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Mental Imagery in Bertrand Russell’s Nobel Lecture “What Desires Are Politically Important?”

Wyobrażenia mentalna w wykładzie noblowskim Bertranda Russela „Jakie pragnienia są ważne politycznie?”

Abstract

The article presents the analysis of the mental images of human desires and their verbalization techniques involved in Bertrand Russell’s Nobel lecture delivered in 1950. Human desires are non-material mental constructs that are not clearly defined in the dictionaries, their verbalization being complicated by the issues related to rationality, psychology of thinking, objectivity, and the variability of individual behavioral reactions. The results of the research suggest that the verbalization of desires is essentially complicated by social and cultural stereotypes. It has been noted that storytelling can be applied as one of the most effective techniques to create the required mental imagery of desires in the recipient’s mind. B. Russell’s unique manner of defining such politically important desires as acquisitiveness, vanity, glory, love of power, excitement is carefully analyzed. The use of figurative language as well as conceptual and stylistic metaphors that facilitate the process of shaping mental images of desires have also been the focus of my attention. Special consideration has been given to the analysis of the verbalization means of the politically important desires.

Key words: *cognitive processing, mental imagery, desires, Bertrand Russell.*

Abstrakt

W artykule przedstawiono analizę mentalnych obrazów ludzkich pragnień i ich technik werbalizacji wykorzystanych w wykładzie noblowskim Bertranda Russella wygłoszonym w 1950 r. Ludzkie pragnienia są niematerialnymi konstrukcjami umysłowymi, które nie są jasno zdefiniowane w słownikach, a ich werbalizację komplikuje problematyka związana z racjonalnością, psychologią myślenia, obiektywizmem i zmiennością indywidualnych reakcji behawioralnych. Wyniki badań sugerują, że werbalizacja pragnień jest zasadniczo skomplikowana poprzez stereotypy społeczne i kulturowe. Zauważono, że opowiadanie historii może być stosowane jako jedna z najskuteczniejszych technik tworzenia wymaganego wyobrażenia pragnień w umyśle odbiorcy. Unikalny sposób definiowania przez Russella tak ważnych politycznie pragnień, jak zdobycie, próżność, chwała, umiłowanie władzy, podniecenie, jest dokładnie analizowany. W centrum uwagi znalazło się również posługiwanie się językiem figuratywnym oraz metaforami pojęciowymi i stylistycznymi, które ułatwiają proces kształtowania mentalnych obrazów pragnień. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na analizę środków werbalizacji politycznie ważnych pragnień.

Słowa kluczowe: *przetwarzanie poznawcze, wyobrażenia umysłu, pragnienia, Bertrand Russell.*

The nature of mental processes and their relation to behavioral reactions has always been one of the crucial issues in linguistics and psychology. The psychology of reasoning and the verbal expressions of its results have been entwined in the wide field of psycholinguistics. The logic of reasoning has been treated as a normative discipline since ancient times, whereas the psychology of reasoning and the verbalization of reasoning are both viewed as descriptive fields based on the introspection of experimental data.

In this paper, we aim at outlining the concept of rationality and its relation to the concept of desire that, according to our observations, may both serve as a linking bridge between mental processes and behavioral as well as verbal reactions. Since both concepts – rationality and desire – are non-material constructs, their verbal descriptions indicated in the dictionaries are somewhat obscure. Our research comprises the analysis of the storytelling techniques that help to create mental imagery of desires by applying the principles of rationality and objectivity. As an example of such integration, we would like to carry on an in-depth study of Bertrand Russell's Nobel lecture "What Desires Are Politically Important?" delivered in 1950 during the awarding ceremony.

The dominance of mental over the behavioral aspects had remained a crucial philosophical and scientific problem until the emergence of psycho-

logical behaviorism, which considered human behavior a chiefly biological response towards external stimuli. Behaviorists diminished the significance of mental processes, focusing predominantly on the physiological aspects of human behavior. John B. Watson claimed that the concept of consciousness could not be considered scientific, for it could not be experimentally measured. (Watson, 1929) He stated that the individual's introspection was the only possible way to examine the phenomenon of consciousness.

