Linguocultural Category "Us-Them" and Markers of Group Identification

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Abstract: "Us-them" concept as a linguocultural category reflects a basic cultural and psychological opposition that shapes cognitive evaluative value system of knowledge and reflects unique perceptions and interpretations of the real world rooted in the identity of a particular culture. This issue has gained increasing relevance in our days provoked by extensive implementation of anthropology-oriented approaches in modern linguistics. "Us-them" opposition plays an essential role in shaping intergroup relations and group identification, which is reflected by the language mind, expressed through speech behaviour of an individual in general and an English speaker in particular. This paper studies the usage of pronominal forms for "us" and "them" and combinations "us and them", "us versus them" to mark group identification. The study demonstrates that every time the "us"-form is not within "standard" usage (e.g. in identification statements), native speakers of English use it to refer to "us" as an ingroup or denote a close emotional bond between them and the others. In contrast, the pronominal form for "them" in a "non-standard" position for a subjective form often acquires negative connotation and is used by native English speakers to refer to "a foe" – i.e. a group of people who violate common norms and therefore are a potential threat or danger. Combinations "us and them", "them and us", "us-them", and especially "us versus them" encountered in analyzed material, as a rule, have a negative connotation and refer to a conflicting situation or a confrontation between the two social groups of "friends" and "foes".

1. Introduction

According to Yu. S. Stepanov, 'FRIEND/FOE' opposition and its various aspects has paramount presence in culture and is an essential concept of any collective, mass, popular, and national mindset [1]. Such cultural inclusiveness leads to the fact that, 'friend – foe' parameter is used to describe not only relationships with their own kin, but also to explain various contemporary processes and phenomena. Social groups are a most important component of the social structure of any society [1]. Amid modernizing society and the development of personal identity sociologists grew increasingly fascinated about social groups, defining them as any relatively stable group of people, interacting with each other and united by common interests and goals. One of the founders of the theory on social groups is G. Simmel, who believed that hostility is a fundamental property of relations between people [2]. It is worth noting sociologist William Sumner, a representative of social Darwinism. In his work 'Folkways' he introduced

concepts 'we-group' or 'in-group', as well as an individual's pursuit to achieve or maintain positive social identity (referred to as 'they-group' or 'out-group'), which became fundamental terms in sociology and social psychology to be later extended into linguistics. According to W. Sumner, relations in the we-group demonstrate cohesion, whereas in the they-group they are in contrast hostile [3].

2. Theoretical Framework

Further studies of intergroup relations were performed within cognitive approach framework; their goal was to establish cognitive mechanisms of intergroup relations. Most prominent representatives of this trend are Henry Tajfel and his successor and follower J. Turner who established the theory of social identity and the theory of social categorization. These theories provide a foundation for almost all modern approaches to the phenomenon of intergroup relations. These scholars have introduced the following terms in academic tradition: social identity - the theory of individual knowledge about being part of a particular social group that bears emotional and evaluative relevance for the individual and his/her group membership; social categorization is a way to organize and streamline social environment, often depending on the role of process participant. According to this concept, positive differentiation between the 'I' inside the group and the 'I' outside it effective through social comparison between yourself and members of your group (the in-group), as well as people outside this group (the out-group). This means that if an individual identifies themselves with a certain social group, then this group has a slightly more positive image in the individual's mind. Moreover, as A. Tajfel noted, every individual is striving towards a better or positive image of self. Thus, one of the main rules in social identity dynamics is the individual's desire to achieve or maintain a positive social identity [4].

The issue of intergroup relations draws attention of linguists and is mainly studies within the framework of 'friend or foe' opposition. For example, scientists involved in the revival of the Proto-Slavic culture analyzed language data to conclude that 'friend-foe' opposition comes into effect within three dimensions: 1) social interpretation of the opposition, i.e. 'friend' is someone who belongs to this social group, whereas 'foe' is everything alien which fails to be a symbol of this group; 2) ethnic aspect; 3) 'human – non-human' parameter, i.e. 'friend' refers to what belongs to humans, whereas 'foe' is everything non-human, bestial, belonging to witchcraft. On top of that researchers found out oppositions adjacent to 'friend or foe' framework, i.e. 'house – forest', 'far – close', 'internal – external', etc. Eventually, they concluded that 'friend-foe' opposition prevails in social reality descriptions [5].

