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Optionality as an indicator of language development

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Abstract

In the paper by optionality we mean a speech modification functioning in the language, manifested in a peculiar deviation within the norm, which exists alongside with the codified literary obligatory variant in certain linguistic and extralinguistic conditions. The functional-dynamic method is one of the main methods we used in here. For the analysis of faculty, an attempt is made to use the studied parameters of such a linguistic phenomenon as variance. Thus, we suppose that the phenomenon of optionality is basically associated with the processes of changes in linguistic systems and is a factor in the dynamics of linguistic development.

Key words: optionality, language dynamics, language variants.

Opcionalidad como indicador del desarrollo del lenguaje

Resumen

En el artículo por opcionalidad nos referimos a una modificación del habla que funciona en el lenguaje, manifestada en una peculiar desviación dentro de la norma, que existe junto con la variante obligatoria literaria codificada en ciertas condiciones lingüísticas y extralingüísticas. El método funcional dinámico es uno de los métodos principales que utilizamos aquí. Para el análisis de la facultad, se intenta utilizar los parámetros estudiados de dicho fenómeno lingüístico como varianza. Por lo tanto, suponemos que el fenómeno de la opcionalidad está básicamente asociado con los procesos de cambios en los sistemas lingüísticos y es un factor en la dinámica del desarrollo lingüístico.

Palabras clave: opcionalidad, dinámicas de lenguaje, variantes de lenguaje.

1.INTRODUCTION

The studying of glottogenic processes and some general rules of functioning of languages, structural shifts in them, and also the understanding of language as an integral system and the deep research of its scientific bases is one of the actual trends of contemporary linguistics. In this regard, the problem of the optional use of language means at different levels of the language is highlighted as an actual and particularly popular object of study.

Linguists differ on the interpretation of the phenomenon of optionality (Aissen, 1999; Bilyalova et al, 2016a; Bailyn, 2001; Kittila, 2005; McGregor, 2010; Rumsey, 2010). Some scientists mean by optionality an opportunity to substitute one synonymic word by the other without significant changes in the plane of content; others recognize ellipsis in it, while the third party – an optional combinability. Moreover, some linguists are prone to denying a possibility of optional use of language means, since they believe that optionality acknowledgement can lead to the revision of the general linguistic theory in the sphere of specific grammatical categories and word definition. Nevertheless, it seems impossible to deny the existence and functioning of the optionality phenomenon (Albina et al., 2014). In this respect, we completely agree with Solntseva who states that “optionality is an objective phenomenon determined by the peculiarities of the language structure and development” (Solntseva, 1963).

The problem of language optionality finds its solution in many researches of linguists who are investigating such languages as Chinese, Vietnamese, Mongolian since it is in these languages that optionality is manifested most vividly (Fry, 2003; Fujii and Ono, 2000; Wang, 1967; Rubinchik, 1982). Thus, a sinologist Semenas studies optionality against redundancy and economy of language means. He comes to a conclusion that the phenomenon of optionality in the Chinese language can manifest itself on the level of phonemes, morphemes and lexemes (Semenas, 1982). As an example Semenas

points to the functioning of grammatical markers expressing aspect, tense, number, etc., as their functioning possesses the property of optionality. This quality means that in certain grammatical and semantic conditions, the presence or absence of a marker doesn't cause a change of meaning.

Another sinologist Yankiver, who studied optionality in the Chinese literary language, considered language elements optionality in comparison with obligatoriness. He writes in his article "Revising the issue of optionality and obligatoriness in the Chinese language": "In the modern Chinese literary language, as well as in other isolating languages of the Far East and South-East Asia, the usage of some auxiliary parts of speech (inflectional suffixes and auxiliary words), functioning in morphology and syntax, is not obligatory in a number of cases" (Yankiver, 1982). He emphasizes that the presence of such auxiliary elements does not influence the meaning and establishing grammatical links between content words in a simple sentence or between the parts of a complex sentence. He calls such auxiliary elements optional, and the corresponding phenomenon - optionality.