In the late 1950s, Skinner cultivated a more radical approach to the study of human behavior. According to Skinner, verbal behavior – the core objective of the linguistic study – is a biologically preconditioned reflex. (Skinner, 1948, p. 37) He undermines the validity of conceptualization, as he states that 'only a small part of the ideas expressed in words prove to be representable in sensory terms'. (Skinner, 1948, p. 6) Noam Chomsky's critique *A Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior* marked the emergence of cognitive linguistics, for it thoroughly rejects Skinner's stance on the role of cognitive mechanisms on human behavior. The review heavily criticizes the application of the functional approach to the complex study of behavioral patterns. Chomsky claims that having identified the notions of stimulus, reinforcement, and deprivation as central, Skinner limits his research to the observation of external reactions to the outer triggers. (Chomsky, 1959) Moreover, Chomsky considers Skinner's definition of verbal behavior as '[a form of] behavior which is reinforced through the mediation of another organism' to be vague and extensively broad. (Chomsky, 1959, p. 20) The statement focuses mainly on the role of external stimuli, while the internal facet of human behavior, i.e. higher mental faculties, is not properly considered.

Notably, Chomsky claims that language acquisition cannot be perceived as a behavioral reaction due to the so-called poverty of the stimulus. The researcher suggests that the phenomenon of human cognition is predetermined by a certain '*built-in structure of an information-processing (hypothesis-forming) system*'. (Chomsky, 1959) Such an assumption accounts for the existence of universal grammatical structures – a theoretical framework formulated by Chomsky. The autonomy between syntax and semantics viewed upon as surface and deep structures accordingly became the subject of linguistic debates in the late 1960s. The opponents of generative grammar, namely George Lakoff, rejected the independence between syntactic structures and the meaning of the utterance. Therefore, the linguistic branch of generative semantics emerged. (Lakoff, 1990)

The attempts to shift the focus of transformational linguistics from the isolated interpretation of syntactic and semantic structures were cru-

cial for the further development of cognitive science. Lakoff and Johnson's linguistic endeavors to prove the conceptual nature of semantics have long ago been outlined in their work *Metaphors We Live by*. The authors claim that the meaning of the utterance cannot be deduced solely from the peculiarities of its syntactic structure. Researchers state that the genuine meaning of the message conveyed depends on one's conceptual system. (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980) The fact that people utilize metaphorical concepts to express themselves justifies the linguistic views adopted by generative semanticists.

The theoretical framework on conceptual metaphor has been further developed in Lakoff's *The Invariance Hypothesis*. The author identifies cognitive linguistics as a two-facet study that requires an equal evaluation of both cognitive and generalization commitments. The former pertains to one's empirical knowledge, peculiarities of perception and categorization. The notion of generalization in cognitive linguistics refers to 'the general principles governing all aspects of human language'. (Lakoff, 1990, p. 40) Lakoff suggests the hypothesis that 'metaphorical mappings preserve the cognitive topology of the source domain'. (Lakoff, 1990, p. 54) The statement emphasized the significance of both the cognitive (metaphoric mapping) and generalization (topology of the source domain) commitments. Notably, the cognitive phenomenon of metaphoric mapping can partially explain the nature of abstract notions.

The human capacity to perceive and comprehend information sensuously poses another topic for scientific research within the field of cognitive science. Having experimentally compared how mental imagery differs from sensual perception, Segal and Fusella inferred that 'mental imagery functions as an internal signal which is confused with the external signal'. (Segal, Fusella, 1970, p. 458) The nature of mental visualization was further considered by D. Schorr, G. Balzano, E. E. Smith. (Schorr, Balzano, Smith, 1978) Pylyshyn argued that the phenomenon of cognitive visualization is shaped by one's empirical knowledge and hence can not be explained using general verbal means. (Pylyshyn, 2002)

In his early work, Kosslyn defined mental imagery as 'perception of remembered information, not new input'. (Kosslyn, 1995, p. 267) Later, in their collective work, Kosslyn et al. suggest that the phenomenon of mental imagery has a multimodal nature. (Kosslyn, Ganis, Thompson, 2010, p. 20) Admittedly, Nanay states that the multimodal perception of the information presupposes the engagement of different human senses. (Nanay, 2018) While the phenomenon of mental imagery can emerge without an apparent external stimulus, the associative networks triggered by visualization can be compared to those provoked by the real world stimuli.

It has also been proven that the usage of figurative language enhances mental imagery. Considering the conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson, the peculiarities of the recipient's conceptual system determine how the meaning of the utterance would be perceived. (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980) Thus, the phenomenon of mental visualization is thought to enable the comprehension of a highly metaphoric message.

In their recent works Carstone (Carstone, 2016) and Stokes (Stokes, 2019) defined the links between the implementation of the figurative language in fiction and the subsequent emergence of corresponding mental images. The scholars claim that the evocative vocabulary triggers both visual and auditory sensory systems.

