THE SEMANTICS, CULTURE, AND COGNITION OF BODY PARTS (A CAUTIONARY TALE)

by
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Three anecdotes might serve to introduce a discussion of the relationship between language and culture, a favorite concern of Professor Wierzbicka, whose courage in taking the 'intellectual risk' (1992: 440) of raising this long taboo issue is only one of the reasons we honor her in this collection of studies.

In 1861 Turgenev wrote of an acquaintance (the artist A. A. Ivanov) that:

Роста он был небольшого, приземист, плечист; вся его фигура, от бородки клинушком до пухлых, короткопалых *ручек* и проворных *ножек* с толстыми икрами, дышала Русью, и ходил он русской походкой.[1]	He was not large, he was low to the ground, broad-shouldered; his whole figure, from his little goatee down to his puffy, short-fingered *arms/hands* and his nimble *legs/feet* with thick calves – exuded Rus, and it was with a Russian gait that he walked.

Next, a colleague whose first language is Russian (but who early in life learned the semi-native English characteristic of Russia's post-war intelligentsia) once spoke of *twisting the hands of my colleagues.* Third, a Russian linguist gave a talk at Berkeley in which the Russian translation of the opening page of Nabokov's *Pnin* was cited, for reasons unrelated to the terminology for body parts. The relevant portion in the original English, with Nabokov's translation into Russian, reads:

Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses [...], but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly *legs* (now flanneled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine *feet*.[2]	Совершенно лысый, загорелый и гладко выбритый, он начинался весьма солидно: большой коричневый купол, черепаховые очки [...], но как-то неожиданно заканчивался парой журавлиных *ног* (сейчас они во фланелевых штанах, одна на другой) и хрупкими на вид, почти женскими *ступнями/ногами*.

In English Nabokov had differentiated 'legs' from 'feet'. He translated the second mention of the lower extremity (English *feet*) with Russian *ступня* 'foot'. When the passage was retyped by the visiting linguist in the form of a handout, *ступня* was inadvertently replaced by *нога*. Since *нога* was already used to translate *leg* just above, a bilingual colleague who was present in the audience later quipped: 'оказывается, у него четыре ноги' ['it turns out he has four legs/feet]'.

In Russian, of course, a single word *рука* is normally used for the whole or any significant portion of an upper extremity, where English would be obliged to distinguish between *arm* and *hand*. Similarly, *нога* is used for any or all of the lower extremity. The vignettes presented above, although anecdotal, are evidently related to that linguistic fact. The anecdotes lend credence to the notion that the failure to make these distinctions in a language is a significant fact of the Russian language and its culture and perhaps even of the mental structures of Russians. As Wierzbicka argues in her monumental study (1992: 63), '[b]ut although lexical differences of this kind can be misinterpreted and exaggerated, nonetheless they do mean something, and if carefully and cautiously interpreted they can be indeed be regarded as clues to the different cultural universes associated with different languages.'

What then do these clues reveal under cautious interpretation?

With respect to the first, it is relevant to mention that Turgenev was in the habit of using isomorphisms between body and soul for the purposes of characterization. In *Fathers and Sons*, for example, Bazarov's

large forehead merits comment twice when he is introduced at the beginning of the novel: *с широким лбом* 'with a wide forehead'[3] and *[е]го темно-белокурые волосы, длинные и густые, не скрывали крупных выпуклостей просторного черепа* '[h]is long, thick dark-blond hair did not hide the prominent bumps of his large skull.'[4] With this forehead, Bazarov is not unlike the frog that he equates to mankind, a comparison (for which Bazarov and the portrait of him were pilloried in the press of the time) expressed indirectly through peasant boys: – *Васька, слышь, барин говорит, что мы с тобой те же лягушки* 'Vaska, do you hear, the gentlemen says you and I are the same as frogs – that's funny.'[5]

Later (Chapter XX) Bazarov's good-natured provincial father boasts that in the province they have even some knowledge of phrenology,[6] again drawing attention to the issue of Bazarov's forehead and its bumps. In obvious irony, at the end of the novel Bazarov will die as a consequence of his own careless manipulation of a scalpel, just as the frogs that are part of his experiments died under his scalpel, a confirmation that Turgenev meant to push the parallelism between Bazarov of the broad forehead and frogs (and also beetles).

Whether or not Turgenev actually believed that physiognomy reflects the soul is not clear. It is certainly not out of the question. In any event, Turgenev used the device of isomorphism to characterize his literary and non-literary characters, and above in his reminiscence about A. A. Ivanov we have an example of this device. Turgenev was evidently striving for parallelism (indicated not only by the syntax, but by the consistent use of diminutives throughout) in his description of the extremities of his acquaintance. Although this acquaintance's limbs were in general characterized by a certain stubbiness, nevertheless he possessed a degree of dynamism. A metaphor for the Russian character? Presumably.

