

## COGNITIVE-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO SOME KYRGYZ LINGUA-CULTURAL CONCEPTS

## КОГНИТИВНО-СЕМИОТИЧЕСКИЙ ПОДХОД ПРИ ИССЛЕДОВАНИИ КЫРГЫЗСКИХ ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРНЫХ КОНЦЕПТОВ

**Аннотациясы:** 20-кылымдын аягы жана 21-кылымдын башындагы лингвистика илиминин мүнөздүү өзгөчөлүгү болуп лингвистикалык кубулуштарды жана категорияларды, б.а адамдын активдүү ролун анын менталдык жана кеп ишмердүүлүгүн изилдөө объектиси катары антропоцентрикалык өңүттөн иликтөө тенденциясынын кеңири жайылышы менен белгиленген. Мындан улам, заманбап лингвистикалык изилдөөлөр көбүнчө когнитивдик багытта өнүгө баштаган. Бул изилдөөлөрдүн көңүл чордону болуп, адамдын билимге ээ болуу, аны топтоо, чогултуу жана колдонуу менен биргеликте анын акыл-эсинде болуп жаткан менталдык процесстер болуп саналат.

Бул теорияларды эске алуу менен, мен айрым кыргыз лингва-маданий концепттердин когнитивдик-семиотикалык иликтөө жолун көрсөтүүнү туура чечтим. Бул изилдөөгө кайрылуудун себеби (актуалдуулугу) : биринчиден, тилдин когнитивдик аспектерин изилденилүүсүнүн маанилүүлүгү, өзгөчө сүйлөп жаткан адамдын билиминин структурасынын когнитивдик чечмеленүүсү; экинчиден, белгилүү бир улуттук-тилдик материалдын негизинде изилдөө жүргүзүү муктаждыгы менен түшүндүрүлөт. Бул изилдөө, ошондой эле, тилдин функцияларды аткаруусундагы жана эволюциясындагы тил илиминин маданиятка, этно – маданиятка, этно – психологиялык факторлору менен болгон байланыштарын да камтыйт. Учурда талкууланып жаткан көйгөйдүн контекстинде, атайын тандап алынган концепттердин анализдери тил жана маданиятты байланыштырган негизги бөлүм катары кызмат кылат. Лингвистикалык формалардын көмүскөсүндө калган тилдик чагылдыруунун когнитивдик структураларын белгилөөгө, тилдик бирдиктердин функцияларынын менталдык процесстеринин көз карашынан түшүндүрүүгө мына так ушул кубулуш аркылуу жетишише болот.

Айрым маданий концепттердин когнитивдик-семиотикалык анализин жүргүзүү максатында, мен кыргыз маданиятынын белгилеринде, символдорунда, салттарында, үрп-адаттарында жана ырым-жырымдарында чагылдырылган кыргыз маданий кубулуштарын чечмелөөдө негизги каражат катары семиотиканын механизмдерине кайрылууну чечтим. Бул түшүндүрмөлөр, белгилүү бир деңгээлде кыргыз маданиятын, анын символдорун, кыргыздын бөтөнчүлүгүн жана ошондой эле баарлашуусун терең таанууга багытталган. Мындан улам, маданият бул – концепцияланган жана баамдалган жолу өзгөчө маани берген негизги кызыкчылык деп эсептейм. Ошондуктан мен маданиятты эң маанилүү объект катары эсептейм, анткени ал маданияттын концептуализациялануу жана кабылдоо жолдоруна басым жасайт.

**Негизги сөздөр:** кыргыз маданияты, когнитивдик семиотика, когнитивдик лингвистика, маданий концепттер, концептосфера, символикалык маданият, таксономия, беелгинин объектиси, репрезентамен, интерпретант.

**Аннотация:** Характерной чертой лингвистической науки конца XX и начала XXI века была ознаменована широким распространением антропоцентрического подхода к лингвистическим явлениям и категориям, то есть к активной роли человека как субъекта ментальной и речевой деятельности. Следовательно, современные лингвистические исследования начали приобретать более когнитивный характер, центральное внимание которого было направлено на процессы приобретения, накопления и применения знания человеком, также как и те ментальные процессы, происходящие в её/его уме и мышлении.

