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The Cultural Semantic Thickness of Insides and Outsides

Abstract:

Much as one would like to resist it, the theme of this session does invoke the famous/notorious container schema. By practicing cultural semantics in the North, one is immediately plunged into the cognitive linguistic notion of embodied schemas actualised and elaborated in usage, as well as into the cultural linguistic commitment to view these schemas (including the container schema) as cultural (or, in effect, cognitive-cultural).

Being in the North or South can thus be viewed as being inside vs. outside, a contrast that is as much topographical/geographical as it is political, economic, and cultural, and ultimately evaluative and axiological. Insides and outsides involve variable degrees of knowledge, insight, and expertise, a continuum of analytic vs. synthetic perspectivisation, as well as an implied directionality of viewing and/or fictive motion. If then, to take an example tangential with the North-South Divide, Karen Blixen’s Out of Africa suggests movement outside (and the loss of) the place that she made her home, CNN’s feature series Inside Africa and African Voices try to assume the insiders’ perspectives, whereas BBC World’s Focus on Africa zooms in onto the continent from an external (northern?) vantage point (this at least is suggested, perhaps erroneously, by their titles). Thus, inside(s) and outside(s) are indeed semantically and culturally “thick” notions that by default function in contrast to each other but need not be symmetrical. Being an outsider can be bad and uncomfortable but can also be an admired act of rebellion. Being inside can mean the spirit of solidarity and the feeling of affinity but also an unwelcome enclosure with no possibility to obtain a broader and a more balanced view.

By exploring the semantics of insides and outsides in contemporary British and American journalism, the present study aims to address the issues of (i) the cognitive-cultural contextualisation of these notions, (ii) the spheres of connection between inside/outside and North/South, (iii) the ambivalence of the inside/outside (a)symmetry. On the theoretical side, it revisits the notions of languaculture (Agar 1994) and cultural mindset (Underhill 2012).

References:
