

The Phenomenon of Responsibility in the Russian and English Languages and its Applied Relevance

Abstract. The key role of individual's responsibility determination in the Russian language is in world predictability or, vice versa, unpredictability. Although in English, the responsibility is likely born by an individual rather than by external factors.

In this presentation, mostly we deal with the responsibility of individual persons. Moreover, basing on the definition of the word in two languages we can see that there is a divergence in understanding responsibility.

Key words: definition, etymology, word, duty.

Introduction

Language proficiency implies world conceptualization. Then, the speaker as a matter of course perceives the ideas' configurations enclosed in the word meaning of the native language, and s/he gets an illusion that so goes all life. However, when comparing different linguistic worldviews considerable divergence between them is revealed. Besides, nontrivial ones are found occasionally.

The key role of individual's responsibility determination in the Russian language is in world predictability or, vice versa, unpredictability. Although in English, the responsibility is likely born by an individual rather than by external factors.

Methods we should briefly consider the etymology of the word. In Russian, the word 'responsibility' – 'ответственность' derives from an adjective 'ответственный' and a noun 'ответ', further from 'от-+ -вет', then from Protoslavlic *vētjo, from which also derived such words as: Old Russian. Вѣтъ «совет, договор» 'advice, agreement', Old Slav. вѣтъ (Old Greek βουλή «решение, воля, совет» 'decision, will, advice'). From here is Russian навет, извет, ответ, привет, обет, совет, вече, ответить, отвечать, завещать etc.

Its definition is following,

1) obligation and willingness of someone to answer for their actions, deeds and their consequences;

2) ability and willingness of a person to recognize that s/he is the cause of anything;

3) colloq. conscientiousness and discipline.

Surprisingly, the word 'responsibility' is rather modern in English. The original philosophical usage of 'responsibility' was political [1] and reflected the origin of the word. In all modern European languages, 'responsibility' settled at the end of the eighteenth century. In the etymology of 'responsibility', the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the debates on the U.S. constitution in the *Federalist Papers* (1787), and the Anglo-Irish political thinker Edmund Burke (1796) [2]. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when John Stuart Mill writes of responsibility he does not mean 'free will' yet. At the end of the nineteenth century, Max Weber who was the most notable thinker to speak of responsibility propounds an ethics of responsibility for the politician.

Therefore, 'responsibility' has a place in eighteenth and nineteenth century thought, although in political contexts, where it concerns responsible action and the principles of representative government. In twentieth century philosophy, on the other hand, the emphasis was placed on questions of free will and determinism.

Merriam-Webster dictionary gives following definition:

1) the state of being the person who caused something to happen;

2) a duty or task that you are required or expected to do;

3) something that you should do because it is morally right, legally required, etc.

Oxford dictionary definition:

1. The state or fact of having a duty to deal with something or of having control over someone;
2. The state or fact of being accountable or to blame for something;
3. A moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of;
4. The opportunity or ability to act independently and take decisions without authorization;
5. A thing, which one is required to do as part of a job, role, or legal obligation.[3]

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Main body

World unpredictability in Russian

One of the most crucial constituents of linguistic worldview is world unpredictability idea. It means that the human cannot neither predict the future nor affect it. In the Russian language, there are many linguistic means, which describe the human's life as some mysterious process. As the result, it seems that the person does not act himself but is affected by some external forces. Apparently, the person declines all responsibility and shifts it on chance, fate, god, universe—whatever you would like.

One just looks around and shrugs one's shoulders like:

- *так сложилось (вышло, получилось, случилось)*

When one feels annoyed/ is vexed: *вот угораздило!*

- or one is happy: *повезло*
- or one got himself in trouble/ got into difficulties and hopes that it will all come out in the wash/ come round somehow: *образуется*

Hope for external circumstances is inherent in both Russian and Western civilizations. As an example, the hope for good fortune (external circumstances) lies in the base of Western civilization, like in a Cinderella story. Everyone may be lucky, may have a good fortune. Nevertheless, the reality proves that the basis of success is in constant work, not in luck or good fortune.

The idea of the future's unpredictability can be expressed by famous Russian word 'авось'. *However, it seems as if nowadays-young people use 'авось' much less than our parents and grandpar-*

ents did. Also, in the meaning of a row of specific words and expressions there are such connected with the idea of probability as *а вдруг? , на всякий случай, если что.* All these words are based on the idea that the future cannot be foreseen, and thus people cannot neither completely hedge against troubles nor exclude that anything good may happen against any expectations.

