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COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CONCEPTS "BEAUTY"/"SCHÖNHEIT" (BASED ON MULTIPLE-RESPONSE FREE ASSOSSIATIONS OF AMERICANS AND GERMANS)

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ABSTRACT

The article presents some results of association tests that help to study how the communicative environment influences a person's view of the world and the ability to resist imposed stereotypes. American and German participants have been asked to give responses to the stimulus word 'beauty'/'schönheit' without any limits of time and number of associations. According to the experiment, special attention of the respondents is given to inner beauty which is considered to be more essential than outer one. This method also reveals sociocultural differences between the two groups of people as well as individual differences between the respondents.

Key words: concept, beauty, schönheit, multiple-response free association experiment, American English, German

1. INTRODUCTION

The attractiveness of the "beauty" concept for comparative analysis is identified by the richness of its components and its connectedness to the cultural sociological aspect of the research.

Being a universal phenomenon in people's lives, the concept of "beauty" is universal for the native speakers of American English and German. However, the linguistic interpretations of this concept differ in the languages under comparison, because its connotative and associative characteristics are original and based on mental images that are essential to a specific cultural group (1).

The word "beauty" is mentioned almost in every literary work (2 - 7). However, in literature the image is transmitted through the personage's outlook and is not being the author's personal experience. Therefore, the attempt of researching on this concept through the analysis of respondents' answers to the stimulus words "beauty"/ "schönheit" has been made in this work. This approach allows identifying the imaginative component of the "beauty" concept on the basis of the native speakers' descriptive perception, considering subjective opinions and, having analyzed them, defining common tendencies in the word's concept construction (8).

According to the book 'Experimental Psychology', the experimental parameters, such as single/multiple response and free/controlled character of associations, are combined differently depending on the aims of the investigation (9). In our experiment respondents gave multiple-response free associations, not being restricted to answering with just one word to the stimulus word.

It is known that when there is some restriction, absence of time for thinking respondents give the most typical answers, while increasing the time results in a bigger variety of the given answers and appearance of unusual even unique associations (8).

The results of such experiments and their comparative analysis can help in composing bilingual dictionaries. According to A. Yusupova, "they allow you to document the role and place of those or other languages in the lexical space, the relationship of such languages, including their relations with other languages" (10).

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our multiple-response free association experiment has been carried out among people belonging to different age groups working in different spheres.

The residents of the State of Arizona took part in the research. The participants were asked: "What is beauty?"

The most interesting responses are given below:

"Beauty is what elevates and inspires you from the mundane and routine".

"Beauty comes from within. It's in the eye of the beholder".

"Beauty is the look on my students' faces when they understand what I'm teaching them. Beauty is the hazy orange sunset you can experience from South Mountain in Phoenix, Arizona. When your children give you a loving hug is truly beautiful".

"Beauty and nature are the gifts that God has given us. Lake Tahoe is just like Haven. When I first saw it, it truly looked like it was closer to Haven than the rest of the world. Beauty in an individual comes from within their heart. It's their attitude, graciousness, dedication to who they care about and love".

"Over the years, beauty has come to mean two different things to me. First, there is outer beauty, how something or someone looks on the outside. For example, pretty hair, nice eyes, or simply an attractive appearance. Second, is inner beauty. I feel the beauty of someone as a person, or soul, is shown by the way they treat their fellow human being. This beauty shows through in acts of kindness or by being empathetic or understanding, not cruel or judgmental".

"Watching while my son helps his little sister with a story or ball, or puzzle. Hiking upon a field of wildflowers that I wasn't expecting – wow! Infinite hugs and kisses from my daughter. Hiking in Washington state and seeing deer amble by me swiftly and quietly. The absolute stillness and quietness of snowfall on my street".

The descriptive notion of "beauty" in the following statement needs to be considered not just as purely subjective, it is a scientific standpoint of a linguist. The analysis of the previous descriptions of the concept "beauty" is given here as well:

"It's been said that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", claiming that beauty is completely subjective. But I disagree. I believe there are elements common to that which most, if not all, people find beautiful.

A sunset on the ocean, for instance, is a sight that everyone I know finds to be a thing of beauty. There is an objective standard for that which we find to be beautiful. It may involve color, form, shape, context, sound, etc., but when the combination of these elements are just so, the result is beauty.

Of course, the above-mentioned declaration applies only to the aesthetic or physical beauty, but the concept of beauty isn't limited to the aesthetic.

We find beauty in the soul. We find it in music, the spoken word, and in the unspoken expression of sentiment for each other.

In short, I think that "beauty" is anything that causes us to appreciate or recognize the good in something or someone".

Having analyzed the statements, we can build up a definite pattern of images, on the basis of which it is possible to figure out the commonly accepted national image, i.e. the concept of "beauty" which is accepted in American society.

