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THE DYNAMICS OF ‘THE BRITISH IDENTITY’ AS A CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH MASS MEDIA: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract: This article explores the multifaceted nature of “The British Identity” within the context of political discourse, focusing on its representation in The Guardian newspaper. The aim of this study is to investigate the content specificity of the concept and its transformation under the influence of socio-cultural and extralinguistic factors. Through a qualitative analysis of selected articles from The Guardian, the paper examines the linguistic units used to represent the British identity and the evaluative nature of their expression. The study adopts a conceptual framework that considers the British identity as a political and cultural concept, susceptible to diverse interpretations and judgments within the ideological context. By employing a content analysis approach, the research reveals the tensions arising from the attempt to cater to both conservative and progressive factions of the UK society. The findings indicate that the representation of the British identity in The Guardian is influenced by socio-cultural factors, reflecting the evolving dynamics of British society. The analysis highlights the presence of evaluative expressions, reflecting the conceptual domain’s evaluative nature and its connection to political and cultural debates, particularly those concerning multiculturalism. While the study predominantly relies on articles from The Guardian, it acknowledges the need for broader source diversity to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the British identity. Moreover, the paper suggests that further research in this field holds promise for exploring the evolution and adaptation of conceptual domains in an ever-changing world. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by shedding light on the complex and evolving nature of the British identity within political discourse. The research serves as a foundation for future investigations into the concept of identity and its representation in professional media outlets, and its implications for social cohesion in diverse societies.

Keywords: linguoculturology, linguoconceptology, concept, the English language, the British identity, mass media.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Concepts act as structural and substantial elements of the individual's conceptual system and ensure the processing of information that reflects the subjective experience of the person, as defined by certain social categories and classes. The basic types of classification activity are conceptualization and categorization, the former of which involves identifying the minimum significant units of experience and patterns of knowledge, while the latter involves grouping certain phenomena into larger clusters, or categories, which are based on comparable attributes. Particular characteristics of a certain culture are captured at the level of cultural concepts, which are collective meaningful mental entities that represent semantic qualities of cultural connotations routinely expressed in language through describing or naming.

The topicality of the research subject is conditioned by the necessity to study the actualization process of semantic speech structures, implementing evaluative meanings in the English-speaking society at the level of linguistic meanings in various types of discourse. This study particularly addresses the media discourse analysis in terms of conceptual structures. More specifically, it delves into how conceptual structures are represented in texts through media discourse analysis. Such representational distinctiveness largely depends on the degree to which evaluative features are expressed, contingent upon the methods and interpretation style utilized.

Consequently, the purpose of this research is to study the process of verbal representation of the concept 'The British Identity' in the modern British linguistic culture, bearing in mind the functioning of the relevant language units in mass media texts, while focusing on the realization of the evaluative attributes given at the language level.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The selection of analysis methods and techniques is influenced by the practical and theoretical objectives of the research, specified goals, and the unique nature of the material under scrutiny. Employing a complex methodology, this study includes several types of analysis such as:

1. Conceptual Analysis: This technique involves analyzing and structuring the semantic components of the concepts with an aim to reconstruct them, using the representative characteristics of relevant language units as a basis.
2. Intralinguistic Semantic Analysis: This approach focuses on revealing common and nationally-specific traits in the semantics of language units.
3. Contextual Analysis: This entails investigating the nuances of the context that guide the process of semantic formation of connotations representing the meaning of language units.
4. Comparative Analysis: This examination uncovers the functional characteristics of the verbal representations of these concepts across varying linguocultural communities and different interpretational aspects.
5. Functional and Stylistic Analysis: This analysis determines the methods of representation of expressive-emotional and evaluative meanings of language units in the media texts under consideration, with the intent to achieve a certain stylistic effect.

The research material encompasses diverse examples from lexicographical sources and texts pertinent to mass media discourse. This primarily includes articles and speeches from British political figures that have been published in the prominent and credible newspaper, "The Guardian".

