

A CROSS-CULTURAL ASSOCIATIVE STUDY OF CONCEPTS (EDUCATION, FREEDOM, HAPPINESS)

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The study aims at conducting a free associative experiment to define fragments of conceptual worldviews of Kazakh and Afghan students aged 18–24 on human concepts (Education, Freedom, Happiness). The relevance of the study is determined by presenting the cross-comparison analysis of the hierarchy of constituent parts (nucleus and periphery) of concepts.

Methods. The association experiment was conducted through a questionnaire and the data was processed by Word Cloud technology. The research methods involved in the study were interpretation, comparison, statistical analysis.

Results. The research underscores that concept is not a stable, rigid category, and it changes under the influence of ongoing transformations in the world. The results of the associative test indicate that the concept constituents comprise basic, universal associations and culture-specific, individual patterns. The experiment results testify that the surrounding environment, for example, economic or socio-political changes, shape world perceptions of a particular cultural community.

Conclusion. The cross-comparison study provides new viewpoints on the hierarchy of the nuclear and peripheral constituent elements within conceptual frameworks of Kazakh and Afghan worldviews.

Keywords: associative experiment, nucleus, periphery, word cloud, cultural community

INTRODUCTION

Science in the 21st century is characterised by the interpenetration of different fields. This trend has given rise to research into the problems of the relationship between language, consciousness and culture. The idea of the concept is becoming

central under the conditions of intersection of different sciences: linguistics, psychology, philosophy and cross-cultural communication.

Gevorg Grigoryan et al. (2023) state that scientists from a variety of disciplines claim that a “concept” is a representation of mental activity, even though the term is differently interpreted.

In modern linguistics, the study of concepts has triggered research in cognitive linguistics which treats the language as a sign system that accumulates and stores a human’s categorised experience of the world (Aloairdhi & Kahlaoui, 2020; Lin, 2024).

Modern linguacultural research suggests that there are some universal notions shared by all people, but each culture has its own unique representation of these concepts (Abildinova, 2021; Kabanova et al., 2021).

Cross-cultural associative research dwells upon diverse mechanisms of perception of different notions. Research by László Kovács et al. (2021) showed how brand names appear in the verbal consciousness of Hungarian, Russian and Lao-tian 4–5-year-old children via association experiment. The psycholinguistic and cultural analysis of individually associated reactions to the German stimulus words “Humor” and “Lachen” was described in the study by Oksana Zubach (2022). A free word association test was used in the study to see how the stimulus words were perceived by the German learners at Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University. Elvira S. Isajeva and Elina G. Vasiljeva (2021) studied the interpretation of the ‘fire’ concept by Russian speakers living in Latvia through an associative experiment.

Conducting psycholinguistic associative experiments is important for understanding the linguistic consciousness of the ethno-linguacultural community and its individuals. Studying the associative meanings of concepts allows us to understand how notions, representing the national picture of the world, are structured in the minds of a linguacultural community. Analysis and interpretation of concepts can identify both a set of universal characteristics and unique, local traits. Understanding common and specific features of basic concepts is crucial for intercultural communication in the era of globalisation. Cross-cultural research in this field gives meaningful insights into collective consciousness of a particular nation, their basic values and attitudes to the surrounding environment.

The present research attempts to explore the basic concepts of Happiness, Freedom, and Education in Kazakh and Afghan communities via a free associative experiment. In line with the current interdisciplinary research, it treats the concept as a complex phenomenon of philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and intercultural communication. The goal of the study is, first, to identify the nucleus and peripheral zones reflecting worldviews of Kazakh and Afghan respondents. Second, to systematise and interpret the reactions to the stimulus concepts. Third, to clarify similar and different features of the concept associations. Fourth, to reveal universal and culture-specific characteristics of concepts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conducting psycholinguistic associative experiments is important for understanding of the linguistic consciousness of both the ethno-linguacultural community as a whole and its individuals.

The research by Alina Yodlovska (2024) used a free associative experiment to assess the understanding of the 'bird' concept in the consciousness of a lingua-cultural community. There were 100 respondents (26 men and 74 women) aged 18–32. The author identified the nuclear and peripheral zones of the concept for Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian speakers. The research demonstrated the existence of universal associations shaped by language and culture and individual associations rooted in particular experiences that differ from person to person. The results of the experiment show that the respondents identify several birds that are typical of their nation and that their responses are tied to perception, specifically vision and hearing.

In a related vein, Mair Makhaev et al. (2023) investigated the toponyms via language consciousness of Derbent students (Dagestan). Both the denotative meaning of the dictionary definitions and free associations of toponyms (Voronezh, Moscow, Vladikavkaz, Volgograd, Dagestan) were analysed.

The research by Diana Rakhimova (2020) looked at the Happiness concept of speakers of American English. The analysis comprised dictionary definitions, respondents' responses, proverbs and aphorisms and interpretation of fiction texts. To get the full picture of the Happiness lexeme, a two-month association experiment was carried out with forty women aged 30–40. The informants' responses were divided into four categories: perception, feeling, picture and notion. Following on from this, the comparative analysis of denotative meanings and associations of respondents showed that indicators of happiness for American women are well-being, prosperity, joy, freedom to choose and mental peace.

The goal of the study by Irina N. Kabanova et al. (2021) was to create a hierarchy of the fundamental axiological components of the universal concept "happiness" as understood by Russian, French, and English linguo-societies within the context of the global pandemic reality through cross-cultural quantified associative mapping. Three associative surveys were conducted using Google Forms to determine the extent to which the "static projection" of "happiness" is still applicable in pandemic-shaken societies, gather free associations, manually compare the data, and identify similarities and differences between current Russian, French, and English (American) conceptions of "happiness." The survey's findings attest to the fact that while some components of happiness are widely acknowledged to be related to "health," "family," "peace," and "freedom," others turn out to be ethnically distinct. The Russian ethnic-specific perception of happiness comprises "physical well-being and health," "commonality" (family, friendship, and other interpersonal relations), "youth," "mood," "freedom," "a state of soul," "balance," "stability," "luck," and "creature comforts." French

perception of happiness lies in “the state of complete satisfaction” (*de pleine satisfaction*), “luck” and “success” (*bonne fortune, chance, prospérité, veine (familier)*), “good prediction” and “chance”. For English-speaking people according to the survey’s ranking section, which used a 1 to 10 scale, “Peace” and “Harmony” are currently seen as the main factors contributing to “happiness” (63,6% of 10/10 choices), with “Health” coming in second (36,4% with varying 9/10, 10/10 rankings) and “Ability to do something” (third, 18,2% with ranking varying from 7 to 10).

Makhinur Mamatova and Diane E. Wille (2021) introduced the study on the attitude towards freedom and responsibility among 47 undergraduates from Kyrgyzstan and 47 undergraduate students from the USA employing the original Concept Questionnaire and the semantic differential method. The findings highlight the universality of the ideals of freedom and responsibility, and the attitude toward society reveals the adaptive strain typical of the late adolescent stage.

Twelve bipolar scales, ranging from -3 to +3, make up the semantic differential. From scale to scale, the pluses and minuses are positioned differently on the poles. The three fundamental dimensions of evaluation (E), potency (P), and activity (A) comprise the organisation of the scales. Four bipolar scales of connotative adjectives are included in each factor. Scales such as “smooth-rough,” “dim-clear,” “good-bad,” and “sour-sweet” are included in factor E. Scales for “feminine-masculine,” “strong-weak,” “small-large,” and “complicated-simple” are included in factor P. The activity dimension includes the following scales: “passive-active,” “sharp-dull,” “hot-cold,” and “quiet-loud.” Semantic representations of the notions “I,” “Society,” “Freedom,” and “Responsibility” are shaped by the estimation of evaluation, potency, and activity. The purpose of the Concept Questionnaire was to examine the concepts “I,” “Society,” “Freedom,” and “Responsibility”. The results indicate that both groups give the idea of “freedom” a positive evaluation. The picture of freedom in the questionnaire focused more on parallels than contrasts. Nonetheless, compared to their Kyrgyz counterparts, the US group exhibits a stronger consolidation of descriptions of the image of freedom. Notably, both groups’ assessments of freedom and responsibility as influential forces showed nearly identical high positive connections.