Учитывая всю теорию, касаемо данной темы, я предприняла попытку провести когнитивно-семиотический анализ некоторых кыргызских лингвокультурных концептов. Актуальность обращения к данной теме обусловлено следующим: во-первых, значимостью изучения когнитивных аспектов языка, особенно когнитивной интерпретацией структур знаний говорящего; во-вторых,

необходимостью проведения исследования на материале конкретно взятого национального языка. Статья, таким образом, предусматривает лингвистическое исследование в тесной взаимосвязи с культурой, этнокультурой, этно-психологические факторы в функционировании и эволюции языка. В контексте настоящей работы нами были отобраны и проанализированы отдельные концепты, которые служат центральным звеном связывающим язык и культуру. Именно это звено, являясь объектом данной статьи, делает возможным определить когнитивные структуры лингвистических репрезентаций, которые остаются на заднем плане лингвистических форм, которые помогают определить функции лингвистических единиц с точки зрения ментальных процессов.

Для проведения когнитивно-семиотического анализа некоторых культурных концептов, я решила обратиться к механизмам семиотики как к главному инструменту для интерпретации кыргызских культурных явлений, которые воплощены в его знаках, символах, традициях, обрядах и ритуалах. Эти интерпретации должны внести определенный вклад в более глубокое понимание кыргызской культуры, её символов, кыргызской идентичности, а также коммуникации. Поэтому я считаю, что культура является центральным объектом, так как именно она придаёт формы, которыми она концептуализируется и воспринимается.

**Ключевые слова:** кыргызская культура, когнитивная семиотика, когнитивная лингвистика, культурные концепты, концептосфера, символическая культура, таксономия, объект знака, репрезентатив, интерпретант.

**Abstract:** The characteristic feature of the linguistic science of the end of the XX and the beginning of the XXI century has been marked with a wide broadening of anthropocentric approach towards linguistic phenomena and categories, i.e. to man's active role as a subject of mental and speech activities. Consequently, contemporary linguistic studies have been moving towards a more cognitive-oriented character. The central focus of which are the human processes of acquiring, accumulating and applying knowledge, as well as the mental processes that take place in his/her mind.

With all these theories in mind, I am intending to present Cognitive semiotic analysis for some Kyrgyz lingua-cultural concepts. The topicality of addressing to the study is caused: first, by the importance of studying cognitive aspects of language, especially the cognitive interpretation of the structure of speaker's knowledge; second, the need for conducting research on a particular national-language material. The research also considers language study in its relation to culture, ethno-cultural, ethno-psychological factors in the functioning and evolution of language. In the context of the present problem, the analysis of the selected concepts serves as a central section that links language and culture. It is the very phenomenon by means of which it is possible to signify the cognitive structures of linguistic representation that remains at the back stage of the linguistic forms, explaining the functions of linguistic units from the point of view of mental processes.

For the purpose of conducting cognitive-semiotic analysis of some of the cultural concepts, I decided to address to mechanisms of semiotics as an essential tool for interpreting Kyrgyz cultural phenomena that are manifested in its signs, symbols, traditions, customs, and rituals. These interpretations are intended to a definite extent to contribute to better understanding of the Kyrgyz culture, its symbols, Kyrgyz identity, and communication as well. Therefore I consider culture is of central interest as it emphasizes the manner in which it is conceptualized and perceived.

**Key words:** Kyrgyz culture, Cognitive semiotics, Cognitive linguistics, cultural concepts, conceptosphere, symbolic culture, taxonomy, object of a sign, representamen, interpretant.

**Cognitive Semiotics** is the study of how to employ and integrate the methods and theories of meaning-making as developed in the cognitive sciences as well as in the human and social sciences, notably in semiotics, linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, computational modeling, anthropology, and philosophy. This is all connected with conceptual and textual analyses as well as experimental and

ethnographic investigations. Cognitive semiotics has many sources and involves the study of thought, learning, and mental organization. The subject area of cognitive semiotics is human meaning construction, the relationship between language-thought-perception and the physical properties of the brain and human cognitive abilities. CS is defined as an interdisciplinary matrix of disciplines and

methods, focused on the multifaceted phenomenon of meaning or as an emerging field with the goal of "...integrating methods and theories developed in the disciplines of the cognitive sciences with methods and theories developed in semiotics and the humanities, with the ultimate aim of providing new insights into the realm of human signification and its manifestation in cultural practices" (www.cognitivesemiotics.com).

In discussing the so-called "(sub-parts of)" and the combination of methods and levels of analysis in CS, J. Zlatev, (Centre for Cognitive Semiotics at Lund University), states the following: "*So...what are the "(sub-parts of) the disciplines" involved? Judging from the background of CS practitioners, one can single out (1) semiotics (whether or not it should be seen as a single discipline), (2) linguistics (approaches viewing meaning as the essence of language), (3) psychology (mostly developmental, but also cultural, cognitive, and comparative), (4) anthropology (biological and, hopefully, cultural, despite its deeply ingrained resistance to "biologism"), (5) enactive cognitive science (including the neuroscientific and dynamic modeling approaches), and (6) philosophy (above all, in the phenomenological tradition) "* (J. Zlatev) .