The issue of optionality in Russian linguistics is exposed to light in the works of most leading researchers of isolating languages, Chinese language in particular, linguists and a married couple (Solntseva, 1963). The following works should be mentioned here: "Sketches on modern Chinese language", "On the

“zero” and “absolute” form in the Chinese language”, “Language as a system-structural phenomenon”, “Theory of optionality and the issue of an unmarked verb form”, “Nature of morphological categories in the Chinese language” etc. In his article “About “optionality” Solntsev notes that optional elements and phenomenon are normally grammatical, not lexical (Solntseva, 1963).

It would be unfair to say that the linguistic phenomenon of optionality is not reflected in the works of researchers of other types of languages. For example, the theory of optional and compulsory compatibility of language elements is developed in Russian and English Linguistics. According to this theory, language elements are capable of two types of combination: compulsory and optional. An obligatory combination is inherent in those dependent elements that are required both by the semantic content and the form of the linguistic units (Bilyalova et al., 2016b; Burlakova, 1981; Ivanchikova, 1965).

Thus, consideration of the problem of optionality in the form of a historical review, as well as a comparison of the main works on this subject, presented by us above, gives a reason to argue that the issues relating to the optional use of language elements at different levels, to some extent are developed and studied, and most scientists agree that optionality is an objective property of any language system.

2.METHODOLOGY

In this paper, optionality is considered as an indicator of language development, which manifests itself in the emergence of new language modifications within the framework of the literary norm. The theoretical basis of the research was the papers of domestic and foreign scientists in the field of linguistic optionality (McGregor, 2013;Jaeger, 2005; Legendre, 2001; Ney, 1983; Aissen, 2003; Anttilaand YuCho, 1998).

To solve the problem of the true nature of optionality, a set of different theoretical and empirical methods of research is used: method of component analysis, method of experiment, descriptive, functionally-dynamic and quantitative-statistical methods.

The functional-dynamic method is one of the main methods for describing the nature of optionality and is crucial in the study of obligatory and optional variants. This method allows to identify by comparing several synchronous time periods of historical movement, the development forces of language evolution.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research attention of linguists for a long time has been focusing on theoretical comprehension and analysis of the concept of the literary norm as a dialectical unity of the following contradictions:

stability and mobility, statics and dynamics, historical conditioning and variability, strict uniqueness and functional-stylistic variability, etc. It is significant that in the study of the literary norm and its structure a dynamic aspect of its understanding and objective evaluation is put forward.

For this reason, the research of the language as a historically developing object and the research of the main features of language modifications are important parts of the study of the forms of language existence and are closely connected with the description of its essential characteristics.

Indeed, a proper understanding of language nature is unthinkable beyond the comprehension of the diverse types of language development. Let's note the constant dynamics in the language system, its change and development create certain difficulties in its description and especially in solving the problems of modern literary norms. From the point of view of the dynamic approach, the norm is not only the result of speech activities codified in the historic monuments of writing, culture, but also innovations related to the potential of the language system itself under the influence of the implemented established speech patterns on a certain synchronous section. Moreover, at the base of communication acts, the means of which is language, the reflection of man's surrounding reality lies, which itself is in constant development and it can but help to influence the development of language. The flexibility of the

language system and its ability to change given the language an opportunity to perform increasingly complex and diverse functions. It contributes to the perfect reflection of the increasingly complex phenomena of the surrounding reality, and is rebuilt gradually with the restructuring of the society that the language serves. Language development proceeds therefore as a struggle of two opposite tendencies –preservation and stabilization of the existing system of language, on the one hand, and for its adaptation, transformation, improvement, on the other. The objective existence of these two divergent tendencies is vividly reflected in the language property as optionality, which manifests itself in the process of selecting certain modifications performing the same function (grammatical or semantic), differing either in their distribution in the social or geographical space, or based on the requirements of the style, or in their frequency and productivity. The mechanism of linguistic change is closely related to the processes of variation, since the change in language is from the historical point of view a gradual preference given by one non-destructive variant to the detriment of others. A change in the literary norms is possible, probably, either within the frame of variants, or as a result of certain changes that have occurred in the language system. Thus, the literary norm cannot be always a set of homogeneous and unambiguous facts, basically it inevitably acts in the form of at least of two categories, namely obligatory and optional. This is the essence of the normative variability, that is, the variants within the norm (Boersma, 1997).