Elena N. Strelchuk and Alina S. Lepkova (2024) contribute a unique perspective on describing concepts within a professional community. They used an associative questionnaire to investigate the semantic content of the concept *Freedom* of the journalistic worldview of foreign students. 51 foreign students of RUDN University majoring in journalism participated in the experiment. A questionnaire survey was based on the primary word-stimulus (freedom). The responders were required to record associations in writing for ten minutes. Data were processed through Word Cloud technology. The survey revealed the nucleus zone, the near-nucleus zone and the peripheral zone. The nucleus zone includes lexemes: freedom, free, life, live, happiness, happy, dream. The near-nucleus zone presented the worldview of students via notions democratic, liberation, liberate, independence, choose, choice, fly, to be, state, cheerful,

will, valuable, value. The peripheral zone is characterised by rarely used words such as right, unlimited, seek, run, get, calm, comfortable, act, discuss, desired, ideological, limited, society, state, protect, limit, play, bird, flight, wings, do. The results of the research outlined that the students understand the Freedom concept by means of basic human values regardless of their professional mental space.

This study employed a free associative experiment to analyse cross-cultural differences and similarities of basic human concepts in Kazakh and Afghan cultural communities. The theoretical assumptions the study relied on are, first, the structure of concepts comprises universal, essential characteristics that are globally recognised. Second, the notion of concept embraces some ethnic-specific, individual, and emotionally-coloured elements.

METHODS

The experimental study was conducted at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University with 101 Kazakh and 35 Afghan students of different specialties aged 18–24. There were 71 female and 30 male Kazakh participants and 13 male and 22 female Afghan respondents. The database for the analysis was generated through the associative experiment, and the research methods involved were interpretation, comparison, statistical analysis.

In a free association experiment the students were instructed to answer with one or two words that first came to mind upon presentation of the stimulus. The stimulus list aimed at building associative fields of concepts “education” “freedom” “happiness”. Google Forms questionnaires were used for gathering free associations, and there were not any restrictions on response options. The respondents might answer using collocations and were able to use any part of speech. The task targeted at identifying one or two words but not writing the ideas and complete sentences, but some students gave the ideas about the concepts using full sentences. The survey for Kazakh students was presented in the Kazakh language, whereas the questionnaire for students from Afghanistan was translated into English. Afghan students study in English in the university since the majority of them possess B2 level of English language proficiency. On average, the participants completed the survey in 3–4 minutes, but the time for the answers was not limited. It was possible to pass the survey both in class and online.

Data processing was handled employing Word Cloud technology, which gives the visual presentation of words, based on frequency and relevance. The most frequent reactions comprised the nuclear part of the concept, while the less frequent reactions to the word-stimulus made the periphery. Then stimulus responses were interpreted to identify differences and similarities of the concept constituents in Kazakh and Afghan cultures.

