

Linguistic Means of Cultural Continuum Conceptualization in American Poetry

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Abstract

The article examines the cognitive and pragmatic dimensions of place names, regarded as semantically meaningful linguistics units within a poetic discourse. It is proved that place names represent the imposition of cultural-historical continuum on geographical coordinates. The research is carried out within the analysis of the American poems (XIX - XXI cent.). The method of cognitive discourse analysis helps to interpret the knowledge behind the form and meaning of place names. The diachronic scope of the study is a basis for the comparative analysis of the place names functioning in the poetic works of different epochs. Thus, the relationship between extra-linguistic reality, mental constructs of its organization and linguistic means of their expression is established. The results of the research show that the role of place names consists in specifying the role of geographical objects in the process of the US development, and in organizing the lyrical space of a poem. In XIX - XX centuries place names serve as markers of geopolitical and historical processes in the American society. In 2nd half of the XX – beg. Of the XXI cent. place names are used mainly for the description of persona's lyrical space.

Keywords: cognitive discourse analysis, cultural continuum, place name, poetic discourse

1. Introduction

One of the primary features of culture is its continuum character that reveals the dynamicity and continuity of its historical development. The work of the ancient philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus "De rerum natura" ("On the Nature of Things") triggered the spread of the theory of evolution within culture studies that described the theory of cultural development for the first time. Similar ideas were lately discussed in the works of J. Bossuet, D. Hume, I. Kant, J. Herder, A. Comte, etc. The modern version of the theory of cultural evolution was represented in the last quarter of the XIX century.

1.1. The Theory of Cultural Evolution

According to L. White, by culture we mean an extra-somatic, temporal continuum of things and events dependent upon symboling. In other words, the culture of mankind as a whole may be considered temporally as a flowing stream, or non-temporally as a system, or as both, i.e., as a system in a temporal continuum. In other words, in the process of its existence a culture undergoes developmental (or evolutionist) changes. Under evolution we mean a temporal sequence of forms: one form grows out of another; culture advances from one stage to another. It is significant that the evolutionist process is irreversible and non-repetitive, and is inherent only in systems, since a mere aggregation of things without organic unity cannot undergo evolution. It concerns cultures as well: culture may diffuse piecemeal, but only a systematic organization of cultural elements can evolve within spatial-temporal continuum (White, 2007). In their works, Spencer and Taylor also emphasized the idea of a multi-linear evolutionary process, since historical and social processes are not linear by themselves and are regarded from different perspectives as they evolve in various dimensions. In texts such a peculiarity of the cultural continuum development is represented in a system of numerous concepts and their structural modifications.

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1.2. The Notion of Cultural Continuum

As it was mentioned above, the fundamental principle of the theory of cultural evolution is that every step in the civilization development emerges and evolves from the previous one, and does not exist separately. The branched system of social institutes, the emergence of arts and religions are the results of the step-by-step development of societies within temporal and spatial coordinates. In other words, all civilization processes unfold in spatial-temporal continuum that may be defined as the form of culture existence, in which the unity of space and time provides its relative autonomy, self-sufficiency, and internal integrity. On every level of its development a culture forms its specific spatial-temporal coordinates with certain norms, symbolic systems and styles, which in their turn lead to the revelation of its internal potential, constructing, in such a way, the whole historical process. As far as the reality is reflected in cultural models, endowed with a certain conceptual meaning, the cultural continuum is organized around concepts that are the representations of the linguistic community experience and the system of its values and beliefs. In a poetic text the stages of cultural evolution are exemplified on the level of concept representation, transformations in structure of which emphasize the process of a dynamic continuum development.

