

The Image of Bread in Closely Related Languages through Word Associations

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Abstract. We perform a comparative study of the culturological characteristics of closely related languages through associative connexions which exist in the minds of their speakers and are registered in lexicographic sources. We examine the stimulus ‘bread’, which is one of the most important European and global culturally marked concepts. Our work addresses Bulgarian and Ukrainian in a broader comparison to Belarusian and Russian.

Keywords: Bread, Word Associations, Linguistic Culturology, Slavic Languages.

1 Introduction

The understanding of natural language as a complex conceptual system, rather than a mere set of formal relations, as well as the acquisition of a foreign language require accounting for its cultural context. For this reason, comparative studies of linguistic culturology are always relevant, especially of closely related languages, whose apparent ease of learning, stemming to the common origin, and similarity of the lexical stock, semantics and grammar does not always save from misunderstanding a token word, a turn of speech or the general context of the situation. The associative connexions that exist in the minds of speakers are culturally marked and largely unique to each language, and consequently are of great research interest. An excellent illustration of this is provided by the system of associations linked to the word for bread, which has long been an important component in the culinary traditions, and hence the cultures, of all nations of Europe and its near surroundings. In the focus of our attention were the associative responses to this lexical stimulus in the closely related languages Bulgarian and Ukrainian, as recorded in several lexicographic sources, esp. (Gerganov 1984) for Bulgarian, (Butenko 1989) and (Martinek 2007) for Ukrainian, and (Ufimtseva et al. 2004) for these two languages as well as Belarusian and Russian. There have been comparative studies of the lexica of Bulgarian and Ukrainian (Derzhanski, Siruk 2015), but this particular matter has not been studied to date. In this study the comparison is extended by the inclusion of Belarusian and Russian evidence. This has not been done to date; its interest lies in the involvement of closely related languages, the similarity and disparity between which are often misjudged because of stereotypes that are rebutted

by adequate linguistic research. The stereotypicality of thought is particularly stable with respect to concepts central to the determination of a nation's cultural identity, which are largely reflected by the basic layer of vocabulary, have old and strong roots in the language, are frequent, structurally and semantically ramified. Food, and bread as one of its main representatives, are among these central concepts, and the contrastive study of the traditions and the transformations of the stereotypical associations with it in Slavic languages is especially important for the formation of an integral image of bread in this linguistic and cultural area.

2 Bread in General, Thematic Grouping

Language is universally acknowledged as a treasure of a nation's cultural heritage, and lexical associations are a powerful instrument for studying the subtle aspects of the meanings of words that go beyond the dictionary definition. Frequent associations can be motivated by culturally conditioned ideas about things, set expressions, images from folklore and history, etc.

A convenient source of information on word associations are associative dictionaries, which reflect the results of large-scale experiments in the course of which respondents, ideally constituting a representative sample of the speakers of the language, hear isolated words (stimuli) chosen on the basis of their importance and have to quickly name the first word that comes to their mind (reaction). As a rule, associative dictionaries order responses by frequency and alphabetically, but the analysis of the data requires regrouping them into thematic groups and building thesaurus lists.

Table 1 compares some results taken from two such studies of word associations, a Bulgarian one (Gerganov 1984) and a Ukrainian one (Martinek 2007). The numbers of reactions of similar meaning to the stimuli *хляб* (Bulgarian) and *хліб* (Ukrainian) 'bread' are summed up and presented as percentages of the total number of responses given, which is 948 in the first and 212 in the second case:

Table 1. Frequencies of reactions to some thematic groups of stimuli from Gerganov (1984) and Martinek (2007).