Education Concept

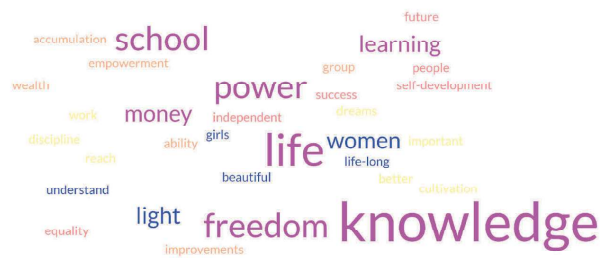
Figure 1
Word Cloud of the Education Concept of Kazakh Students



The core consists of the most frequent and distinctive elements that construct the basic culturally-specific vision of the word-stimulus, while the periphery is described by the units with less frequency and usage.

| The concept zone | Words |
|------------------|---|
| Nucleus zone | book, study, school, science, intellect |
| Periphery zone | money, future, KazNU (Kazakh National University) develop, lesson, politeness, future investment, deep thinking, work hard, search, university, move ahead, self-development, knowledge, teacher, literacy, responsibility, wealth, educational institutions, opportunities, world experience, Kazakhstan, future, new, wisdom, smart, work, light, pen, life |

Source. Own research.

Figure 2*Word Cloud of the Education Concept of Afghan Students*

Source. Own research with the usage freewordcloudgenerator.com.

Table 2*The Content of Afghan Culture Associative View of the Concept Education*

| The concept zone | Words |
|------------------|--|
| Nucleus zone | knowledge, life, power, school, freedom, learning, money, women, light |
| Periphery zone | Girls, life-long, understand, discipline, important, better, reach dreams, cultivation, work, ability, empowerment, wealth, girls, accumulation, improvements, group, people, equality, independent, success, future, self-development |

Source. Own research.

The analysis showed that Education for Kazakhs and Afghans is associated with the common semantic fields such as “school” and “learning”. The word “book” took the first place in Kazakh culture, whereas “knowledge”, “life”, “power” topped the list in the responses of Afghans. Moreover, nuclear culture-specific associations were found in Afghan students’ answers that were connected with “women”, “money” and “light” (nucleus). The words “money”, “self-development” were found in both cultures, but they occupied the different layers of the concept zone. “Money” is nucleus for Afghan students and periphery for Kazakhs. The most vivid difference was presented by the notions “freedom” (nucleus zone) and “equality” (periphery) in Afghan culture. In Kazakh worldview Education is not associated with freedom, gender or equal opportunities. Some students gave the answers in full sentences. Kazakh students: “Knowledge is like digging a well with a needle”, “If you study, you will not die”. Afghan students: “Education can be the best key of my success in the future”, “Education is the best way to reach out my dreams”.

Freedom Concept

Figure 3

Word Cloud of the Freedom Concept of Kazakh Students



Source. Own research with the usage freewordcloudgenerator.com.

Table 3

The Content of Kazakh Culture Associative View of the Concept Freedom

| The concept zone | Words |
|------------------|--|
| Nucleus zone | liberty, independence, sky, fresh air, money, holiday, travelling, life, want |
| Periphery zone | make decisions, nature, carefree morning, take time for yourself, switch off a mobile, not to marry, freedom of speech, domestic films, freedom of thought, flying, youth, individual, Kazakhstan, breathe, lake, home, sleep, prison pigeon, internet, tradition, village, horse, sea air, home, Shymkent |

Source. Own research.

Figure 4

The Content of Afghan Culture Associative View of the Concept Freedom



Source. Own research with the usage freewordcloudgenerator.com.

Table 4*The Content of Afghan Culture Associative View of the Concept Freedom*

| The concept zone | Words |
|------------------|---|
| Nucleus zone | peace, independence, women, right, free, living, financial freedom, happiness, autonomy |
| Periphery zone | happiness, decide, money, make decisions, freedom of thought, security, light of life, hope, walk, liberty, doing what you love to, able to do what you want, living in welfare, being able to say no to undesirable works, ease, Afghan girls, self-confidence |

Source. Own research.

