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978-1-107-01064-2 - Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts: Truth, Love, Hate and War

James W. Underhill

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Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts

‘Ethnolinguistics’ is the study of how language relates to culture and ethnicity. This book offers an original approach to ethnolinguistics, discussing how abstract concepts such as truth, love, hate and war are expressed across cultures and ethnicities. James W. Underhill seeks to situate these key cultural concepts within four languages (English, French, Czech and German). Not only do these concepts differ from language to language, but they go on changing over time. The book explores issues such as how far meaning is politically and culturally influenced, how far language shapes the thought of ethnic groups, and how far their thought shapes language, and the role of individuals in the consolidation of cultural concepts. It offers a clear and thought-provoking account of how concepts are understood, and will be welcomed by those working in the fields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, semantics and pragmatics.

JAMES W. UNDERHILL is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at the Université Stendhal, Grenoble, France.

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[More information](#)

for Henri Meschonnic (1930–2009), poet, translator,
linguist and thinker

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James W. Underhill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1 Hope, Obama and the neoconservative worldview	1
Words of truth	7
Linguistic patterning	9
Beyond ideology	12
2 Ethnolinguistics	17
Linguists and their problem with ethnolinguistics	17
Linguistics following Saussure	23
Six obstacles on the road to understanding ethnolinguistics	27
Defining and redefining ethnology	27
Repercussions for linguistics as a tradition	30
Humboldt, Bartmiński, Wierzbicka and the ethnolinguistics project	31
3 The shapes of truth: a comparative study of converging and diverging tendencies in the construction of <i>truth</i> in English, French, German and Czech	41
Establishing the truth	42
Essence and family resemblance	44
Towards a new universalism – a <i>languageless</i> linguistics	45
Approaching truth	47
Truth’s semantic structure in the lexicon	55
French	56
German	58
Czech	59
Metaphoric paths	61
Defining truth	63
4 Love	65
The languages of love	67
Love metaphors in English	74
Trilingual case study	76
Love, <i>amour</i> and <i>láska</i>	78
Conclusions and reflections	91
Desire, <i>désir</i> and <i>touha</i>	95
	vii

viii	Contents	
	The rhetoric of love and desire	99
	Countering metaphors	102
	Conclusions	106
5	Hate	109
	Do we need hate?	109
	Defining hate	113
	Love, zeal, hate and God	118
	Biblical rhetoric	121
	Old Testament hate	124
	New Testament hate	134
	A philology of hate	143
	The etymology of hate	146
	Synonyms and antonyms	148
	Collocations and associations	149
	Metaphoric construction of the concept of hate	149
	Translating hate	151
	Shared origin: shared tradition?	152
	What writers do with hate	154
	<i>Avoir la haine</i> : having hate	160
	The crusade against the Empire of Evil	167
	Anti-Americanism <i>à la française</i>	174
	The sickly animals of a sick country	175
	The decadence of the lost savage of the Revolution	177
	The Yankee	178
	No thanks for the liberators	178
	Conclusion	181
6	War	183
	Why war?	183
	What does 'war' mean for ethnolinguistics?	184
	What do <i>we</i> mean by 'war'?	189
	What is propaganda?	192
	What is war?	194
	Traditional conceptual metaphors for war	195
	Novel conceptual metaphors for war	197
	Warfare conceptual metaphors	198
	Traditional warfare conceptual metaphors	199
	Novel warfare conceptual metaphors	201
	Switching	203
	Escaping from the neoconservative worldview	205
7	A final word	213
	<i>Notes</i>	221
	<i>Glossary</i>	226
	<i>Bibliography</i>	237
	<i>Index</i>	247

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Truth, love, hate and war – war, hate, love and truth: these are the themes of this book on language and worldviews. In the following pages, we will penetrate into the complex veins and arteries which feed gut emotions, loving and hating, and seek to discern the ways in which the ultimate expression of anger, war, becomes manifest in language, and the strategies politicians and journalists use in order to make an apology for war. War will be inspired by the desire to protect people and values, or so the rhetorical strategies used would have us believe. Hate will be inspired by love. Hate of our enemies and of forms of evil will fuel a passion for war, a passion which will define us and define our enemies.

This was the state of affairs which Shakespeare’s Romeo despaired over when he saw how much the noble sentiments of love and faithfulness became perverted into hating and fighting: the spoiling for a brawl which other characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt and Mercutio, accepted as a natural state of affairs. Seeing his friend Benvolio fail in his diplomatic peace-keeping role, and get drawn into the fight, he cried out:

O me! What fray was here?
 Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.
 Here’s much to do with hate, but more with love.
 Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
 O anything of nothing first create;
 O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
 Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms.

Act 1: sc.1: Shakespeare, (1987/90)
Volume III: Tragedies: 1057

Conflicting, paradoxical feelings – brawling love and loving hate – will churn up emotions and set the agenda for war in 2003, a war of military invasion but also a war of culture and ideology, a war which will entail a reorganisation of the means by which the very concept of ‘war’ is used in English. War has not only transformed the Middle East, it has transformed the ways we think about civil society. And that transformation has engendered (and partly been engen-

Cambridge University Press

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James W. Underhill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x Preface

dered by) the way war is presented, understood and promoted as a strategy of imposing political will.

Can we escape war, and redefine hate and love? Attempting to do so will involve striving to understand the way the three concepts are entangled. This will take us deep into the English speaker's worldview, into the conceptual and emotional centre of his or her manner of perceiving the world and what goes on there. This entails penetrating deeply into the intimate spheres of the imagination. And in seeking entry into those zones of conscious and semi-conscious reflection, we will be weighing up what truth and love mean in and of themselves. They will not simply be seen as aspects of lies and lying, and hate and hating, though truth does, inevitably, posit as its antithesis, untruth, bad faith. And love – as we all know – often leads to spite and aggression.