In 1989 A.B. Penkovsky suggested a hypothesis on a specific semantic category of 'extraneity' in Russian language: "It is suggested to deliberate on a hypothetical existence of 'extraneity' ('foreignness', 'alienation'?) as a semantic category that consequently should be bonded to the category of negative evaluation ('what belongs to foe is bad') and have specific ways of linguistic expression (at least as independent unrelated units)" [6]. Almost all studies showcase a distinct property of 'friend or foe' opposition which is evaluation: what is 'alien' is associated with negative evaluation. International scholars share this viewpoint; for example, T.A. van Dijk, a prominent expert in discourse analysis, referred to 'positive self-presentation' and 'negative other-presentation) [7].

When analyzing the multi-level representation of 'friend-foe' opposition in different languages, most scholars admit the crucial role of personal pronouns, in particular, pronouns *we* and *they* [8, 9, etc.]. Notably, the plural form in 'friend-foe' opposition dominates in the academic dimension of sociology and philosophy for its direct association with collectivization, social differentiation, and identification. 'Friends' and 'foes' imply various social groups, isolated from each other.

3. Methods

This paper is an attempt to show that some pronominal forms – i.e. *us* and *them* –and their combinations function as markers of group identity, thus contributing to language representation of 'friend-foe'

opposition. Echoing A. A. Matveyeva's ideas, we understand this opposition as a universal category based on individual's self-identification with a particular community which is understood as 'us', thus delineating him-/herself from a continuum that is associated with 'them' [10].

We suggest looking at how *us* and *them* are presented in Merriam Webster Dictionary, American Heritage Dictionary, and Oxford Dictionary of English [12-14]. All these dictionaries define *us* and *them* as the object case of pronouns *we* and *they*, respectively; however, commentaries refer to a few challenging structures where these pronouns function in an extraordinary way (as traditional grammar suggests). Those functions are that of subject, apposition (*Us engineers*), predicative (*It's us, it's them*), in combination with preposition *between* (*between you and me* vs. *between you and I*?) and some other non-standard usages. The dictionary says that the choice between subject and object forms does not have to rely on grammar rules; it is rather determined by how formal or informal the situation is, as well as sense of 'pomposity' and 'absurdity' added by 'grammatically accurate' usage of personal pronouns. Meanwhile, native speakers notably tend to use the object case, where the subject case is required by grammar rules. Such 'non-standard' usage, however, is far not in English. It dates back to Middle English; the following paper by O.V. Emelianova provides deeper insight into peculiar aspects of Early Modern English usage of these forms [11]. To study the current state of the issue, there is every reason to search for contexts under concern in using Google and Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) platforms.

4. Language Analysis of Markers of Group Identification

4.1 Object Form of us as a Group Identification Marker

Identification as a process is inherent to any human cognitive activity and is therefore a most crucial part of individual socialization and individualization, as well as self-understanding, knowledge and interpretation of other persons' behavior. First and foremost, it is worth considering statements of identification with the structure *to be + us*. To this end, a number of examples have been selected from Google search results: (1) WE have met the enemy and he is US (first poster for the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970); (2) Robots Are Us: Some Economics of Human Replacement (NBER Working Paper No. 20941, Issued in February 2015); (3) Toys"R"Us, Babies"R"Us Inc. (the world's leading dedicated toy and baby products retailer, offering a differentiated shopping experience through its family of brands, UK).

These Google contexts elicit that pronoun *us* preceded by verb *to be* sounds fairly formal, i.e. it is appropriate for headlines of luxury newspapers, titles of publications by large corporations or academic papers. All the above names follow an identical model and include pronoun *us*; pronoun *we* was not registered in structures of the kind. In examples 1 to 3 use identifying statements to express that specific entities are identical; the first component is variable, whereas the second (*us*) is unchanged. Group identity, seemingly marked by the *us* form, is established depending on how it relates to such entities as *enemy*, *robots*, *toys*. In this case *us* pronoun denotes a bonded group of people having similar properties, interests, and goals.

"Non-standard" usage of objective *us* is not limited to identification statements. Thus, a program appeared on the BBC called '*The super-rich and us*'. The fact that such an influential organization as the BBC chose to use pronoun *us* in its unusual function grants such usage some "legitimacy". The program raises issues of inequality in the UK: very wealthy people (the super-rich) are contrasted to all other residents of the UK (we, the rest of us, and therefore there is *us* in the program name). The latter appear as some integral whole, a cohesive numerous ingroup (which, apparently, includes the authors of the text as well); this group is contrasted to the other small, but very influential outgroup.