Curiously, it is difficult to maintain the parallelism under translation into English. To try to maintain parallelism, one would be forced to say either 'puffy, short-fingered hands and nimble feet (!) with thick calves', in which case one faces the problem that calves are not part of the feet, or 'puffy short-fingered arms (!) and nimble legs with thick calves', awkward because arms do not have fingers in English. The translation that makes sense in English – 'hands with puffy, stubby fingers and nimble legs with thick calves' – loses the parallelism. In Russian, *руки* 'arms/hands' do have fingers, and *ноги* 'legs/feet' have calves, Turgenev could construct this description of upper and lower

limbs as parallel. The contrast between English and Russian on this point seems to support the notion that it matters whether a language makes a distinction between hand and arm (or leg and foot). Is that distinction – or in this instance, its absence in Russian – a part of the language? Evidently. In the culture? Again, presumably so. In the mental structures? By definition it must be, since Turgenev could not do something that would violate his cognitive structures. Yet a little caution is advisable here. Turgenev was able to get away with blurring a distinction that we would not blur in English, but it does not follow that Turgenev (and reasoning by the principle of pars pro toto, every Russian) cannot make the distinction at all.

The second anecdote, the simplest example on the surface, suggests that for a Russian speaker, it makes as much sense to use *hand* as *arm* in the English idiom *to twist someone's arm.* At the minimum, that is presumably because there is no difference between 'hand' and 'arm' in Russian (in the language or the culture). The stronger claim would be that, because the language does not make this distinction (regularly or obligatorily), the distinction is not available to an individual Russian in his/her mental structures. Is that claim justified? The colleague in question would, I think, nine times out of ten correctly use the words *hand* and *arm* in English. The error in this idiom is a linguistic error, one that derives from an incomplete (albeit impressive) knowledge of English. It is not clear, therefore, whether one would really be justified in concluding that this speaker (and by analogy, any Russian, bilingual, partially bilingual, or monolingual) lacks any mental awareness of the internal constituency of the lower and upper limbs.

The third anecdote is the most complex. Nabokov, as I think could be documented in various ways, worked to develop a style in English that was not just an overlay on his native Russian (despite *ideally bald,* a literal translation of an implicit Russian phrase совершенно лысый). Here one wonders if he did not consciously make use of the English contrast between the *foot* and the *leg* (the whole of the lower limbs, which often does not include the foot) to construct his description of Pnin. In the Russian, Nabokov was almost obligated to use ступня for the foot, since otherwise Pnin would have the four lower extremities. But evidently Russians are not used to differentiating the whole нога from the ступня, a term which is too anatomical, as the substitution of нога for ступня demonstrates. The act of substitution seems to provide evidence that Russians do not distinguish between 'leg' and 'foot'. But again, is that true? Ступня is a word of Russian. Nabokov

used it in his translation, and other Russians can use it. They just don't like to. It would therefore be a little extreme to say that, because Russian is reluctant to draw distinction between what Western European languages distinguish as 'leg' and 'foot' (or 'hand' and 'arm'), speakers of Russian make no distinction in their mental structures.

More generally, I hope these anecdotes suggest that there should be some middle ground (or perhaps a continuum of middle grounds) between two extreme points of view – between the universalistic point of view that there is no cultural relativism in semantic structures and the extreme relativistic point of view that the mental structures of speakers of a given language are isomorphic to the semantic categories of that language or the mental structures of speakers of a language. The anecdotes above argue that the fact that Russian predominantly makes use of a single word for a conceptual domain in which English and other Western European languages would use two does influence what may be said in Russian, but that does not guarantee complete isomorphism between linguistic semantics and mental structures. For that matter, the second example seems to indicate that there need not be complete isomorphism between all parts of one speaker's linguistic performance, if a colleague can make a minor mistake in an idiom while otherwise using the English terms correctly.

The assumption that any similarity must necessarily imply complete isomorphism in all respects – what Bazell ([1952] 1966) called 'the correspondence fallacy' – is one of the most pernicious beliefs of modern linguistics. In the issue of language and culture, the assumption of isomorphism amounts to a rather virulent form of structuralism, for it is tantamount to the assumption that anything that is said (or, apparently, thought) by a speaker can only be a token of the general cultural meaning assigned to linguistic units. Language 'performance' is reduced to algorithmic behavior that is always consistent with underlying structures. How could it be otherwise, you might ask: if there are grammars (or lexicons or phonologies or any form of rigorous subsystems of language), usage cannot be inconsistent with them.

