

**DISCOURSE, HYBRIDITY AND CULTURE:  
BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN DISCOURSE INTERACTION  
AND CULTURAL FACTORS**

*In this paper, we seek to revisit the notion of interdiscursivity by showing that various discourses do interact, as well as to trace some culture-specific concepts in the Anglo-American discourse. To this end, we select and analyze James Thurber's fables and Robert Benchley's essays as one of the best exemplars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual humor pieces. We conclude that the cultural concepts are embedded in the narrative discourse intermingling with other discourses, while humor seems to unite readers with different cultural backgrounds.*

**Key words:** discourse, interdiscursivity, hybridity, culture, globalization, humor, James Thurber, Robert Benchley.

*У статті зроблено спробу переосмислення поняття інтердискурсивності у світлі гібридизації дискурсів, а також виявлено культурно специфічні концепти у англо-американському дискурсі. Проаналізовано сучасні басні Джеймса Тербера та есеї Роберта Бенчлі як одні з найкращих інтелектуальних гумористичних творів початку 20-го століття. Зроблено висновок, що культурні концепти є невід'ємною частиною нарративного дискурсу, який взаємодіє з іншими дискурсами, у той час як гумор слугує сполучною ланкою між читачами з різним культурним досвідом.*

**Ключові слова:** дискурс, інтердискурсивність, гібридизація, культурні чинники, глобалізація, гумор, Джеймс Тербер, Роберт Бенчлі.

*В данной статье сделана попытка переосмысления понятия интердискурсивности в свете гибридности дискурсов, рассмотрены культурно специфические концепты в англо-американском дискурсе. Были проанализированы современные басни Джеймса Тербера и эссе Роберта Бенчли как одни из лучших интеллектуальных юмористических произведений начала 20-го столетия. Сделан вывод, что культурные концепты являются неотъемлемой частью нарративного дискурса, который взаимодействует с другими дискурсами, в то время как юмор служит связующим звеном между читателями с разным культурным опытом.*

**Ключевые слова:** дискурс, интердискурсивность, гибридность, культурные факторы, глобализация, юмор, Джеймс Тербер, Роберт Бенчли.

Discourse structure varies among cultures, so by and large culture does impact the way discourses are constructed and construed in various cultural settings (Goddard, Wierzbicka, 1997; Bhatia, 2004; Fairclough, 2003). As discussed in many language studies, the relation between discourse and culture is complex and multifaceted. Goddard and Wierzbicka showed this correlation in their comprehensive study of discourse and culture (Goddard, Wierzbicka, 1997). Obviously, the cultural setting triggers many variations in discourses. In fact, there are some universal principles, but the speakers of different languages with different cultural backgrounds undoubtedly adopt different mindsets and embed unique culture-bound meanings and implications in the process of discourse production and comprehension (Scollon, 2012; Wodak, 2001; Wu, 2011).

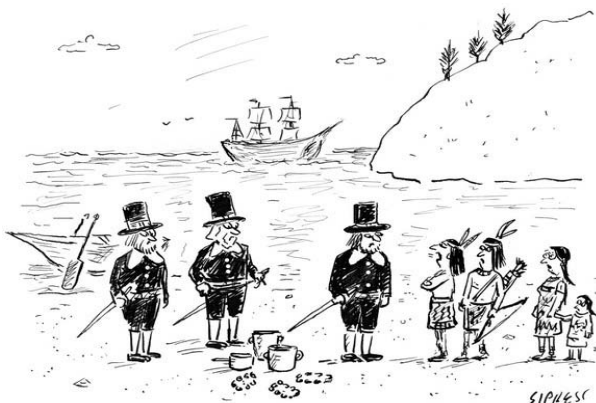
The idea of human communication mediated by universal maxims of conversation once put forward by Grice seems rather disputable (Goddard,

Wierzbicka, 1997). Hence it was challenged by a number of scholars, though there are many proponents of this idea. For example, Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues developed the natural semantic metalanguage consisting of a small set of simple meanings which can be expressed by words in all languages, like this, say, think, people, know, good etc. which can come in handy in cross-linguistic and comparative studies (Goddard, Wierzbicka, 1997).