Additionally, widely circulated statements from renowned public figures, as well as public socio-political advertisements and propaganda bulletins, are extensively utilized. A substantial portion of the material is derived from online sources.

3. A BRIEF EXCURSUS INTO THE HISTORY OF THE ‘CONCEPT’

3.1. Preliminary remarks

In this article, we will venture to analyse the conceptual structure ‘The British Identity’ and its distinctive verbal representation in modern English. Our study would not have been feasible without tapping into the field of linguocultural studies — particularly linguoculturology, a discipline focused on exploring the cultural expressions of people, primarily spiritual, as mirrored and imprinted in their language and speech.

The primary research unit in linguoculturology is the linguocultural concept, generally reduced to a concept as a collection of a subject’s intrinsic qualities, steeply entrenched in culture and language.

Our work revolves around the analysis of British media, making it pertinent to scrutinize political discourse through the lens of conceptual structures’ representation within formalizing texts. The representational specifics of these structures are largely shaped by the potential to express value judgements, contingent on the nature of interpretation and the reader’s response in today’s rapidly transforming world [Khramchenko, 2019, pp. 1287-1291].

Addressing the ‘The British Identity’ concept’s functional and semantic characteristics—which occupies a pivotal place in the political and cultural landscapes of the modern English-speaking world—reveals the importance of this article. Furthermore, we aim to examine how manipulation techniques employed in contemporary media influence the formation and evolution of concepts in the public consciousness.

3.2. Linking the concept to culture

The issue of conceptualization indubitably pertains to the sphere of unique cultural phenomena. Since the foundational unit of linguocultural studies, as previously mentioned, is a concept, it primarily elucidates cultural meaning. It exists “by default” as a linguocultural concept (linguoconcept) – a semantic unit of the “language” of culture. Its expression, in turn, is a bilateral linguistic sign with a linear extent that is not inherently constrained [Teliya, 2002, p. 92]. The notion of culture as a “symbolic universe” [Kassirer, 2000], which specifically manifests in an “interval of abstraction” (when compared to a foreign culture) and is necessarily ethnospecific, is decisive in understanding the linguoconcept.

It follows that the leading distinguishing feature of a linguoconcept is its ethno-cultural marking. At the same time, language in linguocultural studies is not only and not so much a tool to comprehend culture, it is an integral part of it, “one of its constituent parts” [Tolstoi, 1997]. As a matter of fact, attention to the linguistic, sign “body” of a concept distinguishes its linguocultural understanding from all others: through its “name”, coinciding, as a rule, with the dominant of the corresponding synonymic series, a linguoconcept is included in the lexical system of a particular natural language, and its place in the latter determines the contours of its “meaningful component”.

A concept (in its broader sense) is a synthesizing linguistic entity that methodologically parallels representation (image), concept per se and meaning and incorporates them in a reduced form – a kind of “hyperonym” [Kolesov, 2002, p. 122] of the latter. Linguistic personality and concept are the basic categories of linguoculturology, which reflect the consciousness and mentality of the generalized speaker of a natural language. According to Stepanov [2001], in cultural studies the concept acts as the basic cell of culture in the mental world of a person. As the “legitimate heir” of these semiotic categories, the linguoconcept is characterized by heterogeneity and multi-attributes, taking from the concept the discursive representation of meaning, from the image the metaphorical and emotive nature of this representation, and from the meaning the inclusion of its name in the lexical system of language.

Maslova [2008] argues, that each native speaker is simultaneously a cultural carrier, and thus language signs gain the ability to function as cultural signs thereby serving as a vehicle for the manifestation of the core attitudes of culture. Wierzbicka et al. [1999] also point out the national conditionality of language. At the same time, according to the scholars, cultural differences could not be investigated if the meanings of all words without exception were culturally specific – only clearly identified linguistic universals can provide a solid basis for comparing conceptual spaces fixed in lexical systems of different languages [Wierzbicka et al., 1999, p. 291].