How we understand the relationship between system and usage may in some measure depend on what we expect to see. If we assume complete systemic determinism, then of course no speaker can use language (or use cognitive structures – that is, think) in a way that is inconsistent with the structures set by language. But if we look for meaning that is not just an implementation of the basic systemic meaning of the language, we may find some lack of predictability, some

idiosyncrasy, which would suggest that the potential meanings of a word (to limit the discussion to lexical items) are not always contained completely in the conventional, general, societal meaning of the word.

An interesting case of the semantics of body part terminology can be found in Puškin. Russian at the turn of the nineteenth century had by and large generalized a newer etymon *глаза* (plural) for 'eyes', which we will write as 'eyes$_2$' below, at the expense of the older, general Slavic *очи*, which we may write as 'eyes$_1$'. The older form was still available in poetry. In Puškin's oeuvre generally, it is hard to pick out a pattern in the distribution of meaning of *глаза* and *очи*. Possibly *очи* was just 'archaic' or 'poetic'.[7] Specifically in *Evgenij Onegin*,[8] however, there seems to be a richer difference.

In *Evgenij Onegin*, the two words are used about an equal number of times, *глаза* 14 times and *очи* 17 times. *Глаза* is used for eyes understood as tools for performing the task of vision, construed as a basically cognitive, rational, intellectual task, notably the task of reading: И что же? *Глаза* его читали. / Но мысли были далеко (8.xxxvi) 'And lo – his *eyes*$_2$ were reading / but his thoughts were far away'. The sense of vision may be somewhat metaphorical; the locative *в глазах* refers to the field of vision in: И версты, теша праздный взор, / *В глазах* мелькают, как забор (7.xxxv) 'and mileposts, humoring the idle gaze / before one's *eyes*$_2$ flick like a fence'. *Глаза* also are body parts that can vary in certain mechanical ways (color or the like), thereby providing a tag for differentiating one person from another (*Глаза* как небо голубые [2.xxiii] '*eyes*$_2$ azure as the sky'). Thus when someone examines the *глаза* of another person, the perceiver reads only the external qualities of the person examined.

If *глаза* are the tools used by neo-classical rational man, *очи* are what man as the Romantic individual,[9] man as vessel of the soul, uses. *Очи* perceive spiritual truths and assimilate epiphanies, as when it is said of Tat′jana's soul: И дождалась... Открылись *очи* / Она сказала: = то он! (3.viii) 'And its wait was rewarded. Her *eyes*$_1$ opened; / she said: 'Tis he!'' *Очи* do not merely engage in perception of the surface affects of the object of vision, but absorb the essence of that object: Мужчины кланялися ниже / Ловили взор ее *очей* (8.xv) 'the men bowed lower, / sought to catch the gaze of her *eyes*$_1$'.

Очи do not merely perceive the outside world, they also reveal the innermost thoughts and feelings of the person: С печальной думою *в очах* (8.v) 'with woeful meditation in her *eyes*$_1$.' A tear may cloud the *глаза* 'eyes$_2$':

Глазами беглыми читает Простую надпись – и слеза Туманит нежные *глаза*. (6.xli)	with skimming *eyes*$_2$ reads the simple scripture – and a tear dims her soft *eyes*$_2$.

but tears well up from the source of *очи*:

Она темнеющих *очей* Не подымает: пышет бурно В ней страстный жар; ей душно, дурно; Она приветствий двух друзей Не слышит, слезы *из очей* Хотят уж капать; [....] (5.xxx)	she darkening *eyes*$_1$ does not raise. Stormily there breathes in her a passionate glow; she suffocates, feels faint the two friends' greetings she does not hear; the tears from her *eyes*$_1$ are on the point of trickling: [....]

We have here the old (Romantic) metaphor of the eye as window on the soul, revitalized through a lexical difference in *Onegin.*

We even have something like a minimal pair. Of the general Tat′jana will eventually marry it is said:

А *глаз* меж тем с нее не сводит Какой-то важный генерал. (7.liv)	but meantime does not take his *eyes*$_2$ off her a certain imposing general

But as Tat′jana later examines Onegin (after her marriage to the general):

Она его не подымает	She does not bid him rise
И, не сводя с него *очей*	and, not taking her *eyes*$_1$ off him,
От жадных уст не отымает	does not withdraw from his avid lips
Бесчувственной руки своей ... (8.xlii)	her insensible hand...

she does so thoroughly, searching his face for clues about his feelings. But earlier, if Tat′jana examined Onegin with her *очи,* expecting to read his feelings, the general, who is presented as incapable of feeling, cannot examine a person to decipher his or her feelings. If he did not take his *глаза* (eyes$_2$) from her, then all he did was keep her in his field of vision.