The study of Freedom distinguished the association word ‘*liberty*’ as the most popular response among Kazakhs, and for Afghan respondents the most important word was “*peace*”. “*Independence*” was found in both cultures, along with the words of the same semantic meaning “*money*” and “*financial freedom*” that occupied the nucleus. The reactions of gender and people’s rights were likewise mentioned by Afghan students as for Education stimulus. One more important difference was fixed by the Word Cloud technology that “*liberty*” and “*independence*” presented the majority of the responses in Kazakh culture compared to other reactions of the nucleus. Meanwhile, there was not any drastic change in the response frequency of the nucleus zone in Afghan students’ answers. “*Peace*” and “*independence*” reached the peak, while “*women*”, “*right*”, “*free*”, “*living*”, “*financial freedom*”, “*happiness*”, “*autonomy*” were equally displayed in the nucleus. Afghan respondents wrote complete sentences about the concept: “Freedom means to be able to make your own decisions and it means freedom of thought”, “Living one day with freedom is better than 100 years to be slave”, “Learn to enjoy from every opportunity”.

Happiness Concept

Figure 5*Word Cloud of the Happiness Concept of Kazakh Students**Source.* Own research with the usage freewordcloudgenerator.com.

considered as the pre-nucleus zone of the Happiness concept in Afghan culture. Some Afghan students wrote ideas about happiness: “Happiness is that people respect each other’s characteristics and the style of life”, “When the word ‘happiness’ comes into my mind, I always think a new day every day. Yesterday was gone. So, when I wake up in the morning the first thing in my schedule is meditating, being thankful and grateful. A new dawn always brings happiness to me”.

DISCUSSION

The research was built upon a theoretical assumption that the content of basic human concepts such as happiness, education, and freedom is recognised as one of the essential universals across cultures, so they can be characterised by the common associative constituents.

It became evident that the associative map of the Happiness concept in Afghan and Kazakh worldviews incorporates one common core association “family”, for the Freedom concept similar associations are “*independence*”, “*money*” and “*financial freedom*”, and for the Education concept “school” and “learning”. The results of the present paper come in line with the research by Zhanara Abildinova (2021). She analysed the concept Happiness in Russian, Kazakh and English consciousness and revealed the similar reactions: “joy”, “health”, “children” and “family”. The associations “joy”, “health” and “family” are found in the present study of Kazakh and Afghan conceptual spheres.

In the research by Kabanova et al. (2021) it was indicated that Happiness was a cross-cultural universal and reaction-words to Happiness concept like “family”, “peace”, “health” and “freedom” were considered to be common in Russian, English and French cognitive consciousness.

According to G. Akhmetova and D. Imangaliyeva (2022), the semantic organisation of the Freedom concept is universal and it correlates with objective evaluation of basic human values. They analysed Freedom concept in media discourse and described the most frequent meanings of freedom in Kazakh and English languages. The concept conveys the meaning of “liberty” and “independence” in Kazakh, and “freedom”, “right”, opposing meaning of the word “slavery”, “personal efforts” as a way to achieve freedom in English.

In the free association experiment by J-eun Shin et al. (2018), 521 Korean and American participants reported a total of 1563 words for association with “happiness”. In Korea, “family” was the most frequently used association, and “smile” was the most common word among Americans.

Another assumption the study relied on was that semantic-cognitive structure of basic concepts, being philosophically predetermined, can change based on different cultural, economic, socio-political factors that shape perceptions and worldviews.

Grigoryan et. al (2023) handled an association experiment on Freedom concept with Western (Ireland, England, Italy and Poland), Armenian and Chinese students of different universities in Europe, Armenia and China. They classified all the respondents' associations according to different sections. The classification is diverse and complex for it looks at the concept from interdisciplinary linguo-philosophical perspective. It includes synonymous and antonymous associations, changing realia connotations and language means of expressing freedom.

Interviewees interpreted the part on synonymous and antonymous associations, related concepts broadly, drawing on their collective awareness of social bonds, numerous real-world experiences, and philosophical categories. Political, social, and cultural implications pointed to events and phenomena that respondents considered as a symbol of freedom. English speakers identified freedom with national independence like Berlin Wall. Armenians linked it to the fall of the Soviet Union and Armenia's independence in 1991. For Chinese people, national freedom and independence were primarily associated with the establishment of the People's Republic of China proclaimed by Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949. These connotations were described as 'reverse', meaning 'subconscious', that are opposed to direct associations.