### 1. The cognitive 'breakthrough'

The characteristic feature of linguistic science of the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> has been marked with a wide broadening of the anthropocentric approach towards linguistic phenomena and categories, i.e. to man's active roles as subject of mental and speech activities. Consequently, contemporary linguistic studies have been moving towards a more cognitive-oriented character, the central focus of which are the human processes of acquiring, accumulating and applying knowledge, as well as the mental processes that take place in his/her mind. The main aim of cognitive linguistics is the study of the interrelationship of different kinds of knowledge in the process of the speech activity, which has been accumulated by man and available to him at the relevant moment of speech communication. Thus, language, along with perception, thinking, and memory relates to cognitive structures that are challenged to explain the processes of acquiring, processing and rendering the knowledge. In connection with all these, cognitive science considers language as one of the leading fields for studying the nature and types of interaction

of knowledge on different levels of generalization by means of the language.

*With all these theories in mind, I intend to present a Cognitive semiotic analysis of some Kyrgyz lingua-cultural concepts in the framework of the current study.* The topicality of addressing this study is influenced first of all by the importance of studying cognitive aspects of language, especially the cognitive interpretation of the structure of a speaker's knowledge; second, the need for conducting research on particular national-language material. The research also considers language study in its relation to culture, ethno-cultural, and ethno-psychological factors in the functioning and evolution of language. In the context of the present problem, the analysis of the selected concepts serves as a central section that links language and culture. It is the very phenomenon by means of which it is possible to signify the cognitive structures of linguistic representation that remain at the back stage of linguistic forms, explaining the functions of linguistic units from the point of view of mental processes.

The leading role in describing interrelationships between a language and national culture belongs to the achievements of cognitive linguistics, which is needed in describing one's imagination of the world and its realization in linguistics, and as a science "of knowledge and cognition, the results of human perception of the world, and subject-cognitive activity that has been accumulated in the form of intelligent and systematized data, which are somehow represented into our consciousness and serve as a basis for our mental and cognitive processes" (Kubryakova, 2007: 8-16) .

## 2. Kyrgyz Lingua-Cultural concepts

### 2.1. Core concepts of Kyrgyz Linguistic culture

Among the most wide-spread core concepts of Kyrgyz ethnolinguistics, are 25 concepts that predominate in the Kyrgyz culture and make up the Kyrgyz national conceptsphere: *komuz* (national musical instrument), *bozuy* (a basic nomadic dwelling, a cylindrical felt tent), *mountain, child, horse, happiness, ak-kalpak* (a man's felt cap), *Word, Woman, Rituals, Life, Death, Feast, Relatives, Consciousness, Humanity, Fate, Harmony, 'Kut* – 'a spiritual term that means 'good', *ghost, arman* – 'a dream that was not realized', *bata* – 'blessings' (Derbisheva, 2012: 29-30) .

For the purpose of conducting a cognitive-semiotic analysis of some of the cultural concepts, I decided to address the mechanisms of semiotics as an essential tool for interpreting Kyrgyz cultural phenomena that are manifested in its signs, symbols, traditions, customs, and rituals. These interpretations are intended to a large extent to contribute to a better understanding of the Kyrgyz culture, its symbols, Kyrgyz identity, and communication as well. Therefore, I consider culture to be of central interest as it emphasizes the manner in which it is conceptualized and perceived.

Moreover, culture and communication are the two concepts essential to an understanding of semiotics because they are vital for understanding human behavior: “The subject matter of semiotics, it is often credited, is the exchange of any messages whatsoever, in a word, communication. To this it must at once be added that semiotics is also focally concerned with the study of signification. Semiotics is therefore classifiable as that pivotal branch of an integrated science of communication to which its character as a methodical inquiry into the nature and constitution of codes provides an indispensable counterpoint” (Sebeok, 1986a: 36).

Consequently, in this paper I focus on definite Kyrgyz cultural concepts that are vivid in representation. More specifically, the study covers Kyrgyz symbolic culture which is manifested in such signs and symbols as: “yurt”, “kalpak”, and some of the wedding rituals such as: putting golden earrings on the bride’s ears; covering the bride’s head with a white scarf; the ritual of bride kidnapping/stealing. I also tried to provide a semiotic analysis of the symbols and traditions of the Kyrgyz culture. The reason for addressing Kyrgyz symbolic culture can be explained by the fact that it presupposes more than the ability to learn and transmit behavioral traditions from one generation to the next; symbolic culture is a domain of objective facts whose existence depends, paradoxically, on collective belief. The concept of symbolic culture draws from semiotics, and emphasizes the way in which distinctively human culture is mediated through signs and concepts.