Thus, in present day English the *us* form goes beyond its "standard" usage as an object pronoun. At the same time, in our opinion, its "new" usage grants it emotionality and a little different meaning from pronoun *we*. Pronoun *us* is used by native English speakers when they want to emphasize a close emotional connection between them and others, i. e. it acquires the role of a stronger marker of group

identity than *we*. *Us* is not just "we"; it rather says "we are together".

4.2 Object Form of them as a Group Identification Marker

The object form of *them* is widely used in titles of books and magazines: (4) Them: Adventures with Extremists: Picador Classic (Jon Ronson, Pan Macmillan, 2014); (5) Them. A novel about class, race, and the horrific, glassy sparkle of urban life, them chronicles the lives of the Wendalls, a family on the steep edge of poverty in the windy, riotous Detroit slums (Joyce Carol Oates, Fawcett Crest, 1969).

The noun *extremists* in (4) is a clear marker of negative evaluation. It can be assumed that the pronoun *them* is a stronger marker of "foes" – a certain outgroup that transgresses generally accepted norms and often conceals a real or imaginary danger – than the 'standard' form *they*.

Google search results demonstrate that the object form of them is characteristic of rock culture. This youth sub-culture emerged in Great Britain and USA in the sixties of the 20th century. Music, and the styles of clothing, language, and behavior closely linked to it, has provided adolescents with the essential basis for a common sense of identity. The verbal content of rock songs turned toward rebellion, social protest, sex, and, increasingly, drugs. Rock culture has at its core the idea of nonconformity – the fact that someone does not think or behave in the usual way. Choosing their name "Them" after a 1954 American black-and-white science fiction monster film from Warner Bros. Pictures, a Northern Irish showband formed in Belfast in 1964 aimed at presenting themselves as different from most people, emphasizing their otherness and dissimilarity from others.

The performed analysis of dictionary definitions and Google and COCA contexts showcases that in present day English the *them* form also goes beyond its "standard" usage as an object pronoun. It conveys negative evaluation; native speakers of English use it to refer to "foes", some outgroup characterized as different from a certain ingroup.

4.3 Us and them / them and us, us-them, us versus them Combinations as Group Identification Markers

Structures with both "non-standard" forms play a special role in the representing "friend-foe" opposition. Some dictionaries include combinations *us and them, them and us*; others feature *us – them* (e.g. The Oxford Dictionary has articles for each of these graphic forms). Many dictionaries (Cambridge Dictionary Online, The Oxford Dictionary etc.) suggest that *us and them / them and us, us-them* combinations have negative evaluation, whereas division into groups is associated with tension, conflict, and struggle: used when describing disagreements or differences, especially between different social groups (Cambridge Dictionary Online)

According to COCA, *us and them* combination outnumbers significantly *them and us* and its modifications in the ratio of 137 to 37 respectively [15]. As for *us–them*, the corpus produced only 14 contexts. Most contexts are attributive with the pronoun in adjectival position to noun: (6) One of the reasons Jim quit teaching was that he didn't like the "us–them" professor-student relationship; (7)…. we tend to "stand out, resulting in "us–them conflicts (see also the "them-and-us narrative, the "us and them" polarities, this "us and them" mentality, an "us and them" attitude and many others).

As for the meaning, here it is appropriate to recall that according to the above-mentioned theory of social identity and social categorization by H. Tajfel and J. Turner, social categorization is understood as an individual's ability to attribute people around to certain social groups – i.e. categories [4]. This process leads to the identification of the so-called ingroup and outgroup. Thus, an aspect of a most ancient semiotic opposition "friend-foe" comes into effect to reflect a human understanding of the world's binary structure.

It is interesting to see how this opposition is implemented in COCA contexts. The *us* form highlights belonging to the "own" world that is positively evaluated in axiological terms; whereas *them* denotes

belonging to "alien", an alien world, mired with threats and dangers caused by its potential hostility, which receives negative evaluation. Some examples explicitly show that: (8) …still relevant is the idea of dualistic, Manichean world of good and evil, bad guys and good guys, us and them, serpent and angel, gods and devils (compare also The centuries-old dialectic of white and black, us and them, master and servant); contemporary times are described as this polarized world of us and them. It is easy to note that in these examples us stands together with "positive" members of the opposition, while them is at the "negative" pole.

The relations between the two groups, represented by personal pronouns, are represented in an expected way – from simply stating the difference: (9) We are different, us and them, them and us (compare hard distinctions between us and them; the presence of durable and fundamental difference between "us and them") to mentioning tension and conflicts; (10) Still there is significant tension between groups with an idea of " us and them " and even wars between groups of "friends" and "foes": (11) the eternal war between us and them. These and many other examples show that the "friend or foe" opposition plays a dominant role in describing social realities.

