Anna DZIAMA
University of Rzeszow, Rzeszow, Poland

adziama@ur.edu.pl

CONCEPTUALIZASTION OF SHTETL
IN AMERICAN ENGLISH: A CULTURAL LINGUISTIC STUDY

Abstract: This paper examines the conceptualizations of *shtetl*, 'a small Jewish town or village formerly found in Eastern Europe', in American English from the perspective of cultural linguistics. It can be observed that the concept of *shtetl* reflects cultural metaphors, where *shtetl* is viewed as a mythic Jewish idyll and, contemporarily, a metaphor for Jewish communality, for example, referring to an apartment building in an urban Jewish American neighborhood of the East Coast cities. It may be suggested that *shtetl* is also used to describe and categorize things such as tradition, a place of Jewish Diaspora and Yiddishkeit for, mainly, American Jewry. Therefore, this research paper presents cultural categorizations of a place that often emerges at the cultural level of cognition. Overall, the observations made in this paper reveal the potential of cultural schema theory for the studies of cultural linguistics. To recognize this role, the fundamentals of cultural linguistics and its schemes have been used to highlight the need for further research. Several cross-sectional studies have accentuated the cultural concept of a *shtetl, e.g.* Palmer (1996), Sharifian (2011, 2017). This study has tried to identify the key elements of a *shtetl*. I have applied Sharifian's (2017) cultural conceptualization models as well as his distributed model of cultural schemas that can contribute to the knowledge of understating the concept of *shtetl* in Yiddish and American English, and among Holocaust survivors, first generation, second generation, and third generation American Jews.

Keywords: shtetl, schemes, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics

Introduction: cultural linguistics

In his seminal text *Cultural Linguistics*, Sharifian (2017) presents a new approach to the concept of roles and schemes. It has been convincingly argued that cultural linguistics is a multidisciplinary area of research that identifies the relationship between culture, language, and conceptualisation. It has been shown that primarily this research area emerged from a scientific interest in combining

cognitive linguistics with the three traditions existing in linguistic anthropology, i.e., Boasian linguistics, ethno-semantics, and the ethnography of communication, i.e., speaking to be more precise. It has been established in previous studies (Ferarro, 2006; Wierzbicka, 1992) that cultural linguistics has a connection with research in cognitive anthropology since both present and explore cultural models that are mutually related to the use of language. It has been noted that for cultural linguistics, numerous structures of human languages are ingrained in cultural conceptualizations, as well as cultural models. Recent studies have shown that cultural linguistics has synthesized numerous disciplines and subdisciplines, such as those mentioned by Sharifian (2017), "complexity science" and "distributed cognition" to enhance its theoretical understanding of the concept of cultural perception. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2017) that applications of cultural linguistics have enhanced prolific inquiries in cultural domains, i.e., intercultural communication as well as political discourse analysis. It can be assumed that the fundamentals of cultural linguistics are essential in understanding the scheme of a *shtetl*, a small pre-WWII town in Eastern Europe with a mainly Yiddish-speaking Jewish population.

It has been established (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2017) that human conceptualization is as much a cultural as an individual phenomenon, it must be observed that members of a cultural group continuously convey "templates" (Sharifian, 2017) for their ideas, behaviors, beliefs and thoughts in the exchange of their conceptual ordeals and experiences (Sharifian, 2017). Factors found to be influencing that behavior are, oftentimes, the complexity of cognitive systems which emerge from predetermined conceptualizations which have been in constant change amongst the members of a cultural group over a period of time. Data from several studies (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2017) suggest that conceptualizations evoke the concept of cultural cognition. Interestingly, as Sharifian (2017) observed, these conceptualizations can be defined as "distributed" in the minds of a certain group of people who founded them. According to Sharifian (2017), in his developed model of cultural conceptualizations these traits can be found in numerous cultural objects such as art, paintings, ceremonies, observances, oral histories, and chronicles. This article will try to demonstrate how certain elements of cultural linguistics and schemes may enhance our understanding of a scheme of a *shtetl*.

Types of Schema

One of the most significant issues presented in this section is the account of several types of schema which are frequently discussed in the subject literature. It has to be assumed that these conceptualizations observed by Sharifian (2017) occur regularly at the cultural level of human cognition. When discussing the

scheme of a *shtelt*, one must be aware of the fact that these cultural conceptualizations, which are presented and discussed in the following, may not be correspondingly and similarly imprinted in the people's minds of a certain cultural group, either European, Asian, or African, to name just a few. It has to be pointed out that the issue of cultural differences among various members can vary, i.e., in fact some people may or may not – more or less share those conceptualizations.

Event Schema

First of all, let us begin our discussion by presenting *event schemas*, which are derived from our experiences of particular events (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2017). It has been shown that people habitually have schemas for events and services such as baptisms, conformations, weddings, burials, and funerals. Interestingly, it has to be stated that there are correspondingly categories related to those schemas. Namely, these categories that are linked to a wedding schema might consist of 'wedding presents' and 'wedding receptions'. It has been noted that *event schemas* typically include subschemas of events within the events. For example, in the European tradition, to be more precise, its western part, a Christian Catholic schema of a wedding ceremony habitually includes subschemas of church service or mass, music, and reception, as well as various regional and cultural traditions, such as parents blessing newlyweds in Poland. Some events are practiced more or less equally by people from the same cultural group, family, background, or upbringing. It is understood that those common experiences frequently act as a locus for the emergence of cultural event schemas throughout the group. It is accepted that there are also cultural differences in the schemas and categories that are associated with each event. In this regard, one can also discuss the education system in various countries in which the basics are the same but the details often vary.