It is notoriously known, though, that globalization creates some universal cultural icons and codes, nonetheless idiosyncrasy and cultural identity of the speakers of various languages shine through in discourses (Wodak, 2001; Wu, 2011). The fact that globalization is omniscient still holds true; many renowned online magazines like the New Yorker have special columns devoted to the globalization effects.

In opposition to globalization, the de-globalization trend emerged and is now being extensively studied. De-globalization may involve «reseeding of militant and branded nationalism worldwide»; language and discourse more likely follow the suit (Coll, 2009).

*The fact is, we are totally opposed to globalization [The New Yorker, November 2016].*



What do culture, discourse and hybridity have in common? In this paper, we are trying to make a point that cultural aspects are embodied in discourse textures, notwithstanding the fact that globalization has paved its way in language and discourse, most likely giving rise, among other factors, to hybridity of various discourses. Hybridity has entered many academic arenas, «becoming the emblematic notion of our era, capturing the spirit of our times with its celebration of cultural difference and fusion and resonating with the globalization mantra and inevitable transformation of all cultures.» (Kraidy, 2002).

When we deal with a conglomerate tagged Anglo-American discourse shaped by native and non-native speakers of English, first and foremost, we are about to clarify

whether any cultural traces and traits remained and can be identified when the English speakers with different cultural backgrounds contribute to creating the Anglo-American discourse to the extent when various discourse genres interact. The point seems too broad and multidimensional which actually can be the subject-matter of the stand-alone profound research; however, in this paper, we are making an endeavor to shed some light and lift the veil on this issue with perspectives for future research.

This paper revisits the topic proposed in Olga Ilchenko's seminal paper on James Thurber's parody as a source of discourse intermingling. The multifaceted nature of interdiscursivity referred to and studied by different scholars through different perspectives as hypertextuality, bricolage, anchorage, textual and speech interference is uncovered. This study makes the thorough and profound linguistic analysis of James Thurber's «Ladies and Gentlemen's Guide to English Usage» (Ilchenko, 2015).

Our objective here is to capture some culture specific attitudes, assumptions and norms, describe them in culture-independent terms and pinpoint some cases of discourse hybridity.

To illustrate how culture, discourse and hybridity are interwoven, we analyze fables and essays written by renowned American humorists, newspaper columnists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century James Thurber and Robert Benchley. Humor seems to serve a universal medium in fables, short stories and essays which certainly has some culture specificity bringing under one umbrella readers with different cultural backgrounds and inviting them to create some common discourse space or interdiscourse [Georginova, 2014; Zheltukhina, 2009]. We'll see how authors mix discourses to appeal to the reader and get their message across.

James Thurber, a celebrated columnist, humorist, «once a byword for humour» (Gottlieb), is also the author of a series of short fables for the New Yorker collected in «Fables for Our Time and Famous Poems Illustrated».

Fables as short and sharp retellings of various themes could be today classified as flash fiction (Ilchenko, 2015; Gottlieb). In James Thurber's fables, political discourse often comes into play with other discourses bristling with retrospective topics discussed in a satirical manner. Thurber uses such fable genre as animal moral fables, which is actually the most popular genre among fabulists.

In one of his fables «The birds and the foxes», Thurber allusively and allegorically narrates of the bird sanctuary with hundreds of Baltimore orioles and cunning coward foxes which once turned their attention to this sanctuary, attacked it and killed all orioles:

*The next day the leader of the foxes, a fox from whom God was receiving daily guidance, got upon the rostrum and addressed the other foxes. His message was simple and sublime. "You see before you," he said, "another Lincoln. We have liberated all those birds!"*

The pun is used in the moral of the fable alluding to Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address (1863), "government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth". The context and tone are intentionally changed to create the effect of unreality and perplexity to ever achieve such idealistic

government machinery by ordinary people and for their sake. There is also the antithesis – on the one hand, those in power with the overt misrepresentation of their intentions and actions, the «God given powers» and the «God insight» to make landmark decisions are turned to ridicule, but, on the other hand, the reference to personality of Abraham Lincoln as one of the most honored American presidents who paved the way to abolition of slavery, shows the tribute is paid in the American society to certain political achievements.

In the fable «The lover and his lass», Thurber reconsiders the old saying «beauty lies in the lovers' eyes», reminds in a moralistic and deductive manner that love affairs should not be discussed with others and terms of endearment should be vowed solely between lovers. Thurber obviously alludes in this fable to William Shakespeare's famous song «It was a lover and his lass» discussing the love theme through the prism of modernity.