The connection between mental imagery and cognitive processes has been considered within the framework of neuroscience. Skottnik and Linden (Skottnik, Linden, 2019) claim that emotional states are being evoked with regard to certain sensory experiences. Therefore, mental imagery utilizes one's previously accumulated knowledge. Having analyzed the neuroimaging data available, the authors state that it is possible to establish a direct correspondence between the individual's emotional state triggered by a specific stimulus and the brain area accountable for the response.

Evoking mental imagery in a controlled manner has always been one of the fundamental skills in public speaking. In this paper, we will present a survey of mental representations and mental images activated in the Nobel lecture by one of the 20th century's most prominent logicians, and one of the founders of analytic philosophy, the Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Arthur William Russell, 3rd Earl Russell. The Nobel Prize in Literature 1950 was awarded to Earl (Bertrand Arthur William) Russell "in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought." (*Russell Facts, NobelPrize.org...*)

As the official Nobel Prize website puts it, "Bertrand Russell made his first pioneering contributions within the branch of philosophy that deals with logic and mathematics. His authorship came to encompass considerably larger areas, however. His writing is characterized by levity and humor and extended knowledge about science and philosophy to a wide circle of readers. His authorship also embraces social and moral issues, and his standpoints often were controversial. Bertrand Russell was an advocate for reason and humanism and a dedicated defender of freedom of speech and freedom of thought." (*Russell Facts, NobelPrize.org...*)

The Nobel lecture under analysis was delivered during the official ceremony in Stockholm on December 11, 1950 and was running under the title

“What Desires Are Politically Important?”. The title indicated two main concepts that are dominant to the text: DESIRE and POLITICS. Russell maturely designed his public lecture in such a way so that to evoke the set of predetermined emotional states in his audience by triggering certain sensory experiences, as well as addressing specific types of memory (sociocultural and autobiographic).

The lecture encompasses specific mental imagery that utilizes one’s previously accumulated knowledge. Being a man of great scientific and political influence, Bertrand Russell in all his public activities always professed an ideology of a peacemaker. War and peace, desires and fears, love for power and hate – these are the central topics of his lecture. They are, certainly, not new now, and were not new for the aristocratic audience attending the Nobel Prize Awarding ceremony in 1950. But Russell decided to activate a remarkably new set of mental images to multiply the rhetoric effect of the lecture.

After a brief introduction, Russel starts by defining the set of the most profound human desires, the central place in which is occupied by the concept of ACQUISITIVENESS. The author defines acquisitiveness as

“the wish to possess as much as possible of goods, or the title to goods – is a motive which, I suppose, has its origin in a combination of fear with the desire for necessities”¹.

Merriam Webster Dictionary does not offer a separate definition for *acquisitiveness*, associating it with the corresponding adjective *acquisitive* – *strongly desirous of acquiring and possessing*. In his original definition, Russell focuses on a very disastrous combination of fear with the desire for necessities. He uses his own autobiographic memory to illustrate the devastating nature of acquisitiveness:

“I once befriended two little girls from Estonia, who had narrowly escaped death from starvation in a famine. They lived in my family, and of course had plenty to eat. But they spent all their leisure visiting neighbouring farms and stealing potatoes, which they hoarded”.

The mental images of two little Estonian girls stealing food in fear of hunger work as a powerful trigger for the new definition of acquisitiveness offered by the author. This is exactly the case when, according to Russell, desires dominate over rationality.

¹This and all other text quotes are from Bertrand Russell – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1950/russell/lecture/>, 09.05.2021.

Carrying the ideology of a peacemaker, Lord Russell brings about another mental imagery to illustrate acquisitiveness – this time a piece of the common British-German sociocultural memory depicting the event that preceded World War I:

“When the British Government very unwisely allowed the Kaiser to be present at a naval review at Spithead, the thought which arose in his mind was not the one which we had intended. What he thought was, “I must have a Navy as good as Grandmamma’s”. And from this thought have sprung all our subsequent troubles”.

In this example, rational intellectual reactions take over inherent acquisitiveness, which eventually caused serious troubles in history after Great Britain got involved in World War I.

