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VALUES, THEIR HIERARCHY AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG POLISH, RUSSIAN, AND GERMAN STUDENTS*

The article reports on an extensive research project on the systems of values professed by Poles, Russians, and Germans. On the basis of the Free Word Association Test, the author compares and proposes hierarchies of values that can account for the linguistic awareness of the members of these nationalities. The axiological cores of these systems are identified, together with the subjects' attitudes and axiological preferences. A claim is also made that the content of axiological units (value terms) extends far beyond the available lexicographic definitions of the relevant concepts. The research touches upon the ethics of European societies and the problem of axiological erosion, or even abstinence from values, recently identified by sociologists.

KEY WORDS: values, cultural linguistics, axiology

1. Through the following reflections I attempt to engage, from the perspective of a linguist and humanist, in the discussion of values, their existence, understanding, and role in the modern world.

Undoubtedly, values as such are pan-cultural and universal: they concern every individual regardless of the temporal, cultural, and social frame they live in; they constitute the very essence of human existence. According to Jerzy Bartmiński, values are “concepts, states and situations, attitudes and behaviours, which function as ‘guiding ideas’ motivating people’s actions”

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(Bartmiński 2009: 39). A person discovers values throughout his or her conscious life and strives to achieve them. Values not only underlie the normative aspect of an individual's actions, but are above all responsible for their sense of subjectivity; they stimulate activity, mobilise creative energy, express human desires, thus setting the direction for people's development and allowing them to understand both themselves and others, their own and others' choices, as well as to experience and accommodate the social and metaphysical aspects of life. Values allow one to emphasise, define, and determine the "anthropological space of possibility" (Jankowska and Krasoń 2009: 21).

2. The goal of this article is to discuss and compare the ways in which values are conceptualised and organised into hierarchies in the linguistic awareness of young Poles, Russians, and Germans, which also extends onto the concepts encoded through those values. The concepts provide access to cultural codes, a cultural code being defined as

a historically shaped system of signs, ideas, and beliefs supported by elements of the local culture and the cultures coexisting with it; a system that, through its power to give life to a community of meanings and references, is responsible for the sense of unity of a given national community. (Chlebda 2000: 169)¹

The knowledge of this cultural code allows one to make a significant contribution to intercultural dialogue, to the overcoming of barriers, to communication and flow of information between its participants, thereby creating an opportunity for a more rewarding contact and mutual understanding.

The empirical material discussed here is a comprehensive record of linguistic data collected as a result of Free Word Association Test – a psychophysiological, temporal study of word associations known since Francis Galton's linguistic experiments (Galton 1879). The method consists in writing down the first word or expression in one's native language that comes to their mind after being exposed to a given stimulus word. Association experiments based on this method have been conducted successfully since the end of the 19th century until today, primarily by psychologists (Wundt, Kraepelin, Aschaffenburg, Jung, Kent-Rosanoff), but also linguists and psycholinguists (Osgood-Sebeok, Kurcz, Rosenzweig, Moore, Postman, Maršálová, van der Made-van Bekkum, Leontyev, Ufimtseva, Tarasov, Goroshko and others).² In early 20th century, the existence of verbal networks was proven, influenced by social and economic life, as well as the cultural space of the speakers of a particular language (Barlett 1932). Understanding and describing these relationships has opened up new vistas for studying linguistic awareness,

¹ Translations from non-English sources by R.A. [translator's note]

² For more details on the research methodology, see Rodziewicz (2014).

defined as “the entirety of the levels of consciousness, formed and externalised through linguistic means: words, phrases, sentences, texts, and association fields” (Tarasov 2000: 26). Concepts, which are anchored in mental structures, do not exist autonomously. On the contrary, each concept is associated in an extremely ordered, logical, and hierarchical manner with a number of other concepts. Concepts are, on the one hand, part of one’s individual experience, the result of one’s own cognitive activity, but on the other hand, they reflect the pre-existing knowledge transmitted in various ways through a particular culture and social system.