3.3 Cultural concept and politics

Within the context of our research into the conceptual structure of ‘The British Identity’ in political discourse, we cannot fail to mention the concept of a “conceptual picture of the world” [Kharkovskaya et al., 2020, pp. 62–68]. The conceptual picture of the world is understood by researchers as the “grid of coordinates” through which one perceives reality and arranges its various manifestations in one’s mind. It represents the initial element of a person’s worldview and “relies to a large extent on the principle of value orientation, which acts in it as the main principle of hierarchization of objects” [Gurevich, 1972, p. 15; Dyakonov, 1977, p. 30]. It is important to note that highlighting the range of national concepts that make up the national cultural world allows us to distinguish between “our own” and “alien” with a certain degree of confidence, which can help to avoid a certain bias in political and social assessments or to avoid slip-ups in our own statements and behaviour, which certainly comes to the fore if we are talking about the current state of the media.

4. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE ‘BRITISH’? ANALYSIS OF THE EMPIRICAL MATERIAL FROM “THE GUARDIAN”

Before we turn to the material of the study, it should be noted that the presentation of such a complex concept as ‘The British Identity’ in media texts is determined by a number of factors, both linguistic and extra-linguistic in nature. The latter include a wide variety of aspects and ways of covering events, including those that do not always fully coincide with the real perceptions of the authors (both collective and individual) who create these texts [Vishnyakova et al., 2019, pp. 21–31].

So, what is ‘the British Identity’? There is no straightforward and clear-cut answer to this question, especially if we discuss it within the context of political discourse. National identity emerges from a sense of belonging to a community that can identify itself as a nation. It is also a unique form of group identity through which people, despite the absence of physical contact,

feel united due to shared language and a multitude of traditions. Furthermore, historical memory, which allows for feelings of pride in the nation's successes and achievements or false shame for its defeats and failures, plays a vital role. Justifiably, one might expect a sense of pride in being part of a great nation. However, in today's world, this assertion is gradually becoming less definitive. In the specific case of Britain, the issues related to national identity are only growing more complex.

In an article on the then impending referendum on Scottish secession [Moss, 2012, February 5] the author is very ambivalent about the current state of the United Kingdom, and describes it as *"a basically indefensible and unadaptable relic, not a modern state form"*. It is very interesting to note that instead of using the phrase 'The British Identity', the author offers several variants of his own, such as: *"the theory of Britishness"* or *"the essence of Britishness"*. Replacing "identity" with the rather expansive and complex words "theory" and "essence" in these expressions may serve the fact that a debate persists in Britain concerning the nature of being an Englishman, what characteristics can be highlighted, etc. And so far they have yielded no visible result.

If we are talking about mass media as a whole, there is such a thing as a 'dialogue of opinions'. This notion can be defined as the following: each editor, author of articles and reader has a different perspective on a particular issue, which they express in one way or another, seeking support from readers who can share their point of view. Even if the texts themselves are a product of collective activity, as has been said above. Readers, in turn, may not have the same opinion as the one stated in the article, so consensus in this respect is a relative concept.

Thus, what features of Britishness does the author of the article consider to be the most important? *"Tolerance", "openness", "diversity"*, with not everyone sharing his point of view: *"The young – those **under 35**, let's say – have embraced the virtues of a tolerant, easy-going, multi-cultural society; many of those **over 65**, especially in the big cities, feel dispossessed, their old cultural certainties shattered; those **in between** – me and Paxman aside, perhaps – are just about swimming with the tide, or at least keeping our thoughts to ourselves"*. The author divides, rather boldly, the entire British community (including the Irish and Scots) into three age groups – "under 35", "over 65", and "those in between", thus summing up rather disappointingly: *"The young, for all the talk of a lost generation, **have buoyancy and self-belief**, while the old **have their gripes and prejudices** to sustain them"*.