	Bulgarian	Ukrainian		Bulgarian	Ukrainian
'food', 'eat'	16.56%	15.57%	'rye'	0.42%	4.25%
'warm', 'fresh', 'soft'	14.87%	12.74%	'black'	0.84%	3.30%
'salt'	6.54%	6.60%	'knife', 'cut'	3.80%	0.00%
varieties and pieces	8.44%	3.30%	'butter'	1.27%	1.89%
'white'	5.70%	5.66%	'meat', 'milk', 'sausage'	2.95%	0.00%
'wheat'	5.80%	4.72%	'vital, essential'	0.53%	2.36%
'tasty', 'good'	2.95%	6.13%	'hunger, hungry'	0.53%	1.42%
'fragrant'	0.00%	7.55%	'holy, sacred'	0.00%	1.89%
'cheese'	6.54%	0.00%			

We see that in both experiments responses with the meaning ‘food’, ‘eat’ and the like make up the largest portion, closely followed by adjectives that describe bread positively as warm, fresh and soft (all qualities of bread very recently made).¹ But more general descriptions as ‘good’ and ‘tasty’ appeared more often in the Ukrainian study, and only Ukrainians (and among them mostly women) responded by words that refer to the fragrance of bread.²

Many responses can be seen as reflexions of a utilitarian *vs* deferential (verging on spiritual) attitude to bread prevailing in Bulgarian and Ukrainian society respectively. Varieties and brands of bread and other baker’s goods and pieces of bread were more often named by Bulgarians (*Добруджа* ‘Dobrudzha bread, white with higher bran content’, *пута* ‘loaf, cake’, *филія* ‘slice’) than by Ukrainians. The same is true of responses related to the baking of bread and its selling and buying. (It is hard to separate these because Bulgarian *фурна* can mean both ‘furnace’ and ‘baker’s shop’.) And many Bulgarians but no Ukrainians thought of a knife and cutting. Conversely, but perhaps on a related note (because there is a tradition that slicing bread is a sin: it should only be broken), only Ukrainians – not many, but some, and no Bulgarians at all – ascribed holiness to bread. This makes one think of set expressions such as *заміняти святий хліб* ‘exchange the holy bread’—a reference to the folk custom of matchmaking whereby receiving a loaf of bread from the prospective bride instead of the one you’d brought with yourself indicated consent to marriage (SUM, v. 11, p. 82). The word *насъщен* (Bulgarian), *насушний* (Ukrainian) ‘vital, essential’ goes back to the Lord’s Prayer, and its religious roots may still be felt and may motivate its more frequent occurrence in the Ukrainian data. In turn this may correlate with the somewhat higher frequency with which Ukrainians gave responses referring to hunger. They may have been prompted by the respondents’ immediate sensations at the time of the experiment, but may also be an echo of the 1930s’ severe famine (Holodomor) which claimed several million lives in Ukraine and left a terrible psychological effect in the nation’s memory as an activator of the primordial fear of starvation, as well as perhaps a longer-lasting awareness of bread as something more than stuff that is bought, sold, cut and eaten – but rather a primary value, as the most important prerequisite for human existence – than wartime rationing did in Bulgarian society.

Whilst ‘white’ and ‘wheat’ ranked very close in the two studies, ‘rye’ and ‘black’ were just below them in the Ukrainian one but significantly lower in the Bulgarian one. (An additional 1.05% of the Bulgarian responses were *тунос* ‘brown, with significant

¹ In the Bulgarian data *топъл* ‘warm’ is the single most frequent response, evidently because of the set phrase *като топъл хляб* ‘[be as widely desired, eagerly bought, quickly sold] as warm bread’.

² Petrova (2017)’s study also shows that ‘associations that express the objective characteristics according to the perception of the product by the olfactory receptors [...] are more typical for Ukrainian recipients’, who responded with various adjectives meaning ‘fragrant’ 12 times to *хліб* ‘bread’ (as well as 9 times to *кава* ‘coffee’ and once to *пиво* ‘beer’), whereas only one Modern Greek speaker gave such a response, and that to *τσίχλα* ‘chewing gum’, a product to which a fragrance is imparted artificially.

amounts of whole wheat flour'; in Ukrainian such bread is described as *cipuii* 'grey', a word that does not come up in this experiment.)

Finally, salt ranks high on both lists, but on the Bulgarian list so does cheese, which is absent on the Ukrainian one, as are meat and milk.