In general, Tat′jana possesses *очи,* her suitors *глаза.* The exceptions are as striking as the many examples which conform to the rule. After Onegin has rejected her but then appears at her house, Tat′jana is confused by мгновенной нежностью *очей* (6.iii) 'the momentary softness of his *eyes*$_1$' Or what she wanted to believe was the tenderness of Onegin's eyes. That, perhaps, was her mistake all along – in assuming that there was a взор его *очей* (5.xxxiv) 'look of his *eyes*$_1$'.[10] For Onegin's part, the declaration of love he eventually makes to Tat′jana in his letter is flawed by its reliance on *глаза:*

Нет, поминутно видеть вас,	No – every minute to see you;
Повсюду следовать за вами	follow you everywhere
Улыбку уст, движенье *глаз*	the smile of your lips, movement of your *eyes*$_2$,
Ловить влюбленными *глазами,*	to try to capture with enamored *eyes*$_2$;
[...]	[...]
[...] вот блаженство! (8.O)	[...] that's bliss!

Tat′jana's feelings, which are expressed not with *глаза* but with *очи,* cannot be understood by someone using only his *глаза* . Tat′jana has *очи,* and mistakenly expects others too as well; Onegin has only *глаза. Очи,* then, allow for two-way communication between perceiver and perceived. They are dialogic. The events *очи* participate in are activities, and what is perceived are properties that potentially have

many values. The events *глаза* participate in are states, with only two values – one either perceives an entity or one does not. They are one-way, non-dialogic tools. The difference is preserved, at least in poetic language, into the twentieth century, inasmuch as the poet V. Xlebnikov could formulate the seemingly redundant pair of lines about the prophetic eyes of Lermontov:

И в небесах зажглись, как *очи,*	And in the heavens lit up, like *eyes*$_1$,
Большие серые *глаза*	Large grey *eyes*$_2$.[11]

For Xlebnikov *очи* 'eyes$_1$' are still intrinsically expressive.

What does this interpretation of the distribution and paradigmatic meaning differences between *очи* and *глаза* say about language and cognition? At first one might be tempted to say that it is evidence that Russian is more dialogic, more interactive than other languages/cultures in its use of names for body parts. The result seems consistent with the argument of Chapter 12 of Wierzbicka 1992, in which it is suggested that Russian abounds in verbs describing an 'active' involvement with emotions, in contrast to the more static nature of Anglo-Saxon emotion verbs; that in turn is tied to a more reticent character on the part of Anglo-Saxons. (Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is full of examples of hands and fingers stretching out and communicating.) One can easily imagine a Wierzbickian gloss to these two Russian words, something like: *глаза* 'by means of these, X has Y in X's field of vision' as opposed to *очи* 'by means of these, X perceives Y and qualities of Y, and may thereby reveal qualities of X which Y could perceive'.

But here's the rub. This dialogic sense comes out in the archaic word *очи* in its opposition to *глаза,* and then only in Puškin, and then only, or more prominently, in one work of Puškin. If in general culture, language, and cognition are isomorphic, this dialogic meaning must be intrinsic to the word *очи* but missing in *глаза,* and therefore the dialogic meaning must disappear once this archaic word disappears, which in turn would mean that Russian, and Russians, are becoming less dialogic with time.

Something is amiss here. It seems somewhat exaggerated to put so much stock in one word. What we have here is a case in which meaning is imposed idiosyncratically on an inherited lexical difference. Given two lexical items which are roughly synonymous (there is no need to

reiterate that complete synonymy does not occur), a culture, or an individual – as happens in this case – may choose to imbue the contrast with meaning (in this instance, in only part of his linguistic activity). The meaning that has been imposed idiosyncratically by Puškin in perhaps one work is nevertheless in a curious way a universal meaning. The historically newer word *глаза* began as a word designating 'spherical object, orb' and then was extended to refer to the eyes, viewed first and foremost as physical objects ('eyeball(s)'). Puškin is in a way making use of a similar distinction – *глаза* involve visual, cognitive, concrete perception, *очи* involve a more abstract kind of perception. The pattern is quite likely typical in the development of body part terminology.

