

LEARNING MORE ABOUT CULTURES THROUGH FREE WORD ASSOCIATION DATA

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Culture is like a dance, it is important to catch the rhythm.
after Professor Liisa Salo- Lee)

Abstract

The paper is discussing some issues connected with verbal codes of communication. It re-introduces one of the experimental methods of cultural studies. The author shows the opportunities provided by the use of free word association experiment in cultural, cross- and intercultural analyses. To investigate how languages reflect differences in the cultural values of the Americans and of the Belarusians the author compares the free word association experiment data collected in Minnesota (USA) and in Minsk (Belarus) in 1999-2000.

Keywords: Culture, free word association, experiment, comparison, cultural values.

Introduction

The development of cross- and intercultural studies has revived the interest to psycholinguistic methods of cultural values' analysis. The free word association experiment is coming back with the scope of studying cultures.

The aim of the paper is to inform the interculturalists about the potential of this tool rather than to praise one data collection technique over others.

As not so many of interculturalists are psycholinguists, some explanation should be given about the test itself.

Here is how Paul Meara[1] describes it.

"The basic word association game is extremely simple. It requires two players: one whose task is to call out or show single words, and a second whose task is to respond to these words with the first word that comes into his or her head. Despite its popular image as a sure-fire way of probing people's innermost secrets, the most striking thing about associations is that they are actually extremely boring and predictable. Given a word like MAN, 60 or 70 per cent of normal adult native speakers of English will reply with woman. BLACK produces white and HARD produces soft about the same proportion of times. Even relatively unpredictable stimulus words like MEMORY or MUSIC still produce a very limited range of responses. With a hundred people, you would be likely to get about 25 to 30 different responses, but most of these will occur more than twice, and only a relatively small number will be unique responses. Using bigger groups of subjects does not make very much difference to this pattern; responses tend to stabilize with groups of fifty or more, and using a group very much larger than this makes little difference to the range or pattern of responses.

This is unfortunate because it means that discrepant results can always be "explained away" in terms of the stimuli used, and there is no incentive to incorporate these discrepancies into a coherent overall framework. An alternative to idiosyncratic lists is to use one of the many standard lists of stimuli - generally The alternative the Kent-Rosanoff list. This list of words was first used by Kent and Rosanoff

in 1910 as the basis for a study of the word associations made by mentally ill subjects [2] Since then, it has been widely used in word association research, both in English and - in translation - in a range of other major languages. The list consists of 100 relatively frequent words, all of which produce fairly stable response patterns in normal native-speaker adults. the extensive use of this list means that a very large number of sets of association "norms" are available: i.e. collections of responses based on large groups of similar subjects".

The potential this tool has for studying verbal codes of communication was mentioned by the pioneers of psycholinguistics Charles E. Osgood and Thomas A. Sebeok in 1965[3], "Words of high cultural frequency exercised more influence[on reactions to compound stimuli] than words of low cultural frequency". It should be mentioned that psycholinguistics as a science operates with notions closely linked with cultural studies, " ...psycholinguistics studies those processes whereby the intentions of speakers are transformed into signals in the **culturally** accepted code"[4]

Some specialists who were comparing different languages data of free word association tests obtained from the same group of subjects noted that , "some cultural factor affects associational stereotypy"[5]. In 1977 Alexandra A. Zalevskaya published an article titled "Intercultural Aspect of the Problem" where she reflected on differences in responses accounted for by different experiences and values of cultures and said that , "it is of more importance to know that the free word association test provides results that are compatible with universally known cultural traditions of this or that nation". She came to the conclusion that "the materials of association experiments are of considerable interest for intercultural studies"[6]

In the 1950ies-1970ies, when free word association tests were «in fashion», more attention was given to the linguistic characteristics of data. There was basically one researcher who undertook (together with his disciples) several attempts to carry out cross-cultural studies using word assotiations. In his first work Lorand B.Szalay sets the objective «to develop experimentally a method for collecting and analysing data on culturally specific thought pattens and verbal behavior in order to achieve more efficient and persuasive intercultural communication» «In the experiment, word association tests were administered to Korean, Colombian, and US college students...The different cultural groups gave abundant and distinctly differing responses revealing clear and highly culture-specific meaning dimensions. This suggests that associations data provide a solid foundation for cultural analysis» [7] The author conducted several more cross-cultural studies[8], but it looks like he was ahead of his time and there were little if any followers.