3 What Goes with Bread: Stable Pairs

A comparison of several studies of word associations carried out in various languages shows that the noun most often given in response to the stimulus 'bread' is 'cheese' in the Bulgarian study, 'butter' in the English and German, 'wine' in the French and 'salt' in the Russian one (Gerganov 1984, p. 263f). Table 2 summarises the top three associations, to which we add a column for Ukrainian, created using data from Martinek (2007, p. 329), and highlight the nouns:

Table 2. Top three reactions to 'bread' from eight studies of word associations.

Bulgarian	Russian	Ukrainian	Belarusian	Kirghiz	English	German	French
warm	salt	fresh	tasty	tasty	butter	eat	wine
eat	white	food	black	eat	food	butter	white
cheese	tasty	salt	fresh	soft; food	eat	loaf	eat; hunger

These stereotypical accompaniments to bread (to which water might be added) tend to have a dual interpretation of 'not only bread but also N' (positive) or 'nothing more than N to go with bread' (negative). A sagacious Englishman knows *on which side his bread is buttered*; but in G. Orwell's *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (Ch. 7) Gordon orders 'some bread. Of course. And butter' in an effort to order as little as possible beyond the cold beef. In the French translation of the Soviet song 'A Memory of the Fighting Squadron Normandie–Niemen' the pilot recalls himself and his foreign brother-in-arms having shared *notre vin, notre pain* 'our wine, our bread' (read: everything we had),³ in H. Bazin's *Viper in the Fist* the father threatens not to honour any request *de pain ou de vin* 'for bread or wine' (read: anything at all) unless worded in English, forgetting that he is addressing his children, who are not supposed to want wine yet. In the traditional Bulgarian world view as reflected in phraseology bread and salt vary from being a complete meal: *Хляб и сол готова обяда* 'Bread and salt is a ready dinner' (Slavaykov 1972, p. 520)⁴ to a very scanty diet: *Ям хляб и сол* 'eat bread and salt = lead a

³ The Russian original has *Мы из флаги одной согревались вдвоем* 'We kept warm by [drinking – probably something stronger than wine – from] the same flask'.

⁴ The notion that bread and salt are enough to make a meal is disputed in Bulgarian common law (Marinov 1995, subsection 'On the Feeding of Journeymen'): The master's power over journeymen and apprentices is nearly unlimited; with respect to food, however, there are *customary rules strictly determined by the craftguild, which a master may in no wise break...* The master is obliged to feed the journeymen, provide them with heating, light and lodging. The food *must always be cooked*, be it meat or lentin. *Dry bread, or polenta, or a millet loaf never constitutes food [...]*. There were such masters who would break this custom, but such

very modest life' (Nicheva et al. 1975, p. 541). Likewise in Ukrainian: *Пообідали сухий хліб з сіллю* 'They dined on dry bread with salt' (SUM, v. 9, p. 865).

But whence the difference between languages? A variety of factors are at work here. Some are cultural, going back to daily life and traditional models of behaviour. Some are linguistic: in German *Brot* 'bread' and *Butter* 'butter' alliterate, as the words do in English as well; in French *pain* 'bread' and *vin* 'wine' rhyme. Some are motivated by phraseology. In turn they may give rise to set expressions and even words. In English *bread-and-butter*, cut by the Mad Hatter at the never-ending tea party and resulting from the division of a loaf by a knife in the Red Queen's division example, is a lexical unit. So is *хліб-сіль* in Ukrainian: '1. Food, subsistence. 2. A loaf of bread and salt offered, in accordance with the ancient Ukrainian custom, as a token of great respect to the one who is welcomed at the time of official ceremonies' (SUM v. 11, p. 82). Many set expressions confirm the importance of this image.

It is surprising not to find another popular, even emblematic product, which traditionally accompanies bread among the Ukrainian responses, namely *сало* 'pork fat (lard, bacon)'. *Salо* (as it is called even in English) features in many popular sayings, such as *Дурне сало [без хліба]*: 'Silly (is) *salо* without bread', used more broadly to mean that one foodstuff is useless or even harmful without another, or to describe a fool (SUM, v. 9, p. 18).