Verbal association tests, one of the basic research methods in the field of human information processing and in analyses of the relationship between (intangible) consciousness and (directly accessible) language, are a functional tool for penetrating intuitive knowledge, an instrument that enables inquiry into culturally entrenched categorisations and conceptualisations. By the same token, they help specify differences between cultures, language being “the symbolic guide to culture” (Sapir 1966 [1929]: 70). In the present study, the test allowed me to access the realm of axiology and to reconstruct the content of values, together with their rich connotations, in the linguistic awareness of Polish, Russian, and German speakers, shaped by their respective specific historical, social, and cultural experience. The experiment also helped identify and compare the hierarchies of values professed by young generations of Poles, Russians, and Germans.

3. The experiment reported on here had a mass study character: there were 1,500 participants – representatives of the Polish, Russian, and German-speaking communities, 500 students aged 18–25 in each of the three groups, with equal numbers of males and females. A questionnaire had been developed for this purpose, involving twenty value terms. The content had been randomised and the questionnaire was taken in writing. The respondents were given two tasks. In Task 1, they were asked to record their non-directional free reaction, the first word or expression coming to mind after reading the stimulus word. In Task 2, they were asked to indicate the values they considered the most important and followed in their daily lives – this allowed for a construction of axiological hierarchies. The first stage of the experiment also involved the development of a reverse value dictionary, in which the linguistic material is presented from the response to the stimulus word. On this basis the list of expressions that constitute the axiological core of the linguistic awareness of Poles, Germans, and Russians was compiled.

Fifteen concepts, i.e. value terms, had been selected for detailed analysis: – in Polish: BÓG ‘God’, DEMOKRACJA ‘democracy’, GODNOŚĆ ‘dignity’,

- MIŁOŚĆ ‘love’, PATRIOTYZM ‘patriotism’, PIĘKNO ‘beauty’, PRACA ‘work’, RODZINA ‘family’, SPRAWIEDLIWOŚĆ ‘justice’, SUKCES ‘success’, SZCZĘŚCIE ‘happiness’, TOLERANCJA ‘tolerance’, TRADYCJA ‘tradition’, WOLNOŚĆ ‘freedom’, ŻYCIE ‘life’;
- in Russian: BOG ‘God’, DEMOKRATYA ‘democracy’, DOSTOINSTVO ‘dignity’, ZHIZN’ ‘life’, KRASOTA ‘beauty’, LUBOV’ ‘love’, PATRYOTIZM ‘patriotism’, RABOTA ‘work’, SVOBODA ‘freedom’, SEM’A ‘family’, SPRAVEDLIVOST’ ‘justice’, SCHAST’E ‘happiness’, TOLERANTNOST’ ‘tolerance’, TRADITSYA ‘tradition’, USPEKH ‘success’;
 - in German: ARBEIT ‘work’, DEMOKRATIE ‘democracy’, ERFOLG ‘success’, FAMILIE ‘family’, FREIHEIT ‘freedom’, GERECHTIGKEIT ‘justice’, GLÜCK ‘happiness’, GOTT ‘God’, LEBEN ‘life’, LIEBE ‘love’, PATRIOTISMUS ‘patriotism’, SCHÖNHEIT ‘beauty’, TOLERANZ ‘tolerance’, TRADITION ‘tradition’, WÜRDE ‘dignity’.

Thus, the concepts in all three languages correspond to the following English concepts: BEAUTY, DEMOCRACY, DIGNITY, FAMILY, FREEDOM, GOD, HAPPINESS, JUSTICE, LIFE, LOVE, PATRIOTISM, SUCCESS, TOLERANCE, TRADITION, WORK (in alphabetical order). However, it must be borne in mind at all times throughout the subsequent discussion that the respondents operated with value concepts in their own respective languages and the results of the research must also be understood in those terms.

The proposed inventory of axiological units includes values that constitute the core of ethnic culture and most strongly link the individuals to their respective communities. These are social values: DEMOCRACY, PATRIOTISM, WORK, FAMILY, TOLERANCE, TRADITION, and FREEDOM; they “help members of a society make choices, direct and indicate goals and means of action, but also strengthen action itself within their cultural sphere” (Dyczewski 1995: 58).