Generating the requested mental representations goes much effectively with telling stories. Instead of providing descriptions to consider the picture in detail, Russell tells colorful stories leaving the process of image creation up to the audience. Talking about VANITY – another politically important desire, he offers another sketch, this time about Italian princeling, depicting his vanity desire:

“There was a Renaissance Italian princeling who was asked by the priest on his deathbed if he had anything to repent of. “Yes”, he said, there is one thing. On one occasion I had a visit from the Emperor and the Pope simultaneously. I took them to the top of my tower to see the view, and I neglected the opportunity to throw them both down, which would have given me immortal fame”.

In this respect, we would like to mention of the research of Ji et al. (Ji et al., 2016) They analyzed the results of previously conducted psychophysiological experiments, concerning the differences between mental visualization and verbal data processing of fear-related and neutral sentences. (Ji et al., 2016) Having investigated the impact of mental imagery on the individual’s emotional state, the authors infer that visualization of the uncanny information, which triggers one’s empirical knowledge, has a greater effect on the individual’s emotional state than the verbalization of such information. Obviously, with his remarkable skills in storytelling, Bertrand Russell uses verbalization to create a visualized image of the situation, which is much easier to process and to remember.

Human desires are, certainly, non-material concepts, having no universal form and meaning whatsoever. Therefore, it is so important for Russell to

suggest the appropriate stories in order to control the process of creating mental images of politically important desires. Talking about the opposition GLORY vs POWER, he chose to combine factual well-known information about the correlation between the King (in those days reigning the UK) and the Prime Minister ruling the country (“In England, the King has more glory than the Prime Minister, but the Prime Minister has more power than the King”) with a corresponding story about Prussian field marshal Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher and Napoleon:

“Many people prefer glory to power, but on the whole these people have less effect upon the course of events than those who prefer power to glory. When Blücher, in 1814, saw Napoleon’s palaces, he said, “Wasn’t he a fool to have all this and to go running after Moscow.” Napoleon, who certainly was not destitute of vanity, preferred power when he had to choose. To Blücher, this choice seemed foolish. Power, like vanity, is insatiable. Nothing short of omnipotence could satisfy it completely”.

A greater part of B. Russell’s Nobel lecture was dedicated to EXCITEMENT – another politically important desire. Merriam Webster Dictionary offers a very schematic definition for this concept: *1) something that excites or rouses the action of exciting; 2) the state of being excited*. Indeed, it is hard to define this abstract notion in terms of words, or to produce a definite mental image for it. Russell sticks with his mature visualization tool – telling memorable stories to visualize the concept and to provide the requested emotional coloring to this image. Below we present the list of stories visualizing key associations with excitement:

- Alcohol: “When white men first effect contact with some unspoilt race of savages, they offer them all kinds of benefits, from the light of the gospel to pumpkin pie. These, however, much as we may regret it, most savages receive with indifference. What they really value among the gifts that we bring to them is intoxicating liquor which enables them, for the first time in their lives, to have the illusion for a few brief moments that it is better to be alive than dead”.
- Smoking: “Red Indians, while they were still unaffected by white men, would smoke their pipes, not calmly as we do, but orgiastically, inhaling so deeply that they sank into a faint. And when excitement by means of nicotine failed, a patriotic orator would stir them up to attack a neighbouring tribe, which would give them all the enjoyment that we (according to our temperament) derive from a horse race or a General Election”.

- Gambling: “The pleasure of gambling consists almost entirely in excitement. Monsieur Huc describes Chinese traders at the Great Wall in winter, gambling until they have lost all their cash, then proceeding to lose all their merchandise, and at last gambling away their clothes and going out naked to die of cold”.
- War: “With civilized men, as with primitive Red Indian tribes, it is, I think, chiefly love of excitement which makes the populace applaud when war breaks out; the emotion is exactly the same as at a football match, although the results are sometimes somewhat more serious”.

All the mentioned stories do not offer a verbal definition of excitement. They activate complexes of mental images that stimulate emotional reactions carefully controlled by the author. Having analyzed the text of the Nobel lecture, we may state that it is possible to establish a direct correspondence between the author’s image of the concept of desire and individual reader’s emotional state triggered by a specific verbal stimuli as well as his subsequent evaluation of desires accountable for the response. The author carefully plans the response.

In the Nobel lecture under analysis the eloquent speaker – Bertrand Russell – actively exploits figurative language in order to facilitate the process of creating the required mental images. The usage of figurative language enhances mental imagery and the metaphorical calibration involved in it multiplies the expressive effect of the speech. The conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson suggests that the recipient’s conceptual system determines the way how the meaning of the utterance is first conceptualized and then processed in terms of the basic inherent metaphorical samples. (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980) Thus, the phenomenon of mental visualization enables the activation and comprehension of a highly metaphoric content.