The perceptive features of the descriptive component of the "beauty" concept appear in the following notions:

1) "It's in the eye of the beholder", "the look on my students' faces", "the hazy orange sunset", "nature, lake Tahoe", "outer beauty, pretty hair, nice eyes, or simply an attractive appearance", "a field of wildflowers, deer (symbolizes fauna)", "absolute stillness and quietness of snowfall".

All of the above mentioned comparisons are perceptive images, because the image itself is built on the basis of the sensory perception. In this case, visual images are brought to the fore, those that a human-being perceives with organs of vision.

It is possible to make a conclusion that the concept of "beauty" for Americans is based mainly on visual images. In general in the images suggested by the survey participants, the themes of nature and landscape appeared. In some cases the exterior attractiveness of a human or objects were mentioned.

2) "When your children give you a loving hug", "attitude, graciousness, dedication to who they care about and love", "acts of kindness..., being empathetic or understanding", "watching my son helps his little sister", "infinite hugs and kisses from my daughter".

Some of the above given images are based on tactile perception (hugs). The concept of “beauty” itself in these expressions is connected either way with the family theme and relationships between people, be they tactile or mental.

When analyzing this kind of the descriptive component, a peculiar subjectivity of the concept becomes obvious. In this case “beauty” is associated not just with something that is accessible to the most of the people (in the first case – the beauty of the nature is accessible for perception by the sighted), but also with something that only some people have. It is about the family and the people we love. The images are based on personal experience, mature outlook.

Some of the participants did not mention about the beauty in the relationships between them and their children, because there were no children in their families, so they did not have the experience of being a parent. These participants talked in more abstract images associated with the spiritual qualities.

One of the survey participants sums up the above given opinions. This conclusion has the theoretical base given in the first chapter, namely:

“The concept of beauty isn’t limited to the aesthetic. We find beauty in the soul”.

In other words, both kinds of the image (perceptive and cognitive) occur in the descriptive perception of the “beauty” concept among the English-speaking participants. The perceptive kind appears in aesthetic, physical beauty. It prevails in national perception. The cognitive kind appears in abstract notion, in spiritual beauty.

The most detailed consideration of beauty in the United States is represented in the following view:

“We admire young people who are thin and youthful in appearance. Often into trends and outrageous expression. This beauty is often only skin deep. This opinion offends some and pleases others. As we mature, thin is still popular along with credit given to intelligence, confidence and life experiences. And also being “stylish” with a more sophisticated look. Again, this opinion might offend some and please others. And with more life experience, wisdom and freedom are incorporated into the above.

At this time, beauty may be recognized as the spirit of the beauty within; one who may express one's own outer appearance in a more authentic way. The confidence to reveal one's true self and joy for life without fear of judgment. Of course there are always exceptions to the above comments with trends, costumes and a serious intention to wear the latest fashions, sometimes borne out of an insecurity to “fit in,” or obsessed with always making a fashion statement. Thin is still desired.

But as a society, I am hopeful we will finally begin to appreciate the inner beauty along with the outer appearance.

For in the end, it's truly a personal decision of how we see ourselves; who we are, how we feel and what we believe to be attractive for our own selves. Without concern of criticism or judgment. Again, this opinion may offend some and please others!”

Mary Pat gives a title “Beauty in America” to her response, i.e. it is a description of the commonly accepted image in this country, so it is not purely subjective.

In the above given material we find the approval of the judgment about what beauty is for the people, whose mother tongue is American English, what they mean by the concept “beauty” and which images figure in these concepts. In American English perceptive images prevail over the cognitive ones.

However, is the situation in the German language similar to that in American English? When considering descriptive components of the “beauty” concept in German we used the resources of the German website gutefrage.net (11). Also the survey was carried out among the visitors of the website, which was for learning different languages and direct communication with the native speakers of the language that one was interested in - busuu.com (12) (we were interested in the opinions of Germans). The website visitors were asked the following question:

“Was versteht man unter Schönheit?”

The following descriptions of the concept ‘schönheit’ can be found in the responses:

“Schönheit ist vergänglich – die inneren Werte bleiben erhalten. Damit ist alles gesagt”.

“Schönheit ist nur oberflächlich, man(n) dreht sich nach einer hübschen Blondin um, aber für mehr hat man eben doch kein Interesse”.

“Schönheit gibt es nicht und ist eine Erfindung des Menschen. Nur die inneren Werte zählen”.

“Schönheit fängt in den Medien an und geht weiter bis zur Grundschule. Mittlerweile gibt es schon nichts wichtigeres mehr als schön zu sein. Dabei gibt es ja noch nichtmal eine wirkliche Definition von “schönheit!”

“Es kommt auf den Betrachter an! Manch einer würde sagen: “Wie hässlich sie ist!” – “Oh sie ist schön, zwar nicht von außen, aber von innen!” Und manchmal wird Schönheit wirklich überbewertet!”