4 Bread and the Dynamics of Its Attributes

If we compare the data from Butenko (1989)'s associative dictionary of attributes to the adjectives in Martinek (2007), we shall see that the set of basic responses to the stimulus *хліб* is similar, but the frequencies of many differ. In Butenko's list *смачний* 'tasty' is somewhat higher than *свіжий* 'fresh'; *пшеничний* 'made of wheat' is twice more frequent than *житний* 'made of rye' (in Martinek's data there is more *житний* and less *пшеничний*, although the noun *пшениця* 'wheat' is more frequent than *жито* 'rye'). The latter difference can be explained by a change of extralinguistic circumstances: in food stores in UkrSSR wheat bread was one of the main types of bread, but as of the late 1990s and to this day black bread made of rye has been gaining popularity on Ukraine's market.

Many responses registered by Butenko, especially among the less frequent ones, are absent in Martinek's study:⁵ *дорогий* 'expensive' 10, *великий* 'big', *випечений* 'baked' 7, *безцінний* 'priceless', *гарячий* 'hot', *рум'яний* 'ruddy' 5, *солодкий* 'sweet', *цінний* 'valuable' 4, *гіркий* 'bitter', *кислий* 'sour', *малий* 'small', *спечений* 'baked' 3, *багатий* 'rich', *вівсяний* 'oaten', *дешевий* 'cheap', *дорогоцінний* 'precious', *зароблений* 'earned', *необхідний* 'necessary', *твердий* 'hard' 2, as well as a number of *парах legomena*.

as one suffered the penalty of being abandoned by all his journeymen in the next year and being left without working hands, and by this he was forced to mend his ways (p. 37; emphasis ours).

⁵ This is due to no small degree to the unequal scales of the studies: Butenko cites 598 responses and Martinek 104.

Words and word combinations that were given as responses only once would appear to be statistical noise unworthy of great attention, except for those cases where they can be thematically grouped with other synonymous responses, especially more frequent ones. Thus the presence of the relatively frequent reaction *черствий* ‘stale’ 27 (Butenko 1989) and its reduction to *черствий* 3, *сухий* ‘dry’ 1 (Мартінек 2007), as well as the absence of the antonyms антонімічних *м'який* ‘soft’ 19 and *пухкий* ‘fluffy’ 13 in Martinek’s data, are hard to ascribe simply to the smaller number of participants. Rather, they may be explained by the twofold change of historical context: the retreat of post-war poverty into a more distant past (along with the loss of *сухий* ‘dry’ 2, *твердий* ‘hard’ 2, *сушений* ‘dried’ 1, as well as *дорогий* ‘expensive’ 10, *гіркий* ‘bitter’ 3, *воєнний* ‘wartime’ 1, recorded by Butenko) and the changes in technology that extended the durability of bread (the parallel loss of *кислий* ‘sour’ 3, *запліснявілий* ‘mouldy’ 1).

The appearance of responses absent in the earlier study is especially interesting in light of the smaller number of respondents. Singleton responses such as *бородінський* ‘Borodino’, *голодний* ‘hungry’, *карпатський* ‘Carpathian’, *печений* ‘baked’, *світлий* ‘light (coloured)’, *ситий* ‘filling’, *сьогоднішній* ‘today’s’ have appeared. The addition of the adjectives *бородінський* and *карпатський* correlates with the increase of the popularity of black rye bread in Ukraine in the recent decades, which was mentioned above. Singleton words are interesting not just as parts of synonym sets but also from the point of view of diachronic study of associative reactions, especially if later research finds them more frequent.

Butenko (1989) fully supports and confirms the notion of the importance of the fragrance of bread, and food and drink in general, in the minds of Ukrainians: *хліб* is described as *пахучий* 20, *духмяний* 4, *запашиий* 3, *ароматний* 1 (p. 308), *калач* ‘cake’ as *пахучий* 28, *запашиий* 22, *духмяний* 10, *ароматний* 4 (p. 121), *кава* ‘coffee’ as *пахуча* 45 and *запашиа* 44 (respectively the third and fourth most frequent responses) (p. 120), even *пиво* as *пахуче* 5, *запашине* 4, *духмяне* 2 (p. 215).