Russell is definitely a master of stylistic and conceptual metaphors. While uncovering the darkest corners of human nature, the author dwells upon another politically important desire – CONDEMNATION. To achieve a better image he uses a perfect conceptual metaphor CONDEMNATION IS A DRUG. In a traditional system of values, it is natural for the old to condemn the young for violating social norms. Russell offers a different mental image to this idea, saying that condemnation is always wrong, but still practiced by all generations in all the times:

“The devil has many forms, some designed to deceive the young, some designed to deceive the old and serious. If it is the devil that tempts the young to enjoy themselves, is it not, perhaps, the same personage that persuades the old to condemn their enjoyment? And is not condemnation perhaps merely a form of

excitement appropriate to old age? And is it not, perhaps, a drug which – like opium – has to be taken in continually stronger doses to produce the desired effect?”

Condemnation, like any other above mentioned concepts of desires, has no visual form. Thus, its mental imagery is mainly based on emotional coloring of the verbal descriptions involved. Creating a mental representation of condemnation, Russell maturely entwines his ideology of a peacemaker, defining condemnation as one of the reasons for starting wars:

“Is it not to be feared that, beginning with the wickedness of the cinema, we should be led step by step to condemn the opposite political party, dagoes, wops, Asiatics, and, in short, everybody except the fellow members of our club? And it is from just such condemnations, when widespread, that wars proceed. I have never heard of a war that proceeded from dance halls”.

One of the most original and utterly negative concepts defined in Russell’s lecture is the concept of DESTRUCTIVE EXCITEMENT, which, according to the author is one of the most politically important desires:

“What is serious about excitement is that so many of its forms are destructive. It is destructive in those who cannot resist excess in alcohol or gambling. It is destructive when it takes the form of mob violence. And above all it is destructive when it leads to war”.

While defining destructive excitement, the author uses series of brilliant stylistic metaphors to create unique mental imagery which ordinary people never come across in their daily life. These mental images are purely visual; they describe imaginary contexts and situations impossible in the real life. However, it is precisely their impossibility that makes them so vivid and strikes the reader’s mind with its inconceivable beauty:

“Civilized life has grown altogether too tame, and, if it is to be stable, it must provide harmless outlets for the impulses which our remote ancestors satisfied in hunting. ... I think every big town should contain artificial waterfalls that people could descend in very fragile canoes, and they should contain bathing pools full of mechanical sharks. Any person found advocating a preventive war should be condemned to two hours a day with these ingenious monsters”.

Extraordinary mental images of artificial waterfalls and mechanical sharks easily reach the audience's minds. In such a way the recipients store permanent negative mental representations with regard to war and idleness. They contribute to the definition of destructive excitement by evolving negative connotations. In this context, we observe the phenomenon of focal adjustments (using the terminology of R. Langacker) which makes it possible to disseminate the main topic through various explicit and implicit definitions expanding its significance and offering new meanings. Time will show whether politicians will ever follow Russell's advice.

In conclusion, we would like to mention that the question of creating mental images remains a central issue in modern cognitive linguistics. Mental images of concrete concepts can easily be activated with the help of verbal definitions. The biggest complication occurs when it comes to defining indefinable – abstract concepts for which no visualization is possible. Therefore, the requested mental images appear to combine associated visual images, emotions, feelings, explicit and implicit information.

The suggested above analysis of the mental imagery involved in defining abstract concepts of human desires is based on the standard ability of human mind to compare and systematize one's subjective perception of an event or concept with verbal or visual input obtained in the process of communication. Such a characteristic feature of human cognition partially explains why certain concepts or phenomena are being accepted as neutral, while others evoke strong emotional and behavioral reactions. Bertrand Russell as an outstanding scholar and public speaker activated the strategy of storytelling in order to create mental images illustrating basic human desires. He selected a bunch of human desires in accordance with the degree of their political importance. In his Nobel lecture, Russell did not define them verbally. He created effective sets of mental images shaping emotional and expressive layers facilitating the process of defining human desires instead. More than seventy years separate us from the day when Bertrand Russell offered this outstanding account of politically important desires. Nevertheless, the topic of the lecture remains urgent and thought provoking. Further research will uncover neurophysiological aspects of creating mental imagery for the complicated abstract notions. Speaker-oriented strategies for designing mental images, as well as socio-cultural aspects of mental representations remain of paramount significance in terms of understanding the complex mechanism of human cognition.

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