Many of the respondents cited the aphorisms of famous people in their answers:
 “Die Männer beteuern immer, sie lieben die innere Schönheit der Frau - komischerweise gucken sie aber ganz woanders hin (Marlene Dietrich)”.

“Tugenden und Mädchen sind am schönsten, ehe sie wissen, dass sie schön sind (Ludwig Börne)”.

There were some respondents whose answers contained the descriptive component that we were interested in. Here are some of the most specific statements:

“Schönheit ist die Seele des Menschen. Denn die wahre Schönheit kommt von innen, äußere Schönheit hingegen ist nur Schein und vergänglich”.

“Das Ideal ist schön, finde Schönheit wird zu hoch gesetzt! Ausserdem findet jeder jemand anderen schön und schöner als den anderen”.

“Schönheit ist Moral, Freundlichkeit und Intelligenz. Ich sehe die äußere Schönheit der Dinge. Aber Menschliche Schönheit spielt keine Rolle”.

Just like the first survey, the second one has the same result. We witness a unique phenomenon – the image that is prevalent on the national level. Absolutely all of the survey participants, while defining ‘beauty’, refer to human beauty.

Special attention is drawn to the inner and outer beauty, what is more important. Most of the respondents agree on the fact that inner beauty is far more important asset than outer beauty whose time limit is restricted.

Form the above given comments the descriptive component can be identified according to the following parameters:

- images are based on the perception by the organs of sense (in this case the result of the observation is a visual image);
- the concept is based on the images of abstract units (consideration of the inner values).

Therefore, in spite of the overbalance of the visual images, it can be concluded that in German “beauty” is revealed through two types of images – perceptive and cognitive.

It has been found out that the average statistical concept of beauty in German includes the descriptive component which is contained in human beauty. However, we cannot claim that the Germans just “see” the beauty.

The perception penetrates almost all the definitions given by the survey participants. Nevertheless, in most of the responses the collision of the perceptive image with the abstract one is observed. Therefore both kinds of the descriptive component are equal in the perception of “beauty” in Germany. The conclusion is also based on the commonly accepted image that the beauty comes from within.

On the basis of the surveys carried out among the residents of the United States and Germany, it is possible to compare the concepts “beauty”/ “schönheit” and its descriptive components in the American English and German language in the table given below:

Table 1. The results of the experiment of the multiple-response experiment with the stimulus words “beauty”/“schönheit”

	Concept “beauty”	Concept “schönheit”
Descriptive components	1) nature, landscape, fauna; 2) family, hugs; 3) abstract values (moral and ethical). Indirectly: aesthetics, human beauty.	1) abstract values, interior; 2) human, appearance.
Images	1) “the hazy orange sunset”, “nature, lake Tahoe”, “a field of wildflowers”, “deer”, “snowfall”. 2) “children”, “a loving hug”, “watching my son helps his little sister”, “infinite hugs and kisses from my daughter”; 3) “attitude, graciousness, dedication”, “care”, “love”, “acts of kindness”, “being empathetic or understanding”. Also mentioned: “outer beauty, pretty hair, nice eyes, an attractive appearance”.	1) “die inneren Werte”, “schön von innen”, “die Seele des Menschen”, “Moral, Freundlichkeit und Intelligenz”; 2) “schön von außen”, “äußere Schönheit der Ding”.

However, it is not necessary to canonize the data obtained, as, according to N. Safiullina "... none of the writers was proclaimed to be a 'symbol' or 'example' for other writers to follow, and thus none of them can be said to have been canonized " (13). Considering this fact, we can assume that the worldview and personal experience of native speakers, as well as the perception of widely-known writers, can change over time and are purely a subjective point of view.

3. RESULTS

On the basis of the descriptive components' comparisons of the concepts of "beauty" and "schönheit", we have the following results:

1. The descriptive meaningful character of the "beauty" concept is definitely more volumetric than the "schönheit" concept.

The individual concepts of beauty in the English language include a great number of images related to different spheres of life; one concept can include nature, human appearance and traits of character.

In the German language the majority of individual definitions of the "schönheit" concept includes only two facets of human's image which is comprised of human's appearance and his inner life.

2. The concepts of "beauty" and "schönheit" in American English and German are different in descriptive characteristics. In the images hierarchy of the English language the perceptive images of the environment (nature) are drawn forward.

In German the first place belongs to the cognitive images, related to moral values. The descriptive component itself is insignificant, the beauty concept being value-oriented.

According to the research results, we can judge about the national perception of the concept. National value associations prevail in German; however, they have a more shaded character in 'beauty' concept. For instance, in the United States of America there some general opinions on beauty, but they rarely figure in individual concepts. But in Germany the commonly accepted notion of beauty is expressed in the concept of every survey participant.

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