1.3. The Linguistic-Cultural Aspect of the Place Names Analysis

Following O. Jespersen's traditions, within the conducted research place names are regarded as notional linguistic units that are used as structural elements for transmitting the cognitive-pragmatic intentions and the general idea of a poetic text, since they are endowed with an extra-linguistic associative meaning. Place names are an inalienable element of the chronotope functioning on a text level, since one of their basic textual characteristics is the representation of a spatial reality in which a poetic text unfolds. So, they serve as the elements of the spatial model of a linguistic community, and because of their social nature place names maybe regarded as the manifestations of the historical and cultural memory of a society. Lawrence Buell, for example, distinguished three waves of the interpenetrations between Americans and their environment: at first, the space was constructed in the pursuit of the old world traditions, then reconstructed into the image of the American cultural nationalism, then reconstructed again in the latter-day scholarly discourse of American exceptionalism. Thus the territorial facticity of America has always been of pivotal importance for the society development – from the Puritan sacralization of John Winthrop's "City upon a Hill" and the concomitant satanization of the wilderness through the Romantic spiritualisations of the landscape to the secular and urban wastelands of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Benesh, 2005). As far as place names reflect the cultural idiosyncrasies of a certain society, the diachronic approach to their analysis helps to determine the alterations in the role and functions of place names, taking into account the poem's main idea and the author's intentions, as well as to emphasize the centres of the social-political and cultural life of the American society regarding major historical and geopolitical processes. So, the connection between the semantic-pragmatic potential of place names and the cultural environment of a linguistic community is realized on a cognitive level.

2. The Practical Aspects of the Cognitive-Cultural Analysis of Place Names

Many fundamental topics in the American history (the migration of indigenous people and African-Americans, the geopolitical prerequisites of nation formation, immigration and transmigration, the division of American society into classes) provide the necessity of the involvement of the references to spatial coordinates, i.e., place names, into the process of the poetic discourse analysis. Within the framework of a certain poetic work a space may also be endowed with a personal dimension and may lack social-historical contexts. The diachronic approach to the research allows us to trace the regularities of place names' functioning within a text. In this paper the system of place names is regarded as a dynamic field, within which certain events unfold. The following part of the article exemplifies the interconnection between the cognitive functions of place names in a poetic text, the historical period and the cultural prerequisites of a text creation.

2.1. The Cognitive-Pragmatic Dimension of Place Names' Functioning in the XIX Cent

The linguistic representation of the conceptual sphere of the American society takes place in the strictly organized space of a poetic text. Let's analyze the characteristic features of the cultural-pragmatic functioning of place names within the concept *CULTURE* in the American poems of the XIX-XXI cent. The motive of literacy of the American nation is one of the basic in the American poetry of the XIX century, since it emphasizes the prerequisites of the US development. Famous personalities very often became the object of poetic representation. In this case place names link the textual space and the objective reality.

Take our hands, *James Russell Lowell*,
Our hearts are all thy own;

To-day *we bid thee welcome*
Not for ourselves alone. . .
 From *England's royal farewells,*
 And honors fitly paid,
Come back, dear Russell Lowell,
 To *Elmwood's waiting shade!..*
 J. Whittier "A Welcome to Lowell"

The professor of the English literature at Harvard University, the editor of the literature journal "The Atlantic Monthly", and the US ambassador in Spain and the UK, J. Lowell made a great influence on the development of the American literature and strengthening the role of America in the world. The author pays attention to the diplomatic activity of Lowell (*England's royal farewells*), emphasizing his input in bringing peace between the rival nations. The place name *Elmwood* plays a key role as it performs informative and evaluative functions. It marks the historical territory in the state of Massachusetts, visited by many famous American personalities: Thomas Oliver, royal Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts; Elbridge Gerry, signer of the US Declaration of Independence, Vice President of the United States; and James Russell Lowell whose family bought the land in 1818. So, the mentioned place name serves as the means of space personalization in the poetic work. The lack of satisfaction with the level of education and cultural development in America is also reflected in the poem "Lines Written Near *San Francisco*" by L. Simpson:

...Atthatmoment*thehideousvoiceofCulture,*
Hystericalwoman, thrashingherarmsandlegs,
 Shriekedfromtheruins.
 Atthatmoment*everyonebecame a performer.*
Otello and Don Giovanni
And Figaro strode on the midmost stage. . .

The notion of culture is endowed with negative connotation (*the hideous voice of Culture*), as it is not associated with foremost personalities and literature characters (*Otello and Don Giovanni / and Figaro. . .*). On the contrary, it is connected with the description of unprofessional, uneducated persons (*Hysterical woman, thrashing her arms and legs. . .*). The place name *San Francisco*, used in the poem's title, is of pivotal importance. From the point of view of its symbolic meaning, it explains the negative attitude of the author to the level of cultural development in the USA. The period of the 1950-1960's was marked by the appearance of beatnik generation, and a social life revolved around the Summer of Love. San Francisco became the centre of liberal changes in the society. So, this place name performs an informative function since it encodes certain historical knowledge about that period of time, and an evaluative one as it exemplifies the interrelation between the cultural processes in the American society and the events described in a poem.