Google search produced one more modified combination, i.e. *us versus them.* It is not registered in any dictionary; however, it shows significant frequency among Google and COCA contexts (78 examples selected for *us versus them*; *them versus us* registered in only 2 cases). Most COCA contexts feature this combination in attributive position to nouns *approach, attitude, mentality, mindset, thinking, view of the world, philosophy, rhetoric, scenario, style, model, syndrome* that denote predominantly attitudes to some phenomenon or opinion about it. Combination *us versus them* has a stronger idea of "friend-foe" opposition, than *us and them*, since Latin *versus* means "against"; this is demonstrated by expression *clash of images* in the following example: (12) …at the clash of images – pacifist versus militaristic, liberal versus conservative, us versus them. It is fascinating to encounter sociological terms together with combination *us versus them*: (13) She felt alienated by "us versus them" identity politics. As said earlier, "friend-foe" opposition plays a dominant role in describing social realities. Division into in- and out-groups is possible in completely different settings and areas of human activity, for example, in sports: (14) But it will become us versus them, umpires versus players, if the umpires prevail in their arguments at baseball; или науке: (15) I think that more and more it's becoming us versus them – you know, the non-scientists versus the scientists "Friend-foe" opposition is also registered beyond human society, e.g. among insects: (16) Without such markers, no one knows who is friend or foe. When the clarity of "us versus them" breaks down, peace breaks out among colonies of an ant species. The latter context refers to specific markers to distinguish between "friends" and "foes": expression *friend or foe*? (military) is used in radio message – whether it is a friendly aircraft or the foe's – whereas in slovar-vocab.com/English/bed-vocab/ combination *friend-or-foe* means: *friend or enemy? Do you come to do harm or good?*

There is ample evidence that dictionary definitions and COCA examples with combinations *us and them / them and us, us-them* and *us versus them* demonstrate that division into groups is almost always associated with tension, conflict, opposition, alienation of the "outgroup" members. This is clearly seen from text and title of a post about the situation around Muslims in the UK: (17) Young British Muslims alienated by 'us versus them' rhetoric of counter-terrorism … It has contributed to a growing moral panic between a British "us" and a Muslim "other" (September 29, 2015 12.19pm BST theconversation.com).

5. Results

The study yields the following results. When *us* form extends its "standard" usage (e.g. in the identification statements), native speakers of English use it to refer to "friends," some ingroup or to denote a close emotional link between them and others. This form, therefore, acquires the function of a group identification marker, which is somewhat different from *we* marker. "Friends" are members of a larger or smaller social group, bonded by close relationships, joint activities, common views, beliefs, values, etc.

Pronominal form *them* in a "non-standard" subjective position often acquires negative evaluation and is used by native English speakers to denote a group of people or creatures that transgress generally accepted norms; this aspect distinguishes this form from marker *they*. "Foes" that make up a certain outgroup are characterized as outlandish, foreign, being outside the boundaries of their native culture. A "foe" is someone who is strange, unusual, and contrasts with usual and familiar environment, often concealing a real or imaginary danger and threatening one's "friends".

Combinations *us and them, them and us, us-them* and especially *us versus them* registered in analyzed contexts usually mark a conflict, a confrontation between the two social groups of "friends" and "foes" (the two groups often having an unequal position) and therefore convey negative evaluation.

6. Conclusions

The "friend-foe" opposition originated at the dawn of human civilization and has been part of human culture for thousands of years. Nevertheless, new emerging aspects and meanings of this opposition prove its importance and relevance for philosophical, psychological, sociological and linguocultural studies. This opposition plays a significant role in shaping intergroup relations and group identification, which is reflected in language mind and expressed in verbal behaviors of individuals in general and native English speakers, in particular.

The performed analysis showcases that depending on what appears between *us* and *them* (a hyphen, *and*, or *versus*), the degree of tension between the groups behind these forms changes. Presence of *versus* (from Latin "against") will most likely indicate a more acute contradiction, a conflict for one or another reason. It is still an open issue whether there is a difference in the order of *us* and *them* in combinations of concern; this can be analyzed within a different study.

Thus, there is every reason to claim that forms *us* and *them*, as well as their combinations are markers of group identification and important linguistic tool to represent the binary semantic category of "friend – foe", which has a dominant role in social realities.

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