At the same time, both young and old representatives of the Misty Albion named the following values and elements of the state system, which they thought important to consider themselves English: the monarchy, the army, the BBC, parliament, democracy, freedom, equality before the law, openness, tolerance, fairness, justice. In this regard, it is also worth noting that due to the active spread of the policy of multiculturalism, the manifestation of patriotic tendencies is closely linked to issues of political correctness in Britain [Baranova & Kriakina, 2020, p. 3], which can be confirmed by the following observation of the British writer Theodore Dalrymple, who characterizes this notion as follows:

"Political correctness is communist propaganda. In my study of communist societies, I came to the conclusion that the purpose of communist propaganda was not to persuade or convince, nor to inform, but to humiliate; and therefore, the less it corresponded to reality the better. When people are forced to remain silent when they are being told the most obvious lies, or even worse when they are forced to repeat the lies themselves, they lose once and for all their sense of probity. To assent to obvious lies is to cooperate with evil, and in some small way to become evil oneself. One's standing to resist anything is thus eroded, and even destroyed. A society of emasculated liars is easy to control. I think if you examine political correctness, it has the same effect ..." [Glazov, 2005, August 31].

In another article, which is called “England’s identity crisis: what does it mean to be English?” [Harris, 2014, July 21], questions of a different kind are already being asked, namely to what extent is ‘the English identity’ valid at present? The author is concerned not just with the state of the nation in general, but with “*the future of the United Kingdom itself*” in particular. We find very peculiar the way in which the author of this article describes the British identity, but no longer within a conceptual framework as such, but within an entire country:

“Britain and the UK are concepts loaded down with the stuff of empire and colonialism, which all four countries in the UK should shrug off”. Here the author calls for a rejection of the so-called post-imperialist syndrome, which, as we all know, the UK still suffers from to this day. So how should the people of the UK get rid of this inherited burden? The answer is very simple and succinct – “*...reinvent an identity ... better than the battered, cliché-ridden hulk which the retreating tide of imperialism has left them*”. The use of emotive expressive words such as “battered”, “shrug off” and “cliché-ridden” indicates that the “old identity”, along with the state system, has long since outlived itself and requires action from politicians and ordinary people alike.

However, the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ [Vishnyakova & Kostina, 2013, pp. 93–104], which has also occupied the minds of the UK citizens for at least the past decades, is also mentioned here: “*England had a mission to be an inclusive multicultural nation and this old-fashioned imperialist UK has stopped it from fulfilling its national destiny*”. According to the author, becoming “an inclusive multicultural nation” where it does not matter what your background is – that is the destiny of (national) any nation, including the UK. However, would this prediction be considered fulfilled if, as of 3 September 2022, in an article [Krishna, 2022, September 3] published in the Financial Express, people of Indian origin (and who were already born in the UK) own more private property in England than the English themselves? Does not this indicate the degeneration of the English nation as such?

Afterwards, the author gives the reader another interpretation of the conceptual structure of ‘The British Identity’ – “*...other people see a “British” identity encompassing a huge range of people, as against an Englishness that is too often crabby and xenophobic*”. This means that the two structures are drifting apart: ‘British identity’ vs ‘Englishness’, with the former clearly used with at least a prejudiced, if not ironic, point of view, while the latter is used with a clearly negative connotation – it is both “crabby” and “xenophobic”, which puts a stop to ‘Englishness’ as a conceptual structure that should be discussed in public. In addition to this, the author also notes that the structure is “*that image of an insular, sour, grievance-fuelled Englishness, which is clearly a relic of the imperialist past when the English nation was placed on a pedestal as the dominant world nation and is clearly damaging to the progressive modern UK*” [Krishna, 2022, September 3].