The analysis also covers moral (ethical) values such as DIGNITY, LOVE, and JUSTICE, all of which are of particular importance for a critical assessment of the moral condition of European societies proposed by some contemporary sociologists, who point to a progressive “crisis of morality” (Jasińska-Kania 2002: 212), “erosion of moral consciousness” (Mariański 2001: 36), or a “moral anomaly” (Świda-Ziemba 2010: 68–73).

The aesthetic and sensual values, such as BEAUTY and HAPPINESS, in turn, point to the degree of sensitivity, specifically in the domain of interpersonal relations, as well as, in a broader context, to the awareness and appreciation of the differences arising from all otherness and heterogeneity, including cultural.

Because claims have recently been made that European value systems are now evolving towards secularism, hedonism, individualism, and self-fulfilment, the list of the analysed concepts also includes the values of prestige (SUCCESS) and transcendence (GOD).

The ultimate element in the axiological system of Poles, Russians, and Germans is the vital value – LIFE, the fundamental axiological concept without which the implementation of all other values is impossible. The linguistic data collected as part of the association test, comprising 2,495 Polish, 2,857 German, and 2,366 Russian free, non-directed verbal responses to the stimulus words (7,718 associations in total),³ facilitated an inquiry into the roles played by these values. Similarities and differences were identified in the ways reality is perceived through language, reflecting not only the individual experiences of the respondents, which usually have the character of dynamic, processual structures, but above all the collective experiences of communities, dependent on the cultural environment and past experiences of the generation being studied, as well as on the social and political challenges of the present. Thus, the hierarchy of values identified in the analysis is likely to result from the subjective understanding of values and from the properties of the partly institutionalised system of values professed by the relevant communities.

4. Because a detailed and exhaustive analysis of the association profiles of individual values cannot be presented here,⁴ this article will be confined to generalising conclusions that will outline some tendencies in the understanding and preferences for certain types of values on the part of Poles, Russians, and Germans.

The starting point for the summary of the results of the axiological analysis of linguistic awareness of Poles, Russians, and Germans are the value hierarchies reconstructed from the subjects' responses.

The catalogues of the values regarded by Polish, Russian, and German students as priorities is in fact similar. Although there are some differences in the percentages of the respondents in the surveyed groups that declare certain values to be crucial, they do not significantly affect the overall composition of these hierarchies. The first positions in the ranking lists are occupied by those units that, following Ronald Inglehart's (2006) conceptual toolbox, can be referred to as values combining pre-materialism with impersonal

³ The complete linguistic material obtained as part of the experiment is presented in the form of tables with all responses to the stimulus words (see the Appendix in Rodziewicz 2014: 387–489).

⁴ The full description of the data and a comprehensive list of results of this research are presented in Rodziewicz (2014).

post-materialism.⁵ These include FAMILY, LOVE, HAPPINESS, and LIFE. In all the groups surveyed, the primary role was attributed to FAMILY. LOVE as a value experienced and actualised ranked second. HAPPINESS as an axiological unit is most valued by the Poles: in the respondents' declared value hierarchy it occupies the third position. The Russians rank it one place below. The Germans give it the lowest of the three, although still a relatively high seventh place. LIFE is ranked third and highest by the Russians, while the Poles and Germans give it the fifth place.

On the one hand, the axiological units endorsed by the respondents are traditional values. In their semantic structure, the young people usually mention components that point to the satisfaction of primary needs: survival, security, sense of rootedness and stability, understanding, psychological support, acceptance, closeness. On the other hand, there are values that allow the individual to satisfy his or her need of self-determination and self-fulfilment, mainly attainable through contact with other people. Interpersonal relations are clearly highlighted in the association profiles of all of the above-mentioned values considered by the respondents to be the most important. Thus, the pre-materialistic orientation does not exclude elements characteristic of post-materialistic systems. This tendency is also reflected in the high saturation of the semantic content of the key axiological units with emotional and emotionally-evaluative components (largely positive).