In other words, symbols and rituals are the tangible or visual aspects of the practices of a culture. The true cultural meaning of the practices is intangible; this is revealed only when the practices are interpreted by the insiders. Therefore, in order to interpret these cultural meanings, I focus on some theoretical moments of the componential

structure of signs and symbols and how they are decoded according to their meanings through both the Saussurean dyadic tradition and the Peircean triadic model.

It is well-known that meanings are made through our creation and interpretation of ‘signs’. And according to Peirce, ‘we think only in signs’ (Peirce, 1931-58, 2: 302). In other words, ‘nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’, says Peirce (ibid. 2: 172). Thus, anything can be sign as long as someone interprets it as ‘signifying’ something – referring to or *standing for* something other than itself. And as been noted by Daniel Chandler: ‘We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar system of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs which is at the heart of the concerns of semiotics’ (Chandler, 2007:13). Similarly, signs in any culture are interpreted differently depending on the familiarity with the culture. For the purpose of describing some interpretations of cultural signs in/of the Kyrgyz culture, I will refer to two of the most dominant models developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, whose models represent the best way of describing a sign: The Saussurean Model of the sign in the dyadic tradition and the Peircean triadic model that consists of three parts (representamen, interpretant, and object). Thus, in the framework of this study we will try to describe the most commonly known and accepted signs and symbols in/of the Kyrgyz culture by applying these models. However, the interpretation of the selected and analyzed signs can be made quite differently by people who are not aware of the traditions of the Kyrgyz culture.

As the most vivid example of Kyrgyz symbols, I have selected two objects: **a yurt** and ‘a *kalpak*’ - a national hat. A yurt is a circular tent of felt on a collapsible framework, used by nomads and which is a masterpiece of nomadic architecture. A white yurt is the national architectural symbol of the country. It is far more than a house for the Kyrgyz as it is the essence of life itself. Everything happened here – birth, marriage, life, and death. It is not just an example of construction but its internal decoration is an example of national originality where each item has a specific role and place. Even the hearth, which is considered sacred for the Kyrgyz people, has its own place and meaning in the yurt. Thus, every item of the yurt reflects the culture of the Kyrgyz. For example, the yurt’s crown the ‘*tunduk*’ – a dome,

a wooden circle with four beams has for many centuries been the symbol of the unity of the family and all the people. Taken from the perspectives of the Saussurean model, in which the sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (Saussure, 1983: 67), the *'tunduk'* is the material form of a signifier, whereas its function and interpretation in the Kyrgyz culture is a signified concept which symbolizes the sun with the four parts of the world. Thus, the relationship between the signifier (*'tunduk'* as a material object) and the signified (its function and interpretation) is conventional.

One of the other symbols of the Kyrgyz culture is *'ak kalpak'* – 'a white hat', which symbolizes vital energy. Worldwide, only Kyrgyz men wear kalpaks. Since ancient times *'ak kalpak'* has never changed its form, and it is still considered as a symbol of Kyrgyz identity. According to the Peircean triadic (three-part) model, the material object *'ak kalpak'* can be considered as a sign. The process of semiosis, or decoding of this sign can be described as follows:

1. "Ak kalpak" – a national hat is a representamen since it takes the form of a sign, or a 'sign vehicle'.

2. The object of this sign is *'ak kalpak'* which belongs to the Kyrgyz culture and stands for one of the most vivid national items of high value among the number of other cultural symbols.

3. *'Ak kalpak'*, symbolizing the height of the Kyrgyz snow-covered mountains, is an interpretant of the sign since it reflects elevated thoughts, the spirit and the union of the people.

Every element of *'kalpak'* bears a special meaning. For example, the brush should be in front as it symbolizes the juniper, which is associated with eternity. As there are many legends about the ornaments on a *'white kalpak'*; every curl has its own history and meaning. The Kyrgyz people give the white *'kalpak'* only to men who are guests of distinction or honor because since ancient times a *'kalpak'* has symbolized friendship and unity between peoples. According to Kyrgyz history, fighting tribes very often gave each other *'white kalpaks'* as a sign of reconciliation. The color of the hat is also paradoxical itself, because *'ak'* – 'white' – figuratively means abstract feelings, which are sacred and high.