The key language device employed here is the antithesis since discussion of terms of endearment: ... *they continued to bump each other around in the water, happily pushing and pulling, backing and filling, and snorting and snaffling...* is opposed to their mockery and explicit criticism by using exaggerated metaphors with some negative connotation: *capsized bathtub, coastwise fruit steamer*. The reader is taught a lesson how love affairs should be handled: *Laugh and you laugh together, love and you love alone*.

- *An arrogant gray parrot and his arrogant mate listened, one African afternoon, in disdain and derision, to the lovemaking of a lover and his lass, who happened to be hippopotamuses. «He calls her snooky-ookums,» said Mrs. Gray. «Can you believe that?»*

*«No,» said Gray. «I don't see how any male in his right mind could entertain affection for a female that has no more charm than a capsized bathtub.»*

*«Capsized bathtub, indeed!» exclaimed Mrs. Gray. «Both of them have the appeal of a coastwise fruit steamer with a cargo of water-logged basketballs.»*

*But it was spring, and the lover and his lass were young, and they were oblivious of the scornful comments of their sharp-tongued neighbors, and they continued to bump each other around in the water, happily pushing and pulling, backing and filling, and snorting and snaffling. The tender things they said to each other during the monolithic give-and-take of their courtship sounded as lyric to them as flowers in bud or green things opening.*

Thurber was rather prescient with modern gadget frenzy in mind when he metaphorically described how the grizzly bear was overwhelmed with all widgets that congested his house and turned his life upside down. Using such adjectives as *brand-new, new-fangled* describing various degrees of gadgets' novelty spoiling the bear's life, the author shows how annoying new technologies can be. Though, the negative side of innovative technologies is somehow softened by the reference to the musical theme, notably to the popular Christmas song «Silent night»:

- *He found, to his mild annoyance, that the doorbell had been replaced by an ornamental knocker. When he lifted the knocker, he was startled to hear it play two bars of «Silent Night».*

- ... he sank into an easy chair and began bouncing up and down and up and down, for it was a brand-new contraption called «Sitpretty» which made you bounce up and down and up and down when you sat on it.
- Now thoroughly exasperated, the bear jumped up from the chair and began searching for a cigarette. He found a cigarette box, a new-fangled cigarette box he had never seen before...

Technologies can be inherently evil making people go mad which is demonstrated by the adjectives producing the emphatic and emotional effect and the idiomatic expressions *to see red*, *to think black*:

Enraged, infuriated, beside himself, seeing red and thinking black, the grizzly bear began taking the living room apart .

The author resorts to some philosophical reflections: *to forgive, and live, and let live* which culminate a chain of contingencies typical of the holiday season by leaving some room for the reader's further speculations on this topic:

- *A grizzly bear who had been on a bender for several weeks following a Christmas party in his home at which his brother-in-law had set the Christmas tree on fire, his children had driven the family car through the front door and out the back, and all the attractive female bears had gone into hibernation before sunset returned home prepared to forgive, and live and let live.*

A rhetoric repetition of the same root words, polyptoton, is also used to intensify and emphasize the absurdity of some modern technologies and the grizzly's violent anger:

- *This was because the walls of his house had been soundproofed by a sound-proofer who had soundproofed them so well nobody could hear anybody say anything six feet away.*

We can trace some cultural scripts (Goddard, Wierzbicka, 1997) in Thurber's fables characterizing the attitude of the Anglo-American society to some social phenomena:

- 1) overtly discussing family problems and relationship between spouses;
- 2) mocking those in power, i. e. political satire;
- 3) laughing at excessive public display in affection.

Thurber skillfully combines moral discourse, characteristic to the fable genre per se, with political, historic and religious discourses and discourse of love. He narrates simple stories of everyday life seasoned with the special flavor so that it is absolutely unexpected what their culmination can be.

Since the Anglo-American discourse is richly verbal there is no restraint and reserve in expressing various, both good and bad emotions, opinions and desires, as well as in self-exposure, all social issues are overtly discussed and revealed. But on the one hand, there are genre norms per se, and cultural aspects do impact and in some cases predefine the choice of some language means.

