

Title: Heads or Tails: Clarifying Cultural Choices

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Knowledge of culture-specific behavior can be helpful and is sometimes crucial for successful cross-cultural communication. Linguistic structures often serve as clues to behavior. They shape images of a culture and communicative strategies between peoples.

In Russian, the impersonal expression is one such structure. It uses the oblique rather than the nominative case of nouns (and pronouns) that in English are in “subject” position. Impersonal expressions manifest one of the most influential culture-specific “key concepts” of Russian, what Wierzbicka calls a “no-control-over-the-world attitude.” In this scheme, feelings or conditions in the subject position – such as Мне холодно “I am cold,” but more literally “Cold afflicts/besets me” – demonstrate that the real world is something independent of, even antithetical to, human desires and will: we have no choice, this is our lot. Some find in this lack of choice a Russian disbelief in active possibility, suspicion of rationality, unwillingness to compete, submissiveness to fate.

Studies in cultural orientation by Anderson, Hecht, and others offer another interpretation, which language specialists can apply linguistically. The standard-to-English SVO structure Я замёрз “I am cold” suggests that I stand at odds with nature, but also even with it in force. Мне холодно tests your sympathy with my position. The nominative and oblique cases, therefore, represent two sides of one coin, two attitudes about self and world. The nominative construction conveys competition and willfulness, the oblique construction a desire to find harmony and balance in tightly-knit societies.

This paper explores a linguistic strategy for using the language of “not having control.” I will present evidence of Russian expressions misunderstood by other cultures, then demonstrate speech patterns that lead to success or failure in communication. A faithful deconstruction of Russian structure can, I believe, contribute to successful communicative strategies and culturally-aware communication.

References:

- Hecht, M. 2004. Communication, Identity and Relationships: Theory and Practice. Unpublished paper presented at Language-Action Perspective on Communication Modelling: 9th International Conference, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, June 2-3, 2004.
- Wierzbicka, A. 1992. Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations. New York: Oxford University Press.