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**TIME, MIND AND LANGUAGE:  
THE REPRESENTATION OF TIME  
IN LATVIAN AND ENGLISH**

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Saint Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, 'For what is time? Who can readily and briefly explain this? Who can even in thought comprehend it, so as to utter a word about it? If no one asks me, I know: if I wish to explain it to one who asketh, I know not' (AD 401), thus characterizing the nature of abstract concepts that are cognizable but hard to express. Proceeding with the above stated quote, the goal of this research paper is to examine the relationship between time, mind, and language in order to understand how linguistic representation of time impacts individual perception of the world. In order to accomplish this aim, I shall, first, conduct a comparative analysis of theoretical literature and, secondly, apply the theoretical framework to linguistic analysis of the representation of time in English and Latvian. Given the limited scope of the present paper, only a few lexical items describing time will be investigated in the two languages under analysis, according to the qualitative perspective of a case study.

The study has drawn the following research questions:

- 1) What is time and how do we perceive it?
- 2) How do languages affect human perception of time?
- 3) How is time represented in English and Latvian?

In view of the above stated, the research has set its enabling objectives:

- 1) to read and analyze the theoretical writings concerning the research subject;
- 2) to draw the methodological framework applicable to the research;
- 3) to analyze the research data by applying the selected research method;
- 4) to compile a comparative summary of the results;
- 5) to reflect the analyzed research data in the empirical part of the research;
- 6) to draw relevant conclusions.

*Chapter 1* reviews definitions and different models of time based on the Metaphor Theory and investigates the relations between language and cognitive processes in works by Henri Bergson, Lera Boroditsky, Daniel Casasanto, Imanuel Kant, Éva Kovács, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Juri Lotman, Günter Radden, and Steven Pinker.

*Chapter 2* provides a comparative linguistic analysis of select lexical items representing time in English and Latvian, exemplifying the theoretical concepts and illustrating how languages filter cognitive experiences.

# 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to see what role language plays in shaping time as an abstract notion, I shall, first, explore the definitions of time and cognitive processes involved in perceiving and translating nonverbal experience into verbal images based on the Metaphor Theory compared to Lotman's Semiosphere. Next, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will be examined along with an outline of different models of time as observed in diverse cultures.

## 1.1. The language and cognition of time

According to Saint Augustine, 'It is in [...] mind, that [we] measure times' (Saint Augustine, Book XI). Imanuel Kant goes further by claiming that 'Time is not an empirical concept. For neither co-existence nor succession would be perceived by us, if the representation of time did not exist as a foundation *a priori*' (1781: 54). Another *a priori* of the human mind seems to be that 'we think in visual images, we think in auditory images, we think in abstract propositions about what is true about what' (Steven Pinker, 1998). Thus, as Éva Kovács points out, 'the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is often a matter of metaphor' (2006). Metaphor bridges the gaps of linguistic ambiguity and mirrors the mental process of thinking that, according to Pinker, does not function according to 'any left-to-right linear order the way language does, but [displays] a web of connections between concepts [...] connected with other aspects of experience' (1998). Moreover, as 'the mind does not manufacture abstract concepts out of thin air... it adapts machinery that is already there' (Jackendoff, 1983: 188, quoted in Casasanto, 2010: 457), 'each time we use a linguistic metaphor, we activate the corresponding conceptual mapping' (Casasanto, 2010: 471). As a result, according to Lakoff and Johnson's Metaphor Theory, 'Different cultures have different ways of comprehending experience via conceptual metaphors' (1980). As Pinker indicates, though the language of mind is nonverbally universal – a mentalese of images, 'the contents of mentalese are supplied a lot by language' (1998).

Edward Sapir describes 'language as a medium [...] that [...] comprises two layers, the latent content of language – our intuitive record of experience – and the particular conformation of a given language – the specific how of our record of experience' (1921: 150). According to Pinker, language 'helps to think in certain ways, [serving as] one more mental scratch pad [...] to keep the ideas from fading' (1998). Likewise, time can be pictured as a record of events selected from the pool of possibilities, giving a particular form to latent experiences. Both language and time, thus, seem to be creative mediums of human self-

expression interlinked with culture and cognitive processes which resonates with Yuri Lotman's definition of semiosphere as 'the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist' (1984: 205). Similar to the semiosphere where 'the ensemble of semiotic formations precedes (not heuristically but functionally) the singular isolated language and becomes a condition for the existence of the latter' both giving rise to meaning and storing it (ibid.: 218-19), time comprises possibilities of events with meaning potential that, marked and memorized as individual and collective timelines, become an unfolding history.

Thus, language, mind and the perception of time that is described as inseparable from human reflection as a mental faculty processing experience are closely interlinked: time cannot be expressed other than a mental or linguistic metaphor while nothing can be experienced outside of time. As Henri Bergson notes, 'when we speak of time, we generally think of a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space, so as to form a discrete multiplicity' (1910: 90). Furthermore, linear perception of time as space allows to describe time as a series of events in terms of future, present and past tenses, though, as Saint Augustine reminds, 'present of things past [is] memory; present of things present, sight; present of things future, expectation' (AD 401, Book XI), so that the only real time for the self to generate meaning is now. Conceptual metaphors, on the other hand, help model reality by highlighting different mental routes and preserving a variety of perspectives from which abstract concepts can be approached so that prevalence of particular metaphors in a given culture affects perception and interpretation of time like select paradigms that influence the syntax of the narrative of life.