Robert Benchley was a prolific columnist, essayist and humorist with a sophisticated sense of humor whose papers simply make you giggle. Every line of his columns is saturated with «pure» humor. He is the one who can skillfully narrate everyday tales sharing his personal experiences and reflections with the

reader and making allusions to history, music, politics. With his emblematic intellectual humor, the so called «genteel» humor style, Benchley guided the reader through the epoch of...

- the US-Soviet competition deriding the absurdity of central planning revealing to the reader political and historic background, referring to some symbolic international charitable movements such as *the Salvation Army*, cultural icons of the Soviet era: *Lenin's tomb*:

- *IF I HEAR ANY MORE about this five-year-plan business I am going to start one myself. Russia has been working on hers for a couple of years now, and England is thinking of starting one, and what Russia and England can do, I can do. All that is necessary is for me to find out just what a five-year-plan is.*

- *As I understand it, you take five years to start all over again. You throw out all your old systems, clean out the rubbers in the hall closet, give to the Salvation Army all those old bundles of the National Geographic you have been saving, and tell your creditors to wait for five years and that they will be surprised to see how well you pay .*

- *Now, I may have this five-year plan all wrong. I haven't read much about Russia's, except to look at pictures showing Lenin's tomb. But I do know that the principle of the thing is that five years are supposed to elapse before anyone can really judge of its success .*

- the US Post Office as the bureaucratic machine and «most popular line-standing field in the country», which has now, luckily, fell into oblivion. He emphasizes the incongruity of the American lifestyle «building the reputation for speed and dash» which has actually become the American culture specific concept with the red tape propagated by the US postal services in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The American lifestyle is contrasted with the Spanish relaxed way of living which characterizes two different national characters and psychologies:

- *For a nation which has an almost evil reputation for bustle, bustle, bustle, and rush, rush, rush, we spend an enormous amount of time standing around in line in front of windows, just waiting. It would be all right if we were Spanish peasants and could strum guitars and hum, or even stab each other, while we were standing in line, or East Indians who could just sit cross-legged and simply stare into space for hours. Nobody expects anything more of Spanish peasants or East Indians, because they have been smart enough to build themselves a reputation for picturesque lethargy .*

The special communication ritual of the sender and the postal services officer is lyricized. The sender intentionally shows servile complaisance and deference that actually creates the humorous effect, even the musical reference is used here as the sender's trick to please the officer and conquer the officer's heart:

- *The following ritual will then be adhered to, a deviation by a single word subjecting the sender to a year in Leavenworth or both:*

*Clerk's Question: Do you want to mail a package?*

*Sender's Answer: No, sir.*

*Q. What do you want to do ?*

A. *I don't much care, so long as I can be with you.*

Q. *Do you like tick-tack-toe?*

A. *I'm crazy mad for it.*

Q. *Very well. We won't play that.*

A. *Aren't you being just a little bit petty?*

Q. *Are you criticizing me?*

A. *Sorry. [5].*

• the Bourbon dynasty, notably the exorbitant lifestyle of Louis XIV, when comparing modern luxury bathroom design, which has gained great popularity these days, modestly called in plumbers' catalogues «private heaven» with the luxury of the Palace of Versailles. In this refined and elegant manner, Benchley laughs at modern kitsch and bad taste by using very apt historical metaphors by comparing modern grand opulent bathroom halls with the largest Roman imperial baths of Diocletian built from 298 to 306 AD:

- *A firm of what purport to be plumbers (but whom I suspect of being royalist propagandists trying to get the Bourbon kings back into power again) has just issued a catalogue showing how to make your bathroom look like the Great Hall at Versailles – or I guess the best way to go about it would be to make the Great Hall at Versailles look like a bathroom.*

- *If I ever do succumb to the Louis XIV instinct in me (and make enough money) and do have one of the "Diocletian baths" installed in that great big new house I shall build, there will be a secret door, hidden behind a rare tapestry, to which I alone will have the key.*

By and large, the narrative discourse in Thurber's fables and Benchley's essays depicting some culture specific concepts is intermingled with musical, political, philosophical, religious and historic discourses. Obviously, the boundaries of interdiscursivity are now expanding and will be reconceptualized by including not only micro- and macro intertextual levels, but also cultural and social contexts on a larger scale.

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