, bravery, and ability to fight) remain at the core and are stable in all three works. No matter the constituent parts of King Arthur description seem to be rather close yet verbalized by various linguistic means; we subconsciously perceive each new interpretation as a novel one. We suggest looking for the answer in the general cognitive mechanisms mapping new knowledge of the world into the already established structures.

In our research we devise the notion of a "conceptual dominant" based on the fundamental dichotomy of human processing of information: some features acquire particular significance, while the others serve as the conceptual background. The same notion or situation could be perceived differently giving rise to systematically different linguistic coverage. This has been advanced in cognitive linguistic studies in the concept of *salience* useful for semantics and syntax (Geeraerts, 2006), *reference point* (Langacker 1991), and *figure* (Talmy, 1983).

Particularly, differentiating the profiled figure and its background as a fundamental process of meaning construction over the continuum of language means development - turn out to be applicable. We show how the conceptual dominant gets formed in a socio-cultural system, orchestrating the semantic and syntactic means to verbalize a concept. The patterns of cognitive dominance are revealed in longer stretches of discourse. Our analysis of the fiction works of different periods indicates that the medieval mindset represented by romance discourse in Malory developed the image of King Arthur into its full and glory force with *nobility* as the salient feature (based on its frequency and semantic complexity in the text). Twain minimized the concept structure as much as possible since Arthur is certainly not the major focus of his attention. He reconceptualized *heroism* of Arthur displayed in an unusual way – in the 'fighting' against smallpox and death described through language of combat. Language of Cornwall makes Arthur archaic through semantic characterisation of all relational features in the conceptual domains, yet the dualism of profiling two qualities brought to the fore seem to be very modern, pertaining to *loneliness* of a strong and responsible ruler. The core qualities in the analysed novels distant in time remain to a substantial extent the same. The contrast is brought by the conceptual dominant as it profiles the relationship between the core and periphery.

Thus, the linguistic and cognitive construct of the conceptual dominant in the conceptual domains brings to the limelight only those semantic features that are based on facets of knowledge making them salient for the particular period of time and against the core - background. In conclusion, we suggest that the dominant mechanism is universal for any system keeping up with the dynamism of human consciousness.

References
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