2.2. The Cognitive-Pragmatic Dimension of Place Names' Functioning in the XX – XXI Cent

The events in the social and historical life of America in the XX – XXI century led to the appearance of new cultural directions. The first half of the XX century is marked by the Jazz Age (the period from the end of the WWI to the beginning of the Great Depression). Jazz music made a significant influence on the development of the American culture. One of the jazz products was the blues, which evolved from the cultural traditions of African-Americans:

Droning a *drowsy syncopated tune,*
 Rocking back and forth to a *mellow croon,*
 I heard a *Negro play.*
 Down on *Lenox Avenue* the other night. . .
Hedid a lazysway
Hedid a lazysway
 L. Hughes "The Weary Blues"

The place name *Lenox Avenue* symbolizes the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance, because this street became the centre of the new cultural direction of African-Americans in the 1930's. Lenox Avenue brought together the cultural tastes of African Americans, Latin Americans, Indians and the Spanish speaking population, which evolved into the creation of the Jazz music. So, the main function of the place name is the one of identification, i.e., the realization of its cultural and social potential in the context of the whole poem. The informative and evaluative functions of place names are also performed in the poem "Riverside Drive" by D. Zerden in the framework of the description of modern architecture:

... But isn't this what we wanted?
 I like this storm. The sky exhaling black smoke.
 Frightened birches. Time turned to water
 and the clean frost on our windows
 and bringing up our high color.
 Didn't we want to walk past the faded Beaux-Arts glory
 of buildings with their arches and turrets
 as complex and shadowed as the mind's apartments,
 where the gloom gathers inside gates
 under the stone nymphs and nameplates?..

Riverside Drive, situated in the western part of Manhattan in the New York City, is known for its picturesque architecture style. The style Beaux-Arts influenced the architecture of the USA in the 1880-1930's. Within the context of the whole poem the place name *Riverside Drive* transmits the author's intentions: the opposition of traditional and modern artistic tendencies involves into the process of text interpretation reader's background knowledge. Such opposition is realized in the word-combination *the faded Beaux-Arts glory/of buildings*, which marks the impossibility of a return to the past, full of majestic architectural masterpieces. The complexity of the form and meaning of the artistic works of the past is expressed through its comparison with a human mind, which is difficult to understand (*as complex and shadowed as the mind' apartments*). The inconsistency of the change to a new style in architecture and arts in general is exemplified with the help of rhetorical questions (*But isn't this what we wanted?.. Didn't we want to walk past the faded Beaux-Arts glory / of buildings?..*), the answers to which bare individual character, the marker of the postmodernism epoch. The poem "Shubert in Florida" by Ch. Smith represents the background function of the place name *Florida*:

... I was listening
 to Schubert, I was standing in a stairwell
 in a beach town, listening to *Schubert's darkest sonata*
 played on a car radio,
 thinking of children
 coming on love for the first time, of their hands...
 and thought how ridiculous
 and destructive this is, this irrepressible need
 for the loved one...

The classic art works (*Schubert's darkest sonata*) do not lose their relevance in a modern society (*played on a car radio*), because they are based on the embodiment and interpretation of human values. The place name *Florida* in the context of the whole poem serves only as a background for the representation of the main hero's inner state, emotions and feelings.

3. Conclusions

The results of the conducted research show that place names, being the elements of conceptual representation, are endowed with the cultural connotative and denotative meaning. The exemplification of such meaning within the context of a whole poem depends on the social and historical development of a society, and pragmatic intentions of an author. Within the American poetic works of the XIX century place names denote strategic territories. They serve as the markers of a geographical space, which is the element of the American cultural continuum. In the poetic works of the XX-XXI centuries place names are also used for the formation of the individual space of a lyric hero, which is characterized by internal integrity and is culturally and pragmatically motivated.

So, the role of place names in the American poetic discourse of the XIX- XXI centuries consists in the representation of events unfolding, that reflect the important historical and cultural processes in the society; documentation of the objective reality (in order to familiarize readers with the continuum of the American society); the revelation of the role of states, towns, and other geographical objects in the process of the geopolitical and historical development of the USA. In other words, place names are the markers of a geographical space, on which cultural-historical and individual-lyrical dimensions within a poetic work are imposed.

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