5 Bread in a Belarusian and Russian Context Too

Ufimtseva et al. (2004) is a parallel associative dictionary of four closely related languages, aiming to be a tool for comparative research of the associated cultures. The experiments on which it is based can’t be described as highly representative (all respondents were college students, and the Belarusian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian ones were from one university each), and at times the data are hard to interpret because responses given in Russian to stimuli in Belarusian or Ukrainian (unlike responses in other languages) were not separated from the rest. So we use evidence from this dictionary with some reservations, comparing it to data from other sources wherever possible.

Table 3 is organised in the same way as Table 1 above, but has a few more rows. When comparing the numbers, it should be kept in mind that the Bulgarian material here is significantly more recent than Gerganov (1984), whereas the Ukrainian is somewhat older than Martinek (2007), though newer than Butenko (1989).

The responses meaning ‘food, eat’ are at the top here as well, in all languages. Bulgarian participants name varieties and pieces of bread (as well as knife and cutting) more often than the others, whilst Ukrainians pay more attention to its taste and fragrance (with Belarusians coming second). Butter is mentioned by all, though with different frequency; only Bulgarians respond by ‘margarine’, and only a few Belarusians and considerably more Russians name the brand of spreading products Rama—a sign of the 1990s, when it made an appearance in the ex-USSR; for some reason this is not evident from the Ukrainian responses, but those don’t contain any dairy terms, even the otherwise ubiquitous milk.

Table 3. Frequencies of reactions to some thematic groups of stimuli from Ufimtseva et al. (2004).

	Bulgarian	Ukrainian	Belarusian	Russian
‘food’, ‘eat’	18.54%	11.04%	14.73%	13.39%
‘warm’, ‘fresh’, ‘soft’	3.12%	10.21%	7.37%	9.32%
‘salt’	5.72%	11.88%	5.64%	7.97%
varieties and pieces	9.88%	1.46%	5.49%	5.59%
‘white’	4.33%	2.08%	2.04%	3.90%
‘wheat’	1.91%	1.04%	0.94%	1.19%
‘tasty’, ‘good’	1.21%	7.92%	4.39%	2.71%
‘fragrant’	0.52%	4.17%	2.82%	0.68%
‘cheese’	1.04%	0.00%	0.00%	0.17%
‘rye’	1.04%	1.88%	2.04%	2.71%
‘black’	4.33%	3.96%	3.29%	4.58%
‘knife’, ‘cut’	1.21%	0.21%	0.78%	0.51%
‘butter’	0.69%	1.04%	1.25%	2.71%
‘margarine’	0.17%	0.00%	0.47%	1.86%
‘milk’	0.35%	0.00%	0.47%	0.68%
‘meat’, ‘lard’, ‘sausage’	0.17%	0.00%	1.10%	0.00%
‘wine’	1.04%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
‘water’	2.43%	0.42%	0.47%	1.86%
‘vital, essential’	4.16%	3.33%	0.47%	5.25%
‘hunger, hungry’	4.68%	0.42%	0.31%	0.68%
‘holy, sacred’	2.77%	3.75%	0.63%	0.34%
‘head (of all)’	0.00%	7.08%	9.87%	11.53%
‘work’	1.73%	1.88%	2.82%	0.00%
agriculture	1.04%	2.50%	6.11%	2.03%
‘life’	1.91%	4.79%	2.82%	2.20%
‘won’t’	0.69%	0.00%	0.47%	0.51%

The holiness of bread is most often noted by Ukrainians, but Bulgarians follow closely; the large number of religious associations produced by them is rather unexpected, and may have to do with the choice of participants (assuming that students of theology formed a substantial part), as well as the time (the late 1990s, a period of a growth of interest towards religion; oddly, this does not affect the Belarusian and Russian reactions); in Ukraine the situation has deeper roots, as said above.

The unusually high presence of the concept ‘hunger’ in the Bulgarian responses may have a similar explanation.