The idea of world unpredictability leads to unpredictable results, especially one's own actions. The Russian language possesses an amazing wealth funds, providing the speaker with the opportunity to absolve themselves of responsibility for their own actions: enough to say *мне не работается* instead of *я не работаю (I do not work)* or *меня не будет завтра на работе* instead of *я не приду завтра на работу (I am not coming to work tomorrow)*, or use *постараюсь (I will do my best)* instead of *сделаю (I will do)*; *не успел (I had no time)* instead of *не сделал (I have not done)*; *мне не повезло – я провалился (I failed).*

In the Russian language, there is a whole layer of words and syntactical constructions wherein there is a notion of such possibility that some things occur by themselves 'как бы само собой'. It should be regarded that 'как бы' is linguistically specific and its idea is characteristic to Russian linguistic worldview. One can feel the sense of epistemic uncertainty: maybe A, maybe not A, maybe both yes and no, moreover, it even does not matter. This serves double function: on the one hand, it eliminates a responsible agent if he exists in reality. Therefore, it can be said *постараюсь (I will do my best)* instead of *сделаю (I will do)* or *не успел (I had no time)* instead of *не сделал (I have not done it)*. On the other hand, things and circumstances endowed with sense of pseudeactivity, pseuderesponsibility when comparing such phrases like *образуется я, обойдется, успеется*, constructions like *мне не работается* etc. In other words, in 'как бы само собой' formula there are two constituents both equally deviating from rational scientific point of view on things and mutually exclusive:

1) I don't have to take effort to do something (because ultimately nothing depends on me) and

2) If I do nothing, anyway something will happen.

The idea of «как бы само собой» is so strong in the Russian language system so that it can be expressed not only by means of words and syntactical constructions, but also with special word derivational models like: *зачитался, заработался, засиделся в гостях – therefore one has not done*

something one had to do, although as if against one's will, and thus it is not in one's fault.

In case, when one had not done what he was supposed to do he can use an exquisite formula *he успел*. When 'Я не успел', one shifts his responsibility for not doing something to external forces (as lack of time), simultaneously alluding to the fact that one indeed took efforts.

To my regret, I frequently tried to use such fine formula when explaining the absence of my homework on French courses. While ascending a staircase I brushed up on my future excuse. It was right there, where I understood for the first time in my life that in French I cannot excuse myself without admitting my fault. As the result, my explanation was so simple «Je ne les ai pas fait» – «I have not done it». Here I meant that it was me who was not responsible enough to take the time and do homework just on time.

It should be noted, that the opacity of the relation between cause and effect, absence of differentiation of probabilistic, random phenomena occurring with a person from his own actions, which he produces and which he should bear the responsibility for. Indifference to this difference leads to the fact that in some cases the Russian language imposes responsibility where one actually does not have it. To compare 'угораздило, умудрился'.

Increased responsibility in English

People tend to evaluate other people as responsible or not, depending on how seriously they take their responsibilities. Often it is done informally, through moral judgment. Sometimes this is done formally, in legal judgment.

The most important factors for evaluating responsibility are: general responsiveness to others (e.g. via moral reasoning or feelings such as sympathy); a sense of responsibility for one's actions (e.g. so that we may offer reasons for our actions or feel emotions of shame or guilt); and tendencies to regard others as responsible (e.g. to respect persons as the authors of their deeds and to feel resentful or grateful to them).

In English philosophic and linguistic worldview, there is a division of responsibility into retrospective and prospective.

Firstly, we consider retrospective responsibility. In assigning responsibility for an outcome or event, one may simply be telling a causal story. This might or might not involve human actions. For example, the faulty gasket was responsible for the car breaking down; his epileptic fit was responsible for the accident. Such usages do not imply any assignment of blame or desert, and philosophers often distin-

guish them by referring to «causal responsibility.» More frequently, however, responsibility attribution is concerned with the morality of somebody's action(s). Among the many different causes that led to an outcome, that action is identified as the morally outstanding one. If we say the captain was responsible for the shipwreck, we do not deny that all sorts of other causes were in play. But we do single out the person who we think ought to be *held responsible* for the outcome. Retrospective responsibility usually involves, then, a moral (or perhaps legal) judgment of the person responsible.

This topic is an old concern of philosophers, predating the term «responsibility» by at least two millennia. The classic analysis of the issues goes back to Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he investigates the conditions that justify, rehabilitate us from blame and the circumstances where blame is appropriate [4]. Among conditions that excuse the actor, he mentions intoxication, force of circumstances, and enforcement: we cannot be held responsible where our capacity to choose was suppressed or where there was no effective choice open to us, (though perhaps we can be blamed for getting into that condition or those circumstances). We can be blamed for what we do when threatened by others, but not as we would be if enforcement were absent. In each case, the issue seems to be whether we are able to control what we do: if something lies beyond our control, it also lies beyond the limit of our responsibility.