The historical continuity of the normalization process causes the need for periodic updating of codification. In the process of codification of the rules, we can distinguish three closely interrelated parts. They are the assessment, selection and codification of language patterns as the normal variants. The main types of assessment of linguistic phenomena include: firstly, the distinction between correct and incorrect variants (in terms of the literary norm); secondly, an indication to a more or less commonly used form (lexeme, structure) from the number of variants; thirdly, an indication to the different scope of the use of linguistic phenomena, relating to the norm, or to the different language conditions of their use. From our point of view, optionality probably takes place only in the second and third cases. Hence, a natural question arises: can we consider the optional variant as the literary norm? We are taking the view that the norm should imply the dynamism and the development of language units. "The norm is a conditioned social and historical result of speech activity, fixing traditional language parts of the system or creating new language facts in the conditions of their connection both with the potential possibilities of the language system, on the one hand, and with the realized samples, on the other".

Heterogeneity of the source material often leads to a significant variation within the literary norm, while the variants, both obligatory and optional are not only preserved and maintained, but also are widely included in the literary norm. Thus, the stability of the literary norm does not preclude the optional variants used in the

language and it does not constitute an absolute obstacle to the historical changes of the literary language. In the ongoing process of language development, new ways of expression appear and they replace or coexist with existing ones. It's important to note here that the replacement process is necessarily preceded by a stage of coexistence of an old and a new language variants, which create ground for competition of variants. Based on the dynamic nature of language, it can be argued that the literary norm may include variants that actually exist in a language and optionality is its objective and inevitable consequence. The issue of optionality appears when the language has not one, but two or more possibilities to refer to the same linguistic meaning, in other words, two or more variants.

The phenomenon of optionality seems to be associated with all types of changes (with the processes of continuous change within the language system), also with transitions in the language systems, the emergence of parallel means of expression, with redundancy, and variation, which is inherent in any language system in its synchronous state. We can observe the co-existence of at least of two modifications (the obligatory variant and the optional variant) in a certain time period, which, ensuring the continuity of the language development, helps "to get used to the new variant, make the shift of the norm less tangible and painful" (Gorbachevich, 2009). In this we see the main importance of optionality. Indeed, the presence of the optional variant in a language may indicate the functioning of the newly emergent phenomenon, or, on the contrary, the dying, that is,

the optionality itself is an indicator of internal structural changes in the language, an indicator of linguistic dynamics. For the speech functioning of the language, the optional variant is also of great importance, since it gives the speaker the opportunity to choose different expressive means for the transmission of specific content in accordance with the needs of a particular communicative situation.

4.CONCLUSION

Optionality, as well as the norm, is a functional concept and is closely related to the flexibility of language – a parameter that is determined by the number of formal ways of expression and transmission of the same content. All modern literary languages are characterized not only by a certain degree of stability of normative implementations, but also by a certain set of variant means formed as a result of parallelism of some structural capabilities of the language, as well as historical shifts occurring in the language structure and forms of its implementation, allowing their optional use. The understanding of the dynamic nature of the language norm includes both the statics (system of linguistic units) and the dynamics (functioning of the language). The functional aspect of the norm is particularly interesting in connection with the phenomenon of a variant: "The norm cannot be given by a finite set of facts, and it inevitably acts in the form of two variants –obligatory and optional

(additional). Factually, it is a source of literary variants, i.e. variants within the normal frame".

The foregoing in connection with the optionality as a linguistic phenomenon closely connected with linguistic dynamics, which is accompanied by a variant realization of linguistic forms, dictates the need for a more detailed interpretation of the phenomenon of variance and optionality in linguistics.

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