There are many similarities in terms of preferences and/or perception also of the remaining values, apart from those mentioned above. A high, fourth position in the axiological hierarchy of all three language groups is occupied by FREEDOM. The association profiles of FREEDOM are dominated by post-materialistic characteristics. This value is captured by the respondents in a highly individualised and subjective perspective, where physical freedom and freedom of choice are at the forefront. It is an individualistic, irresponsible freedom, understood as unlimited autonomy. According to contemporary young people, FREEDOM is a non-directional and unlimited category that relativises social regulations – it is clearly moving towards subjectivisation and is understood as emancipation. The individualistic aspect of FREEDOM

⁵ According to Inglehart, there exist pre-materialistic (traditional) values, such as HEALTH, LIFE, or FAMILY, materialistic (modern) values, such as MONEY, SOCIAL SECURITY, or WORK, and post-materialistic (postmodern) values, such as LOVE, FRIENDSHIP, HAPPINESS, or SELF-FULFILLMENT. According to that author, in the postmodern reality, the post-materialistic values are gaining more importance than the materialistic ones, since the implementation of the latter, in particular of the modern values, in well-developed countries is undisputed. This is because in those increasingly prosperous countries, the attainment of materialistic values does not involve any particular effort, but is rather, with some simplification, assumed *a priori* (cf. Inglehart 2006: 334-348).

is realised, especially in the awareness of the German students, through the maximisation of personal freedoms, with a shade of selfishness that finds expression in creativity, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency. On the other hand, in the consciousness of the Polish and Russian respondents, ontological freedom has a strong position, usually conceived of as free will or the ability to make choices and decisions.

WORK, JUSTICE, and SUCCESS are similar with regard to their semantic content. However, their importance is differently evaluated by different groups of respondents. WORK is ranked highest by the young Germans (the eighth position), while the Poles and Russians place it just after the first ten in the ranking. A relatively low placement of WORK may indeed be a sign of an abandonment of the traditional ethos of work. In the description of this value, the pre-materialist and materialist components, i.e. financial security and protection, are balanced with elements of a clearly post-materialist character, such as personal development and self-expression, as well as interpersonal relations. The latter type are the determinants of a new, communicative work ethos that emphasises individualism, quality of life, satisfaction, passions, and teamwork. The subjects' responses and axiological preferences reveal the import of the "work – life – balance" principle (Kuhn 2005: 60), i.e. a balanced personal and professional life.

JUSTICE has consolidated in the linguistic awareness of the interviewed Europeans as an ethical value based on the principle of egalitarianism. JUSTICE is one more value with regard to which the respondents emphasise the importance of interpersonal contact and a pro-human attitude. However, the respondents from all groups question the existence of justice in real life: it functions as an ideal rather than empirical reality, it is treated in utopian terms, without a clear inclination to make an effort and render it real. The highest readiness in this respect was manifested by the Russians: justice takes the eight place in their declared hierarchy of values. The Germans and especially the Poles distance themselves from it, placing JUSTICE in distant positions, the eleventh and thirteenth respectively.

The largest degree of convergence could be observed in the meaning of the values of prestige. SUCCESS is one of the few "mirandas"⁶ whose multilingual conceptualisations reveal similar thinking in the speakers of the three languages. The common part of the association profile of SUCCESS (established on the basis of the frequency of mentions) consists of such facets as work and profession, effort, wealth and prestige, self-expression and self-fulfilment, competition, and struggle. The young people in this

⁶ The term was introduced by Walery Pisarek (2002: 26); cf. its Latin origin: *mirandus* 'worthy of admiration'.

research conceptualise SUCCESS by relating to post-materialistic components. However, despite positive and very positive speaker attitudes, SUCCESS is ultimately ranked relatively low, in the seventh position (Russians), tenth (Poles), and twelfth (Germans).

The central axis of distinction between the linguistic communities being examined runs through the understanding of social values, such as DEMOCRACY, TOLERANCE, and DIGNITY, which can be classified as post-materialistic values. Differences have also been observed in the profiling of the concept of PATRIOTISM. Without going into details, we shall focus on formulating the basic conclusions arising from the analysis of the respondents' verbal reactions.