A different use of «responsibility» is as a synonym for «duty». When we ask about a person's responsibilities, we are concerned with what she ought to be doing or attending to. Sometimes we use the term to describe duties that everyone has – for example, «Everyone is responsible for looking after his own health.» More typically, we use the term to describe a particular person's duties. He is responsible for sorting the garbage; she is responsible for looking after her baby; the Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for monitoring air pollution; and so on. In these cases, the term singles out the duties, or «area of responsibility,» that somebody has by virtue of their role.

Now, we can analyze prospective responsibility. This usage bears at least one straightforward relation to the question of retrospective responsibility. We will tend to hold someone responsible when s/he fails to perform her duties. A captain is responsible for the safety of the ship; hence, he will be held responsible if there is a shipwreck. The usual justification for this lies in the thought that if he had taken his responsibility more seriously, then his ac-

tions might have averted the shipwreck. In some cases, though, when we are charged with responsibility for something, we will be held responsible if harm occurs, regardless of whether we might have averted it.

Applied relevance of the phenomenon of responsibility

Examples:

1. It is widely known, that the British apologize for any reason, even if they have done nothing serious. For example, if a person standing before entrance/exit of the store noticed your momentary confusion about whether you or he should pass one another forward (give way/ make way) – the British will apologize. However, the reverse side of the coin is that British people are very sensitive. If you accidentally touched someone and did not apologize, then you will be reproached that you are poorly educated and reminded of the need to say sorry in such cases. This example presents to which extent the British consider themselves responsible for their actions. The answer is that they are ready to answer for their own actions, at least in word. It also demonstrates that fact that they would like to apply these moral values to others.

2. Taken from real-life experience. In most cases, when a reviewer here, in Kazakhstan (probably, in Russia too) analyses a lesson given by a teacher or a teacher-trainee s/he is likely to reproach:

- You did this or that wrong.
- You must fix this or that, correct this or that mistake.

- You are wrong.
- Here you have made such mistake.

While his Western colleague will probably say:

- In your place, I would have done so, because...

- In order to avoid this flaw, error, mistake

They would like to admit their responsibility for the future success of their testee rather than frustrating his/her ambitions and motivation. The Russian language worldview speakers, who inclined to shift their obligations to external factors, would rather blame any external circumstances, e.g. some specific person – testee or his or her tutor, than make some efforts to share trainee's responsibility to some extent and try to help him or her using his/her life or professional experience.

3. In my opinion, English speakers and Russian speakers imply different amount of certainty and responsibility for their statements in terms of their outcome. I would like to examine word 'prob-

ably'. As Aristotle said, 'The probable is what usually happens' [3]. Descartes in his work 'Discourse on Method' expressed his thought as. 'It is a truth very certain that when it is not in our power to determine what is true we ought to follow what is most probable.' [5] Finally, as Cicero said, 'Probability is the very guide of life.'

Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of 'probably':

1. very likely : almost certainly
2. insofar as seems reasonably true, factual, or to be expected : without much doubt [3].

In English the word 'probably' indicates on a higher degree of probability of an event than 'perhaps', 'maybe' and 'possibly'. 'Perhaps', 'maybe', 'possibly' indicate that something may happen or may not happen or that there is a possibility that something will happen/will not happen. 'Probably' also has a similar meaning, but the likelihood that something will happen is quite high.

In Russian, their analogues have slightly another shade in connotation. When in the Russian language the words 'может быть, возможно, вероятно' are used—they leave a loophole, so as not to make a final decision. 'Maybe I will go to the gym', 'Maybe I will start a project next month' – they are all hidden excuses, when in the face of choice a person still does not want to do something. It is hard to admit this fact; therefore, it is better to provide a solution to someone or something, i.e. decline responsibility.

Even saying 'probably', we tend to decrease the degree of probability that an event will happen. So, in Russian only 100% sure statement can be taken under someone's responsibility. The rest that is lower than even 99.9% cannot be said for sure.

Conclusion

For people with different views on 'responsibility' notion different criteria of responsibility evaluation should be applied.

How can we impute or impose liability on those whose language worldview rather implies declining them from all responsibility by external factors, along with those who imply responsibility as an attribute of the actor. If Russian-speaking people should fall under the same standards with representatives of Western civilization, the essence of responsibility in a common understanding should be conveyed to all of them. Conversely, it seems difficult to explain to a British why he should not take all responsibility or to a Russian, why he should bear responsibility.

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