The present study did not pursue the goal to identify 'hidden' representations of the concepts for the concept in the research has two definite categories such as nucleus and periphery. The solidarity with the study by Grigoryan et. al (2023) lies in the fact that events in the history of a particular culture shape the presentation of the concepts in people's minds.

The most frequent associations that constitute the core of the Freedom concept are 'peace' and 'independence' in Afghan culture. Farooq Yousaf and Moheb Jabarkhail (2022) mentioned that the United States concluded its twenty-year war on terror in Afghanistan on August 31, 2021. The Taliban and its allies took total control over Afghanistan. Observers, both inside and outside the nation, are wondering what the future holds for Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

Other culture-specific connotations are "*women*" and "*girls*" in Afghan representation of Education and Freedom concepts. Yousaf and Jabarkhail (2022) stated the facts how Afghan women were treated in the 1990s. The Taliban then forbade women from attending school and deliberately discriminated against them by forbidding them from working outside the home. In addition, women were required to leave their houses with a "mahram," a male chaperone. Men were obliged to keep women at home. According to estimates from UNESCO (2020), the national literacy rate in Afghanistan was 29.8% for women and 59% for males. The female literacy rate, at 29.8%, is among the lowest in the world, but it only started to rise when the US and Coalition entered the country in 2001, and it was far higher than it had been during the Taliban rule in the 1990s.

The research supports the assumption that changing realia affect concept identification and give rise to a number of modern, emotionally-marked, and individualistic patterns of associations.

In view of Strelchuk & Lepkova (2024) periphery traditionally represents less obvious components that contain emotionally-coloured and semantically interconnected words. Svetlana Sergeevna Vasilenko (2019) attempted to explore the common and different characteristics of the Travelling concept in Russian and German languages. She noticed that the word-stimulus gained frequently mentioned reactions and single-word responses that were classified as individual associations.

The analysis of Kazakh and Afghan concepts revealed single, individual associations that occupy the peripheral zone. The reaction 'travelling' is associated with Kazakh Freedom concept since young people have different opportunities for working and studying abroad. They can choose different academic mobility programmes and see the world. The reaction word *not to marry* sounds as a protest against marriage in general, for women in Kazakhstan tend to combine career and family life. They want to marry when they achieve professional and social status and can provide their families and children with necessary things.

Single associations for Education concept in Afghan culture: work, ability, accumulation, improvements, people, success, self-development; for the Happiness concept: meditating, grateful, dawn.

The research showed the periphery as the strata for subjective, individual connotations that might not have any connections within the concept frame. Nevertheless, they reflect the impact of current global changes and people's perceptions of the world.

CONCLUSION

The research addressed cross-cultural associative study of basic human concepts in Kazakh and Afghan cultures. The interpretation, comparison and systematisation of the research results revealed central and peripheral zones of the concepts. The nucleus showed both universal, common features of the concepts that structure unified, globally acceptable values and culture-specific reactions. The periphery mainly consists of culture-specific and subjectively oriented reactions. Words and notions are perceived through the prism of culture, which is associated with the peculiarities of the processes involved in conceptualisation and the formation of the world picture. The study underscores that world picture as a storage of perceptions and assessments of certain notions of realia is a dynamic category.

The scientific contribution of the paper is determined by the analysis of concept associations represented by different cultural communities. The cross-comparison research gives new insights into the hierarchy of the nuclear and periphery associations of Afghan and Kazakh worldviews on different concepts. The theoretical value is defined by contributions to cognitive research, semasiology, cultural studies and intercultural communication.

Future research might apply the theory of cultural dimensions by Geert Hofstede to the associations analysis and find the differences and similarities between conceptual spheres of individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

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