## **1.2. Models of time across cultures**

For decades there has persisted tension between the deterministic Sapir-Whorf view on languages as tools shaping thought by filtering perceptions and Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar 'invariant across languages and cultures' (Casasanto, 2010: 466). According to Casasanto, 'recent psycholinguistic evidence support[s] the Whorfian hypothesis' proving via a number of experiments that, though due to universal laws of physics 'prelinguistic children's conceptual mappings between time, distance, and amount could be the same universally', 'the way we deploy these image schemas depends on our linguistic experiences' (ibid.: 466; 471-2). Thus, as Boroditsky states, 'people in different cultures or groups have been shown to differ in whether they think of time as stationary or moving, limited or open-ended, as distance or quantity, horizontal or vertical, oriented from left to right, right to left, front to back, back to front, or in cardinal space (e.g., East to West)' (2011: 338-9).

According to Radden, this divergence in conceptual representations of time arises due to the fact that space as the physical domain upon which the metaphors of time are based is three-dimensional as opposed to time perceived as a one-dimensional sequence (2003: 237). Consequently, ‘different cultures and languages as well as the same culture and language may make different uses of potential mappings’ according to six metaphorical dimensions of time in terms of ‘(i) dimensionality of time, (ii) orientation of the time-line, (iii) shape of the time-line, (iv) position of times relative to the observer, (v) sequences of time units, and (vi) motion of time’ (ibid.). Due to the limitations of this paper, only three dimensions, namely, *dimensionality of time*, *shape of the timeline* and *motion of time* will be discussed in greater detail as these will be reflected in the empirical part of the research.

First, as Radden points out, time can be represented as a zero-dimensional “point in time”, duration is described one-dimensionally as having “length” or being “long” or “short”, and a period of time is seen either two-dimensionally as a “stretch” of time if the focus is on temporal continuity, [...] or three-dimensionally as a “span” of time if the focus is on the bounded duration of the period (2003: 227-8).

Secondly, time is imagined as linear to emphasize the ‘template for time as passing’, which is a dominant metaphor in Western cultures, as opposed to the cyclic model of time that highlights the ‘recurrent’ aspect of time (ibid.: 229). Thirdly, ‘two basic models of conceptualizing time as motion: the “moving-time model” and the “moving-ego model”’ are distinguished, focusing either on the *flow* and *change* of time where time moves ‘from the future to the past’ or on ‘goal-directed actions’ of the self where ‘the observer comes from the past and moves via the present into the future’ respectively (ibid.: 236-7). According to Boroditsky, research ‘findings demonstrate that [...] language not only reflects the structure of our non-linguistic mental representations, it can also [impact individual performance] in low-level perceptuo-motor tasks’ (2011: 337). Moreover, knowledge of other languages affects time perception because new conceptual metaphors offer new conceptual insights using different languages (ibid.: 336).

## 2. REPRESENTATION OF TIME IN ENGLISH AND LATVIAN

In order to investigate how languages reflect different models of time and whether conceptual differences exist between languages, English and Latvian languages will be compared, analyzing a few common lexical items denoting time. First, lexis representing duration in both languages will be explored, studying correlations between different parts of speech as defined in *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* and *Latviešu valodas vārdnīca*. Secondly, the models of the shape of the timeline and motion of time implied in the examples under analysis will be determined.

Duration of time in English is expressed via a spatial metaphor of distance that measures time according to its length, e.g. *a long time*. In Latvian, on the other hand, there exist two adjectives characterizing the length of time: *ilgs laiks*, which indicates duration directly, as opposed to *garš laiks*, where duration is expressed via a spacial metaphor as in English. The first expression has a neutral connotation because it is used to describe time only whereas the second expression *garš laiks* has a negative implicature in the Latvian language because it is associated with boredom due to an overstretch of time: Latvian *garlaicīgs* is an equivalent for English *boring*.

In both languages, other parts of speech share the root of the adjective denoting duration: English adjective *long* is associated with the verb *to long* and noun *longing*. Similarly, Latvian adjective *ilgs* is accompanied by a verb *ilgoties* and noun *ilgas*. Thus, the duration of time is associated with the active process of longing, desiring connected with dreaming and modeling of future expectations. The same correlation exists between English *year, yearning* and Latvian *gads, gaidas*. Consequently, though at first both languages seem to represent a linear model of time, also the cyclic representation is comprised in the two languages indicating active participation of the self in the formation of time and the narrative of life.

Consequently, it can be concluded that though particular cultures might be regarded as favoring a certain concept of time, languages preserve also traces of less frequent mappings while preference of particular conceptual mappings of time in languages is linked with cultural values.

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