Cultural identity of emotions: the meaning of love in English vs. Polish

Since Jankowiak and Fisher (1992) found compelling evidence for the presence of romantic love in 147 of the 166 tribal cultures from all over the world, most anthropologists have assumed that love is a cultural universal, which is likely to have appeared in all human groups at all times in human history (see Hatfield & Rapson, 2002 for a review). Although it is largely obvious that love, in one form or another, has always been on people’s minds, the explanation of what it really is remains elusive: there is still no consensus in psychology on a definition of love or even an agreed taxonomy of love subtypes (Berscheid, 2010). Love is an extremely polysemous concept (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, 2007) with uncertain borders and countless related concepts.

This paper explores a cultural difference in the meaning of love between English and Polish speakers. From the perspective of the recently emergent field of Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2017), emotions have a culturally constructed conceptual dimension, or cultural identity to put it in a different way. Previous research (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk & Wilson, 2015) found that emotion clusters of love overlap between Polish and British English speakers only to some extent. For instance, a listing of significant adjectival collocates for the English lexeme love includes: passionate, sexual, and erotic. In contrast, a comparable list for the Polish equivalent ‘miłość’ includes items related to religious love: God’s/divine (boży/boski), marital (małżeński), brotherly (braterski), Christian (chrześcijański), and pure (czysty). Poles tend to associate love with divine rather than earthly connotations.

The research presented in this paper is based on a range of proposals submitted by Polish translators for rendering the meaning of the slogan “I’m lovin’ it”, popularized in Poland by a global fast-food restaurant chain. The elicited proposals show that rendering the meaning of the slogan poses a challenging task for Polish speakers. For instance, while some translators employed the verb “uwielbiać” (‘adore’) to convey the meaning, others skipped the emotional aspect altogether and used phrases like “Ale pycha!” (‘So delicious!’) to put across its sense. Strikingly, the verb “kochać” (‘love’) featured in relatively few proposals. Because speakers from different speech communities draw on different culture-specific schemas and foster different values or attitudes towards the expression of particular emotions, the meaning of love in of the above-mentioned slogan differs between English and Polish speakers. While straightforward reference to love in the fast-food context may be appropriate for English speakers, for Poles it appears to be exaggerated, awkward, or even inappropriate because of culturally constructed identity.

References