DEMOCRACY is known, understood, and can be easily defined by the speakers of all three languages. The respondents enumerate a number of advantages of this political system, including, among others, the institutional order, i.e. the establishment of specific rules that contribute to the proper functioning of the state, freedom of speech, the influence of citizens on the functioning of the state, equality before the law, and justice. These are "ideologemes" common to all democratic societies. In the linguistic awareness of the young Russians, the primary constituent of democracy is freedom. The Poles identify democracy principally with parliamentary democracy. For the Germans the embodiment of democracy is their own country. From the conceptualisation of democracy it can also be inferred that the young Poles and Russians are less likely than their Western European counterparts to express the need for civic participation, and that their willingness to engage in diverse forms of participation in social and communal action is less important. Poles are ready to participate in the political life of the country, which is reflected in the emphasis on the importance of parliamentary elections, but their awareness of the possibility of thus shaping and transforming their social life is not obvious. Germans are characterised by a relatively extensive knowledge of their constitution and, consequently, are aware of their civil rights.

In the hierarchy of preferred values, DEMOCRACY ranks quite low. It is valued highest by the young Germans, who rank it in the fifteenth place. The utilitarian value of DEMOCRACY is similarly evaluated by Poles: in their hierarchy it occupies the sixteenth place. DEMOCRACY as a value that can be realised on a daily basis receives least recognition from the Russians respondents, who placed it in the last, twentieth position.

The profiling of TOLERANCE reveals certain differences, in particular between the Russian-speaking community and the other language groups. While the Poles and Germans are inclined towards positive TOLERANCE, their Eastern peers profile this value as forced acceptance and indifference,

a negative kind of tolerance. The choice of who or what is the object of TOLERANCE is influenced by current social, political, and media discourse. In the Polish survey, a prominent role is given to personal tolerance, while in the other surveys ethnic tolerance prevails.

In the ranking of values that the respondents follow in their lives, if one is to trust their declarations, TOLERANCE occupies a rather low or a very low position: ninth for the Germans, fourteenth for the Poles, and sixteenth for the Russians.

Also, the image of DIGNITY in the linguistic consciousness of the respondents is far from homogeneous. For the Poles and Germans DIGNITY is primarily a personal and an ethical value. The German respondents placed this value in a broader context of human rights guaranteed by jurisdiction; they also stressed the bioethical aspect of DIGNITY, which remains unmentioned in the responses from their peers in the other two groups. The declared placement of DIGNITY in the ranking of values followed in daily life is the highest in the case of the Poles: it comes in the ninth place. In the collective consciousness of the young Russians and Germans, DIGNITY is positioned lower: as twelfth and fourteenth, respectively.

The analysis of the verbal and association networks of the concept of PATRIOTISM has revealed that this value is centred around the notion of homeland. For the Germans it is the so-called little homeland (*Heimat*), their private homeland; for the Poles and Russians it tends to be the whole country. Consequently, the Poles and Russians further explicate PATRIOTISM as a bond that is rooted in rational, ethically oriented actions understood as service for their homeland. The students from Western Europe rarely refer to such notions as fidelity or sacrifice and completely ignore the aspect of duty to their homeland. The only element in the association profile that combines the three different linguistics views of PATRIOTISM is the notion of love as its defining element.

What does this research tell us about PATRIOTISM today? Is it an important value? As a guarantee of the sense of elementary safety – probably not any more. As a bond that cements a community sharing a geographical and cultural area – not very much, either. As a social value manifested in civic patriotism – also to a limited degree. Against the background of other values, PATRIOTISM was ranked low and very low: in the seventeenth position by the Russians, eighteenth by the Poles, and twentieth by the Germans.

Few discrepancies were found in terms of understanding and appreciation of TRADITION and BEAUTY: they are only manifested in the distribution percentages of semantic characteristics within the association profiles of these values.

The dominant cultural connotations of the concept of TRADITION are the festivity and rituals associated with it. At the same time, the respondents in the study paid special attention to holidays as a part of the “living tradition” (Gajda 2003: 77): the current tradition that the respondents identify with as members of a particular community and feel obliged to cultivate. However, in the system of values that the young Poles and Germans tend to follow, tradition occupies a very distant, seventeenth place. Russians rank it even lower, in the eighteenth position.