It is odd that Bulgarians come out as less interested in oven-hot bread than everyone else, and that they respond by ‘black’ more often than the Belarusians and Ukrainians. On the latter subject, Ukrainians unexpectedly say ‘black’ more often than ‘white’ and ‘rye’ more than ‘wheat’, although both in Butenko (1989)’s earlier and in Martinek (2007)’s later study it is the other way around.

Responses motivated by the East Slavic saying ‘Bread is the head of all’ (that is, the most important thing) are very commonly given by speakers of all East Slavic languages, but no Bulgarians, predictably.

Belarusians are first, and Ukrainians second, in giving responses related to work and agricultural activities.

The response ‘life’ is most often given by the Ukrainians, who are the only ones not to make any statements of the undesirability of bread (‘don’t eat’, ‘don’t miss it’, ‘not tasty’, ‘putting on weight’, ‘very harmful’).

One Ukrainian has responded by ‘cheap’, three Belarusians by ‘expensive’, and two have named exact prices, as has one of Gerganov (1984)’s Bulgarian respondents.

Some responses here, as generally in associative dictionaries, are hard to interpret because of word polysemy and homonymy: it is impossible to tell whether Russian *печь* is the noun ‘oven’ or the verb ‘bake’ (this at least does not affect the division into thematic groups) or – in the absence of written stress – whether Ukrainian *мука* means ‘flour’ or ‘torment’ (this does, and neither can be written off as implausible, because words with similar meanings have been recorded as responses to ‘bread’, e. g., *ядове* ‘worries’ in Gerganov (1984)).

6 Conclusions

Generalising the data of lexicographic and other information sources, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn on Belarusian, Bulgarian, Russian and Ukrainian speakers’ associations with bread:

1. Bread is of eminent importance in the culinary traditions of the speakers of all Slavic languages involved in the comparison.
2. In all it plays the part of basic/minimal food.
3. However, bread tends not to be consumed alone but with other substances, the first of which, to the speakers of all named languages, is salt. Thereafter regional peculiarities begin: Bulgarian imagine bread with cheese, and Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians with butter or meat products.

4. There is also a difference in the grain that is predominantly used: to Bulgarians bread is mostly white/wheat, to Russians it is black/rye, to Belarusians and Ukrainians both are familiar in various ratios. This has been in a state of flux recently.
5. Speakers of Ukrainians and Belarusians associate bread particularly often with the processes of its production.
6. Bread is generally thought of in a positive context, as something good and tasty, especially by speakers of Ukrainian and Belarusian.
7. The freshness of bread receives much attention, but is perceived by different senses. The focus on the fragrance of bread is characteristic of speakers of Ukrainians, and to a somewhat lesser degree, of Belarusian. To Bulgarians the most prominent feature of fresh bread is its warmth.
8. The division of bread into parts appears particularly noteworthy to speakers of Bulgarian.

As we see, the bread associations, as well as their frequencies, of speakers of Ukrainian and Belarusian are especially similar. The bread traditions of speakers of Russian and Bulgarian are somewhat more distant, each in its own way. The bread associations of speakers of Bulgarian have fewer common points with those of the speakers of the three East Slavic languages. These conclusions are not final, they are in need of refinement and deepening by further investigations.

7 Directions for Future Work

Comparative linguistic and cultural studies based on full-scale associative dictionaries are essential for both research and language teaching and learning. For a holistic comparison of data from different languages on various parameters and for obtaining results in different formats and without violating the principles of scientometrics, it would be best to use a parameterised computer lexicographic system developed according to unified scientifically sound methodological principles.

The regular collecting of the results of associative linguistic experiments will allow the accumulation and organisation of data for systematic diachronic studies of associative relations, which would be especially useful for the advancement of linguistic theory and linguistic culturology, and would serve as a basis for recording and studying cultural heritage embodied in language.

We see the creation of such a system as an important direction for future work. A less large-scale, but no less interesting task is the comparison of results obtained through analysing different data. We also plan to compare our results based on the lexicographic resources with corpora-based ones, especially extracted from a parallel corpus which we have been developing lately. Text corpora are an excellent source of linguistic data which allow (among others) a cultural interpretation. It would also be interesting to extend the research by including data from other Slavic languages.

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