Moreover, there is a great number of Kyrgyz cultural concepts dealing with Kyrgyz cultural traditions, such as weddings, a child's birth, death,

etc. Like in any culture, the wedding procedure of the Kyrgyz is a complex event and consists of many rituals that are carefully planned and organized, and yet readily accessible to semiotic analysis by means of signs and codes. However, the process of decoding these signs is complicated because it is important for someone to be aware of the cultural moments in order to reveal the object of a sign which is hidden. With all these in mind, it is worth noting that it is even hard to analyze such cultural events as weddings due to the fact that they consist of several symbolic stages.

The Kyrgyz wedding ceremony or *'Kelin aluu'* – lit.: 'bride's arrival' is a mixture of ancient rituals of wedding and Muslim traditions. As can be seen from the scheme above, there are three ways how young people come to a wedding, and this consists of several rituals: golden earrings are attached to the bride's ears by the groom's mother; bride's arrival at the groom's house; putting on a white kerchief on the bride's head; scattering *'chachyla'* – candies on her way to the house; bride's bow; *'kalym'* – 'dowry'; presenting a cow to the bride's parents, etc. In fact, there are more rituals dealing with weddings in the Kyrgyz culture. However, within this study I decided to select and provide a semiotic analysis of the most important rituals of the Kyrgyz culture of wedding.

To qualify cultural objects and traditions as a sign, I resort to the conventional model of analyzing the sign where all three elements are essential (object, representamen, interpretant). According to this model: the sign is a unity of *what is represented* (the object); *how it is represented* (the representamen); and *how it is interpreted* (the interpretant). Thus, for example the ritual of attaching golden earrings to the bride's ears by the groom's mother has a symbolic meaning. Here, the golden earrings are a representamen of a sign since symbolically it means that the young couple is engaged from this very moment, and thus it stands for the object of a sign. The sense made is that the golden earrings are a precious gift to be given to a special girl, who will become a new member of the family:

1. Golden earrings – is the *object* of a sign;
2. Golden earrings are represented as a symbol of engagement and as the groom's mother's gift to the bride (*representamen*);
3. Golden earrings are interpreted as an invitation to a family as a new member (interpretant).

One of the other integral rituals of the wedding is

covering the bride's head with a **white kerchief**. The object of the sign here is a white kerchief which is put on the bride's head upon her arrival to the groom's house as a kind tradition to continue the family.

1. The *object* of the sign here is a 'white kerchief'.

2. The *representamen* of the sign is the action of covering the bride's head with a white kerchief on the threshold of the groom's house upon her arrival.

3. The *meaning* of this action is that the white kerchief is the sign of virginity and the bride who just arrived is a virgin. Secondly, the meaning of white in the Kyrgyz culture is associated with purity and good wishes. Thus, this is the interpretant of the sign 'white kerchief'.

One of the indispensable conditions of the Kyrgyz wedding ritual is 'kalym' - a bride ransom. It is a sum of money that the groom's side pays out to the bride's parents for their daughter (bride's price) .

1. The *object* of a sign here is the 'kalym' – the amount of money paid to the bride's parents by the groom's side.

2. When the parties have agreed on their children's decision to live as a family, or in case when even the groom had kidnapped the bride, or the marriage had taken place by mutual agreement of both parties, the groom's side must pay the 'kalym' - a bride ransom, 'bride's price'. Thus, this is the *representamen* of the sign 'kalym'.

3. Symbolic interpretation of this sign means that the bride from that moment is considered to belong to the new family since the price for her has been paid out. Also, this means that the groom's side wishes to reimburse the expenditures that her parents invested in their daughter by the time of marriage.

From a foreigner's point of view, it can be considered that the bride's parents just sell their daughter. However, it is still a cultural moment, which is ambiguous as it deals with money matters between two parties whose children decided to marry.

One of the most interesting and hotly-disputed issues in/of the Kyrgyz culture is bride kidnapping.

It has been from time immemorial that a man can kidnap a young girl he loves or knows. Although technically against the law, this custom still exists. Bride kidnapping rituals are not very common in Kyrgyzstan, but nevertheless, it randomly takes place among the Kyrgyz. It deals with the kidnapping of the girl without her agreement. The paradox here is that the groom steals a girl with the aim to develop a happy family life, which is logically hard to be explained.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that almost all traditions and customs in the Kyrgyz culture is associated with a chain of events, celebrities. Almost the whole life of a Kyrgyz is full of signs and symbols that must be decoded or interpreted.

Thus, with all these in mind I suggest the idea that cultural moments, i.e. traditions, customs, rituals can also become the objects of semiotic analysis. Also, I suggest the idea that not only the concepts, representing an object, but also cultural traditions, rituals, that consist of chains of events can be subjects for cognitive semiotic analysis.

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