In the 1990ies the interest to the tool started to reappear this time to analyse culture [9]

The premise is that as associations show links between words, they reflect relations between notions and life experiences. If an association is evoked, the link is quite stable and is of relevance for the object. Languages reflect and shape cultures, hence links between words also reflect cultural patterns (e.g. if a subject responds "respect" to stimulus "old man" it may show positive value of age, past time orientation, as well as hierarchy principle in that society). Free word association experiment is quite a convenient tool for intercultural studies, as

- it has a clear-cut sphere of application, i.e. verbal codes of communication;
- it reveals the inner, mental links between words(hence, notions), it actually shows the importance the subject gives to phenomena even if is not easily verbalized in daily life;
- it captures changes and differences of how the world is perceived by various cultures on intra- and intercultural, syn- and diachronic levels;
- it is not guided by the experimentator (hence FREE WORD ASSOCIATION EXPERIMENT);
- the numbers of subjects are usually high, hence quite representative;
- it can be easily reproduced with a different group of subjects;
- the subjects(university students) and the list of stimuli(Kent-Rosanoff list) have been the same throughout the world ever since 1950-ies, hence the comparability of data;

- o it can be combined with most methods of intercultural studies, e.g. purely theoretical, field notes, questionnaires, recordings' The data can be further used and verified in focus group studies, discourse analysis, etc.

The basic difference between the approaches to free word associations used in the 50-70s of the 20th century and the modern ones is that today attention is given to medium and low-frequency responses, rather than to- mostly- the top five. The argument is that this is a way to learn more about the subtle differences accounted for by the cultures, in which the subjects were socialized. It stands to reason even more when one thinks of the globalization processes that influence the daily life of people via media (e.g. ALWAYS[panty-liners] could have never evoked any reaction whatsoever in Russian speakers only a dozen years ago).

Free word association can be used to study how this or that language reflects the values of a culture as well as to single out the salient features of a culture where other tools could not be applied for various reasons.

Free word association data can also explain to a certain degree the cross-cultural interference people experience in intercultural communication.

No doubt it is hardly possible or advisable to use the free word association test as the major tool in studying a culture or, rather, its verbal codes of communication. Nevertheless it can provide additional information, proof or denial of data obtained through other methods.

Background

Back in 1995 at a meeting of ex-USSR teachers with US colleagues a US Professor asked the NIS audience to instantly tell him who would they approach in case of trouble, i.e. he asked the subjects to give a reaction to the stimulus TROUBLE. The Professor was disappointed as one of the teachers answered, "911". Luckily, the rest of the group gave "correct" answers, "Friends, family, neighbours". Of course, there was no 911-type service in the NIS at that time, and even the University teachers of English did not have enough opportunities to watch numerous American movies where the 911 was mentioned. (By the way, today the situation would be different in any audience as a new 9.11 association was, unfortunately, born in the world after the 9.11.2001). That was the objective reason for not mentioning 911 as a response to TROUBLE. However, a deeper analysis proves that deeper layers of culture can account for the situation, more precisely, the difference in the elements of cultural patterns- values, beliefs and norms of behaviour.

Experience gives ample examples of it. Before the creation of the 911 service in Belarus the reaction of a POLICE OFFICER ON DUTY to help rescue an elderly woman who got locked out of the house on her balcony was, "Why don't you ask your neighbours to help you?"

The results of classical free word association experiments carried out in 1999-2000 by the author with Belarusian and with the USA students show that the comparative analyses of medium and low frequency reactions given by American and by Belarusian subjects also reflect differences in cultural patterns.

The paper will show data concerning the comparison of the Man-to-Man relations in American and in Belarusian subjects.

Experiment

According to the existing taxonomies of cultures (e.g. by E. Hall [10], G. Hofstede [11], , etc.) Americans are low-context, highly future-oriented, doing, monoactive (monochronic), and individualistic, medium-to low power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity culture. The recognised cultural values lie in achievement, nuclear family, religion ("In God We Trust"), democracy.

There was no IBM in Belarus when G. Hofstede conducted his study, so no numbers are available to identify the position of the culture on Hofstede's tables. However, the longitudinal sociological study under way in Gomel (Belarus) by V.Kirienko [12] gives enough information to roughly estimate Belarusians as higher power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism, past and present-oriented,

being-in-becoming, feminine culture. It also has a tendency to be high context, being collectivistic and feminine. It is considered impolite to ask someone for a favour without a longish introductory conversation, as is not usual to formulate the request in a straightforward manner.

The Belarusian concept of the family is that of extended family, including at least three generations-the grandparents, the parents and the children.

Religion has been almost banned during the 75 years (almost 4 generations) of communist rule in Belarus, so it seems unlikely that the Belarusian subjects would have religion as a central value.

Hypothesis

On the grounds of the above speculation, the hypothesis can be that American data should show a more functional approach to inter-human relations. Belarusians are expected to be more concerned about characteristics of people, their description (e.g. more associations with colours), and are supposed to show involvement in more in-groups with more elaborate structures (extended families vs. immediate families). According to the proclaimed American values it can also be anticipated that the USA subjects give more reactions connected with religion. As representatives of a more collectivistic culture, Belarusians should give more nouns in the plural and name more groups, rather than individual people.