Writers such as Shakespeare and philosophers such as Augustine, Aquinas and Buber have unveiled, defined and discussed the complexities of loving and hating, and sought to circumscribe the very limits and the essence of truth. Their work is unfinished. Philosophers and writers will continue to enlighten and inspire us in seizing upon those emotions which take us by the guts. In dissecting and defining them, they will instruct us as to our own natures, and the role those emotions play (or should play) in this world. But though the poetics of thought, the study of the way language shapes our conceptual and emotional relationship to the world, is ultimately philosophical in nature, this is not – strictly speaking – a philosophical book.

This is a book about language. Or rather, this is a book about languages. Ethnolinguistics is the study of the way worldviews construct the complex and flexible frameworks within which we think and feel. To say 'within which' is already misleading: we are not 'confined' to or by language. We live 'in' language and we love 'in' language, just as we hate 'in' language. We tell the truth or choose to lie, once more 'in' language. But we are not the playthings of language. Language is our adventure: we contribute to shaping it, we follow its logic, but we open up new vistas within language. Studying thinking-in-language involves investigating the geography of our understanding. Like land developers we can transform our linguistically painted landscape. Ultimately language is not a prison. But nor is it a mere tool, a means: it is an ongoing act of creation. Consequently, at one level we are as much the producers as the products of language.

Worldviews emerge within our own language, visions of the world, conceptual worlds, which oppose and contradict one another: incompatible ideologies which seek to exclude one another. But there is a worldview which is implicit in the deeper frameworks of the language system we speak. At this level, French and German shape the imagination, the understanding and the desires of the French and the Germans. Their sensitivity to the world, all of the conceptual connections which French and German people take for granted,

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978-1-107-01064-2 - Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts: Truth, Love, Hate and War

James W. Underhill

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

appear to us curious, at times almost incomprehensible. Learning to navigate within their waters, we come to realize that we are entering another world-view. And at this stage we realize that the world is always grasped and represented 'in' language. We realize that our English language imposes its own constraints upon us, just as the richness and depth of expression in English, both past and present, has opened up for us a wonderful means of expression: one which allows us to enter the worlds of philosophers such as John Locke and the worlds of writers such as Shakespeare. Languages cultivate the mind, just as the mind cultivates language, constantly reinvigorating its potential for expression.

Recognising that languages are complex systems of conceptual and emotional patterning is part of the ethnolinguistic project. Recognising that languages pattern understanding differently, and that they thereby present slightly different worlds to us, is the crux of the ethnolinguistic approach. We will be investigating English, French, German and Czech. Why not Russian? Why not Arabic? Indeed, why not? Though comparative linguistics often takes on board multiple languages and draws up dauntingly impressive tables of details concerning linguistic diversity, it is my firm belief that language study which relies on second- and third-hand sources is of little use in opening up worlds – other worlds – to us.

I share with Humboldt and with Whorf a fascination with non-Indo-European languages, but remain sceptical about what can be understood until one comes to grips with actually communicating in a foreign tongue. Moving beyond the Indo-European mindset might well take us beyond the limits of 'Western' conceptions of society, history, time and space. But unlike many researchers working at the level of grammar and relying upon second-hand accounts, I believe it is all too easy to fall into schematic and simplistic conceptions about the understanding of people of cultures other than our own. Believing that we can understand other cultures and languages, and believing that we can understand them 'in' English, is very often the tacit belief that is shared by those people who speak about languages they do not speak to people who understand them no better than themselves.

Comparative linguists often believe they can leave speech behind, leave content behind, leave meaning behind, in focusing on the supposedly 'deeper' levels of language, grammatical form and construction. This appears to me an absurd misunderstanding of the very nature of philology (*filia-logos*), the love of language. If we leave meaning behind, we leave people behind. And language is about people, it is about us.

I have therefore chosen to study only languages which I speak and which I can discuss at the level of discourse analysis. Discussing speech and discourse strategies transforms ethnolinguistics into a 'cross-lingual discourse analysis'. Corpus study will become essential when we engage foreign languages at this

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii Preface

level. For this reason two of the four studies (love and war) will focus upon strategically defined corpora.

Truth, love, hate and war: are these private or public concepts? Do love and truth belong to the realm of intimacy, or do they belong to the world of politics? Is hating an inner seething of twisted emotions deep within us, or is it the very bond which binds us to our enemies, private and political, and thereby defines us and gives our lives meaning? War may, at first sight, appear purely political, but as our case study will show, a vast array of metaphorical 'wars' figure in the imagination – and the truly intimidating thing about propaganda is that it will reach deep into our imagination and seize upon those imaginary wars in order to manipulate us and to realign our feelings in relation to real wars. Real wars, meanwhile, will gradually be deprived of their 'reality', as they are masked by perverted positive representations of problem solving and liberation.

Language is both personal and political. The ethnolinguist must face up to this. For that reason, the arduous task we are setting off on is that of moving into politically charged foreign territory. This book does not offer readers an easy entry into exotic thought-worlds: it invites readers to ponder upon fragments. Starting with truth, love, hate and war, we will try to reach out within the thought-worlds of other language systems in order to gain a greater understanding of the way living, breathing individuals struggle with words and refashion their own worlds, the way they debate questions and dispute answers, the way they define and redefine the way they think and feel about each other.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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