The underlying constituents of the concept of BEAUTY are also almost identical at the level of linguistic explication, although they rank differently in terms of the number of associations. At the core of the linguistic awareness of the Polish participants in the survey there is female beauty and physical attractiveness in general. The key associations evoked in the Russian respondents are natural beauty, nature, and the beauty of the human soul. The Germans, in turn, identify beauty primarily with a person’s inner life. BEAUTY does not belong to the values followed by the young people on a daily basis. The Russian students appreciate it the most: in their hierarchy of values, BEAUTY occupies the thirteenth place. The Polish students rank it fifteenth, while the Germans rank it only as the sixteenth item on the list.

In the preceding reflections summarising the research on the understanding and ranking of values by the groups of Polish, Russian, and German respondents, essentially one axiological orientation is dominant: the post-materialistic (postmodern) orientation. It has to do with broadly understood freedom and the non-material aspects of life. It focuses on the well-being of an individual viewed as individual expression, self-fulfilment and improvement, personal happiness, and rational values. In this context, it does not seem surprising that the usefulness and necessity of striving for and implementing such pre-materialistic values as TRADITION, PATRIOTISM, and GOD, which were classified by the students as the last-choice values (i.e. those than can be pursued “later”), are evaluated very low. The values that were ranked last in the axiological hierarchy can be regarded, following Clyde Kluckhohn and others (1951), as passive or ritualistic. Although the respondents are inclined to regard them as rather important elements of their value systems, the values are now losing their former appeal and power of emotional stimulation for driving human behaviour. They are pursued rather occasionally.

5. I have also proposed to render the hierarchy of values as a reverse dictionary (Rodziewicz 2014: 493). It is assumed that the ranking of the values that are explicitly mentioned by the respondents as key values, and that are potentially socially accepted, corresponds to the ranking of the presupposed values, implied in or deduced from repeated verbal reactions

of the respondents. An exception here are transcendental values. The data collected for the reverse dictionary suggest that they occupy a higher position in the linguistic awareness of the respondents than in the explicitly declared hierarchy. The frequency of the repetition of the words for God (the Polish *Bóg*, the Russian *Bog*, and the German *Gott*) in association with other value terms places them in the tenth, ninth, and tenth position respectively. Thus, the respondents implicitly ranked lower the values that score higher in direct responses: the Poles and Russians – JUSTICE, SUCCESS, and DIGNITY; the Germans – SUCCESS and TOLERANCE.

Cultural determinants of gender did not play a significant role in understanding and establishing the order of values.

6. Most of the semantic features of the axiological units being considered that were suggested by the respondents are not documented in modern lexicographic sources. In the light of the data obtained from the association test, the dictionary definitions appear to be quite poor and mono-faceted. The interesting and semantically rich interpretations of the concepts that were proposed by the respondents go beyond their conventional understanding, which means that these fuller conceptualisations still need to be discovered. This shows, on the one hand, that the semantic content of the value terms is subject to dynamic extension, while on the other hand, it points to the instability and variability of the notion of value as such. At the same time, free non-directional verbal responses to stimuli words reflect the way reality is categorised by contemporary young people and their own axiological experience. They also constitute a valuable exemplification of macro-scale trends.

Undoubtedly, however, the results of this research do not corroborate the claim made by some sociologists as to axiological erosion in contemporary societies. It appears that it is more appropriate to see the situation in terms of axionormative relativism, whereby there is a growing tendency to employ individualised strategies for determining one's own identity and tailor one's axiological hierarchy and to the current needs. The picture is certainly a dynamic one, as "the axionormative systems are always products of cultural and historical circumstances: they are fixed only for some time" (Mariański and Smyczek 2008: 9).

To conclude on a positive note, the linguistic analysis reported here has revealed that the values professed by the respondents in this study are linked, to a large extent, with interpersonal relations.

translated by Rafał Augustyn

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