The data has proven most of the above hypotheses based on the existing taxonomies of cultures. In some cases, however, the results were unexpected (e.g. more religion-related associations in Belarusian data, more individual names given by Belarusians, as compared to the USA subjects).

Procedure

Two experiments were carried out first in Belarus and then in Minneapolis.

In both cases responses from 60 random subjects were analysed-30 men and 30 women.

The stimuli lists were the classical 100 words Kent-Rosanoff ones.

The instruction was,

" You are taking part in a free word association experiment. In front of you have a list of words. Your task is to read each word and next to it write down the first word it makes you think of. All responses are the correct ones. Please, do not skip words. Thank you."

For the purpose of the present paper, i.e. the comparative study of Man-to-Man relations in the Belarusian and the USA cultures reactions to stimuli NOT naming human beings were selected. Stimuli like MAN, WOMAN were ignored as they are more likely to evoke "human being" responses, especially in American subjects who tend to prefer paradigmatic reactions, according to previous research [14].

All reactions naming human beings (e.g. *baby*, *wife*) were singled out for further analysis.

Discussion

In the Belarusian sample 126 different reactions connected with the notion of HUMAN BEING were found to 62 stimuli out of 100. In the American sample- 92 reactions to 40 stimulus words were singled out. So, even at this level one can see that Belarusians are more concerned with interrelations between people.

Out of the 62 stimuli Belarusians responded to using the notion of human being 40 were nouns. In the American sample-at most 27 (Due to the peculiarities of the English language it is not always possible to differentiate verbs from nouns in the stimuli and reactions).

10 adjectives (and 2 Participles- AFRAID, WORKING) in the USA sample and 18 in the Belarusian one have evoked "Man" reactions. 7 adjectives denote colours, 2- qualities, 3-taste, 2-sound, 2- speed, and 2-size in the Belarusian data, whereas in the Minneapolis group only 3 colours (GREEN, BLUE,

BLACK), 2- speed, 1-size 1- sound, 2-qualities (ROUGH, BEAUTIFUL) produced similar reactions. At least 3 adjectives denote the state of a person (HUNGRY, THIRSTY, AFRAID).

Some of the results can be accounted for by language reasons, as some of the English adjective-stimuli (e.g. HUNGRY, AFRAID) were translated as nouns, other-as verbs (AFRAID) into Russian. Nevertheless these results fit into the general picture(see Table 1).

Table 1 Adjective stimuli that have evoked responses connected with Man-to-Man relations
(Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
Dark	-
Red	-
White	-
Yellow	-
Blue	Blue
Black	Black
Green	Green
Sweet	-
Bitter	-
Slow	Slow
Swift	Swift
Long	-
High	-
Sour	-
Soft	-
Beautiful	Beautiful
Cold	-
Quiet	-
Loud	Loud
-	Hungry
-	Rough
-	Working
-	Short
	Afraid

Even at a first glance the given data, i.e. more descriptive reactions on the Belarusian side of the table shows that the Belarusian subjects are more interested in describing people (colours), whereas the American ones- in characterizing them from the point of view of action, activity, and its results (AFRAID). It can also be proven by the fact that in 6 cases Americans gave reactions linking a fact of life, an abstract notion to professions or to people performing a function (JUSTICE –*judge*, HEALTH-*doctor*, HEAD- *President, Chief*, TROUBLE- *police, lawyer*, SICKNESS- *doctor*, COMMAND-*general*, CHAIR – *Head of Department*, WHISTLE-*cop, coach*). Belarusians have given similar reactions to the words COMMAND, WHISTLE, HEAD. The reactions to the word SICKNESS and HEALTH show those who experience these states, rather than those who deal with the situation –*old woman, man*. In full accord with the above speculation on cultural differences in dealing with TROUBLE, Belarusian subjects have given the typical cultural reaction *friend*, i.e. the person you go to when you need to share (Sic! Rather than *solve*) something. All in all the Belarusians have named 11 professions, the Americans-18 (see Table 2)

So, one can say that associations provide yet another proof to the fact that the American culture is an active, doing one, interested in achieving results- curing an illness, dealing with trouble, etc.

Table 2. Professions named by subjects (Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
Sportsman (Basketball player)	Sportsman (Runner)
Doctor	Doctor
Policeman	Policeman(Cop)
Student	Student
Sailor	Maid
Tailor	Barber
Soldier	Coach
Farmer	Cowboy
-	Carpenter
-	Lawyer
-	Judge
-	Priest
-	Auto dealer

As a matter of fact, it was expected that the US respondents would have more associations with individuals. However, they only gave 11 names, almost twice as little as 20 in the Belarusian data(see Table 3).