A parallel of sorts can be cited in the still viable contrast between *hoofs* and *hooves* as plurals for *hoof* in English. *Hoofs*, the form in which the old alternation in voicing of fricatives has been lost, has long been the general form used in anatomical descriptions. Yet the older form *hooves* continues to occur. To the extent that there is a stable difference in meaning, it seems that *hooves* is laden with the associations of rich event scenarios – of agents (steeds) who perform dramatic actions (thundering or the like). Two examples from one poet:

> The wind leans from Brady's, and the coltsfoot leaves are holed with rust,
> Rain fills the cart-tracks and the sole-place grooves;
> A yellow sun reflects in Donaghmoyne
> The poignant light in puddles shaped by *hooves*.[12]

And again:

> That was how his life happened.
> No mad *hooves* galloping in the sky,
> But the weak, washy way of true tragedy –
> A sick horse nosing around the meadow for a clean place to die.[13]

Hooves are animate spirits. They leave imprints, they engage in heroic activities like galloping, their activities have reverberations – like Puškin's *очи*, they communicate.

There may well be something of a general pattern here, whereby newer lexical items for body parts will begin the life cycle of development with highly tangible, concrete, anatomical meaning, while

the older form will carry with it rich associations of complete event scenarios. If so, then one cannot use examples like these to claim that Russian body part terminology is more attuned to dialogicity than English.

One might well object that Patrick Kavanagh's use of *hooves* is idiosyncratic, like Puškin's use of *очи*. If these uses are idiosyncratic, then there must be meaning that involves making use of the stable, culturally sanctioned meanings but is not already completely contained in the cultural meanings. If that is so, it means that we never know for sure when we cite evidence whether it is in the culture or in the individual's manipulation of the linguistic tools provided by the culture. If it is possible to manipulate meaning idiosyncratically (within limits, obviously), then semantics does not completely dictate and constrain the meaning that individuals can impute. What is ultimately of interest is the strategies that people use. Lexical semantics are merely the tip of the semantic iceberg. It's what we can see. People are constrained to *talk* using the terms they have, but we don't know whether people are constrained to *think* in those terms: precisely because meanings are strategies rather than fixed entities, they may well intend meanings that are significantly different (and therefore more interesting) than might appear if one viewed meaning only as an instantiation of whatever the global, invariant *Gesamtbedeutung* of a word is. In examining cultural structures, our attention should be directed not only to identifying the stable patterns of language and culture, but at least as much to the ways in which speakers of a language/culture make use of those stable patterns in their parole.

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Notes

1. I. S. Turgenev, 'Poezdka v Al'bano i Fraskati. Vospominanie ob A. A. Ivanove,' Polnoe sobranie sočinenij i pisem v dvadcati vos'mi tomax. Sočinenija v pjatnadcati tomax, 14 (Moscow-Leningrad: Nauka, 1967), 88. Emphasis is added throughout in examples.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, Pnin (New York: Avon, 1953), 7.

3. I. S. Turgenev, Otcy i deti, Polnoe sobranie sočinenij i pisem v dvadcati vos'mi tomax. Sočinenija v pjatnadcati tomax, 8 (Moscow-Leningrad: Nauka, 1964), 200; Ivan Turgenev, Fathers and Sons, transl. Constance Garnett, ed. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York-London: W. W. Norton, 1966), 4.
4. Ibid.
5. I. S. Turgenev, Otcy i deti, 212; Ivan Turgenev, Fathers and Sons, 14.
6. I. S. Turgenev, Otcy i deti, 312.
7. Il'inskaja (1970) in general casts the discussion of the distribution of these synonyms in Puškin and other poetry of the time in terms of a vertical stylistic hierarchy. In her analysis, *очи* is basically a 'poeticism' and 'Slavonicism' which, interestingly, tends to be used more frequently than *глаза* (see especially pp. 97-99, 167-70).
8. The normal conventions for books and stanzas are followed for citations from: A. S. Puškin, Evgenii Onegin. Puškin. Polnoe sobranie sočinenij, 6, ed. B. V. Tomaševskij (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1937) and Aleksandr Pushkin, Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse, transl. Vladimir Nabokov, 1 (Bollingen Series, 72) (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1964).
9. The tension between the classical and romantic *Weltanschauungen* is of course basic to Puškin, so much so that it would be diffcult to point to a single discussion. See recently Gasparov 1992, notably but not exclusively pp. 62-74, 320-26.
10. Onegin also possesses *очи* when Tat'jana sees him in her dream (5.xx). She reads with *глаза* when she recapitulates Onegin's reading at his house.
11. Velimir Xlebnikov, 'Na rodine krasivoj smerti – Mašuke,' #153, *Tvorenija*, ed. V.P. Grigor'ev and A.E. Parnis (Mosow: Sovetskij Pisatel', 1986).
12. Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1964), p. 36.
13. Ibid, p. 35.

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Wierzbicka, Anna. 1992. Semantics, Culture, and Cognition. Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations. Oxford: University Press.