The author of the article also emphasizes that not all political parties in England will be discussing the issue of England’s values and what it is called in the world for a very long time yet: “*There will also be an inevitable discussion about values, history and culture. Are people on the liberal left prepared to let England be defined as the country of kings and queens, Victorian values, the Anglican church, Margaret Thatcher, Downton Abbey and Nigel Farage?*” [Krishna, 2022, September 3].

In addition, the article mentions a very interesting example of Billy Bragg, who has been discussing issues relating to England for over a decade, both in his writings and his songs. In 2002, he released the album “England, Half English”, the title of which he borrowed from George Orwell and adorned with St. George’s flag. In the title track, he tried to explore what his home country was and is:

*“My mother was **half English** and I’m **half English** too
 I’m a **great big bundle of culture** tied up in the **red white and blue**
 I’m a fine example of your **Essex man**
 And I’m well familiar with the **Hindustan**
 ‘Cos my neighbours are **half-English**, and I’m **half-English** too”.*

According to his philosophy, “half-English”, there is no point or much reason to hide behind the Union Jack, as that period has long since passed and the Englanders (all) need a “civic renewal”. In this regard, it should also be noted that although in a multicultural country, the revival and preservation of national identity may become increasingly problematic in the near future, especially in terms of politics at the current moment in time, national identity is starting to play a more prominent role. Despite the fact that in the wake of Brexit, the British Government introduced a wide, multi-year programme of change, led by the Home Office, to transform the operation of the UK’s border and immigration system, the number of immigrants still continues to increase every year (as of the year ending June 2021, people born outside the UK made up an estimated 14.5% of the UK’s population, or 9.6 million people). In general, the very process of transformation of this mental-linguistic entity is becoming a subject of discussion by many authors. For example, the following statement confirms this point about British culture as a repository of values that have been formed over the centuries:

“The truth is that British Culture has already adapted to and been influenced all of the positive things brought to our nation from our colonial empire. For example, washing daily, or far more often, all types of foreign food, and many notable additions to our language. It would seem therefore that we have already taken the best from our master’s colonies, including of course the more intelligent members of their respective populations, like for example doctors, nurses, business people, scientists, and, dare I say, politicians? Add to this long list, the world’s oil, diamonds, silver, gold, and all types of other natural resources also including almost infinite amounts of relatively cheap, and skilled labour. Therefore we, or more accurately our own ESTABLISHMENT, have already raped these places and people of virtually everything they ever had of any real value, and continue to do so at an ever-increasing rate” [Archbishop Cranmer Blogspot].

In addition to what has been said above, we should also quote Madeleine Bunting and her article “My British identity is in Scotland’s hands now” [Bunting, 2014, July 21]: “Being British is always part of a dual identity. That doesn’t deny that Britain has a curious hollowness to it – its traditions of empire, war and monarchy are all problematic – and successive politicians’ attempts to redefine it have been lamentable... It is by definition a plural identity; it is multi-ethnic and that has offered a capaciousness for mass immigration in the 20th century. Black British, Asian British, British Muslim: these identities have emerged in the last 60 years and are still being worked out”.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it should be noted that in the process of studying political discourse, it is already evident that the content specificity of the concept ‘The British Identity’ itself is subject to various transformations and permutations due to the impact of various socio-cultural and extra-linguistic factors, which is naturally reflected in the implementation of its representative linguistic units in the texts of the British media, which is trying to please two parties at once, and “support” both older, rather conservative people and younger, more open and advanced representatives of the modern youth.

More than that, at the verbal level ‘the British identity’ conceptualized area has a high representativeness of the expression of evaluative nature, which is connected with the content specificity of the concept, serving in some cases as a political and cultural concept, provoking mixed interpretations and judgments in different conditions of the ideological context. Most vividly this aspect is revealed in the texts of mass media, both reflecting modern trends in the development of British society and the broad polemics on the issues of the multicultural environment. That is why it appears to us that further research in this field holds great promise in terms of the “evolution” and “adaptation” of the conceptualized domains (not just those of ‘the British Identity’) in the modern, ever-changing world.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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