Table 3. Persons named by subjects (Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
-	Ted

-	Amy
Marina	Gina
Liuda	Kelly
Jesus Christ	Jesus
Magomet	Abraham
Solomon	Aladdin
John the Quiet	Gudykunst
Captain Vrungel	Tiffany
Swift	
Maxim(Gorky)	
Mozart	
Bach	
Grieg	
Peter the Great	
Copernicus	
Lenin	
Amstrong	
A.Marshall	
Custeau	
Lukashenko	
Viktor Tsoi	
Kurt Cobain	
Moiseev	

Summing up, one can say that the Belarusians are more interested in individuals who have some authority for them than the Americans.

Indirectly, the higher number of historical figures' names (Peter the Great, Solomon, Jesus, Marshall, John the Quiet, etc.) in the Belarusian data could indicate the higher power distance. (There were three stimuli both groups gave status-reactions to, e.g. HEAD- *chief*, *President USA*, HEAD- *President (Belarus)*).

On the other hand, the considerable number of historical personalities also testifies that the Belarusian culture is more past-oriented than the American one.

Of special interest are reactions given by Belarusian subjects to the word JUSTICE. They named two personalities who, in their mind, symbolize justice- *Solomon* and *Lukashenko* (The President of the Republic of Belarus).

In 14 cases the Belarusians and in 13-the Americans gave female reactions to stimuli (e.g. *girl, woman, Mom, wife*). 19 times male reactions (*names, Boy, etc.*) were evoked in the Belarusian group and 9 in the American one (*Dad, boy, etc.*). It could show the masculine character of the Belarusian culture, if it were not for the fact that the historical figures in the whole world have the tendency to be males, the famous HE-story and not HER-story.

Mother is equally important for both groups- 7 reactions to 4 stimuli in the USA and 7 reactions to 5 stimuli in Belarus. The similarity in family in-groups ends here. It was quite unexpected that the Belarusians did not mention *father* in their reactions, who is comparatively popular with the Americans (4 stimuli). In general, Americans, as they should, connected more stimuli with the concept of "family" (see Table 4):

Table 4. Stimuli that evoked "family" associations (Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
House	House
Memory	Memory
Joy	Joy
Hand	Comfort
Fruit	Short
Earth	Command
Cottage	Slow
Stove	Wish
Bed	Beautiful
Quiet	Working
-	Trouble
-	Street

In full accord with the hypothesis, the Belarusians offered more members of the family, than the Americans(See Table 5):

Table 5 Family members (Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
Ancestors	-
Old granny	-

Granddad	-
Mother	Mother (Mom)
-	Father (Dad)
Husband	-
Wife	Wife
I	Me
-	Brother
Child (baby)	Child (Daughter, baby)
Family	Family
Relatives	-

The concept of "child" is reflected in *child, baby, little one* in the Belarusian sample, and in *child, daughter, baby, kid* in the American one.

Another –cultural- difference is that the Belarusians, unlike the Americans, mention *friends* and *enemies*, creating in this way another in-and out-groups: I+ friend, I+ enemy. The American subjects only mention *mate*, i.e. the I+ friend group (For further discussion see Table 6).

On top of family members and professions Belarusians give names of nations (*Russian, American, Chinese*), religious groups (*catholic*), sexual minorities (*gay*), congregations of people (*crowd*), nations (*people and peoples*), races (*Negro*), *men*. They also mention the *police* and the *Army*

Americans are not interested in religions, sexual minorities, and they only speak of one nation (*people*).

Table 6. Groups of people mentioned by the subjects (Belarusian responses are given in the translation into English)

Belarusians	Americans
Ancestors	-
Family	Family
Relatives	-
Friends	Friends
Enemies	Congregations of people
Congregations of people	-
Sexual minorities	-
Professions	Professions
Nations	Nation
Religious groups	-

Races	Races
Humankind	Humankind

As is seen in Table 6 the Americans identify two times less groups than the Belarusians, which means that groups are not very important for them. It can support the hypothesis that the Belarusian culture is more collectivistic, and hence higher power distance and higher context.

Conclusion

The hypothesis estimating the Belarusian culture as more collectivistic, higher power distance and context, more past and being-in –becoming oriented than the American culture was verified through the responses of Belarusian and American subjects to the 100 stimuli of the Kent-Rosanoff list. The analysis of the data obtained through the free association experiments carried out in Belarus and in the USA has proved to be supportive of the other methods of studying cultures. The conclusion is that experimental psycholinguistic techniques provide additional information for students of intercultural communication, and are also useful for teachers of languages and culture.

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