Image Schemas

It is a widely held view that *image schemas* are those which deliver structures for certain conceptualizations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1987). Palmer (1996) reputes these as "schemas of intermediate abstractions (between mental images and abstract propositions) that are easily imagined, perhaps as iconic images, and clearly related to physical (embodied) or social experiences". It has commonly been assumed that when talking about 'the foundation of the nation' one is attached and evokes the *image schema* of 'construction' and 'building' to present the conceptualization of a 'country' or a 'nation'. We can also present the *image*

schema of a *pedagogue*, who in ancient times is portrayed originally as a slave who accompanies children to schools. Therefore, a clear *image schema* of a 'road' and a 'path' is observed (Lakoff & Johnson, 1987).

Proposition Schemas

It has been argued that *proposition schemas* can be described as concepts which can be represented as models of ideas, thoughts, and behaviors (Sharifian, 2017). Interestingly, these schemas postulate "concepts and the relations that hold among them" (Sharifian, 2017). For example, this schema may be illustrated by certain concepts of marriage, food, housing, and religion. These *proposition schemas* might, in fact, provide a source for diverse forms of reasoning across numerous cultural groups. For instance, it can be seen on the example of narratives and oral stories by Polish highlanders who habitually represent *proposition schemas* which mirror highlander culture, values, and their worldview. It is also thought that a shtetl scheme is "part of a larger cultural attention to the importance of place in Jewish life, ranging from immediate concerns of an individual Jew [...] to the mythical stature of ancient sites", as Shandler (2014:22) observed.

Emotion Schemas

Sharifian (2017) sees the emotion concepts as the instantiations of some schemas. For example, Palmer (1996) observes that "emotions are complex configurations of goal-driven imagery that govern feeling states and scenarios, including discourse scenarios". It can also be seen in terms of emotions as social and cognitive in nature and perceives them as the events or situations in which they occur. Here, one can think of a range of emotions that a *shtetl* or a *place* can evoke.

Role Schemas

Recent research has suggested that *role schemas* can be defined as a knowledge structure which people possess of specific and explicit role positions in various cultural groups (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2017). For example, it is believed that those roles and schemas include good knowledge of particular social roles which represent sets of behaviors that are projected on people in specific social positions and situations. Interestingly, these schemas are often associated with category cases such as 'doctor', 'truck driver', 'teacher', etc. It has to be pointed out that these schemas take in and show knowledge about different characteristics

associated with certain roles, namely, age, appearance, attire, manner of speaking and, to some extent, the level of income and social status. It is noticeable that people in various cultural groups have a paradigm of different categories and schemas for the same role. To illustrate this point, let us talk about the role of a mother. These associated *role schemas* often include positive knowledge about responsibilities and household tasks between children and the person denoted as a *mother*. For Polish people, the word for "mother" evokes a role category with certain qualities, that is, to love your children, understand them, care for their needs, mentor them, protect, etc. Similarly, we can discuss the role of a *shtetl*.

The scheme of *shtetl*

Let us examine the role of a *shtetl*. As Sharifian (2011) argues, cultural conceptualisations may be instantiated and reflected in cultural artefacts such as paintings, rituals, language, and narratives. Therefore, the *shtetl,* which has been present in Jewish culture for centuries, is a prime example of such conceptualization – produced as the realization of culture, yet not equally imprinted in the minds of all the members of a cultural group. As far as the conceptualization of shtetl is concerned, one can argue (see, for example, Hoffman, 2007 and Shandler, 2014) that virtually every Jew today has a mental image of the *shtetl*, the small villages in which Jews lived for centuries in eastern Europe. These images are informed by the portrayal of *shtetl* life in a variety of media, such as fictional novels or films.

It has been noted by the above-mentioned authors that from the mid-nineteenth century, the *shtetl* also has become a cultural and a literary construct. This 'imagined shtetl', unlike what may be referred to as the 'real shtetl', was often assumed to be exclusively Jewish, a face-to-face community that lived in Jewish space and time and preserved traditional Jewish life. It has been argued in the literature and in political and cultural discourse that the "imagined shtetl" has always evoked a variety of reactions that ranged from parody and contempt to praise as a supposed bastion of the pure concept of *yiddishkeyt*, which can be translated as Jewishness. As Shandler (2014: 25) pointed out, this cultural linguistic concept is "a shorthand symbol, attitudes toward the *imagined shtetl* were a revealing litmus test of the Jewish encounter with the dilemmas and traumas of modernity, revolution, and catastrophe collide". It can also be assumed that following the annihilation of East European Jewry, the *shtetl* has become a recurrent if inaccurate cultural scheme for the entire lost world of East European Jewry. This can be illustrated by examples such as Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, better known as *Fiddler on the Roof* and painter Marc Chagall's frisky, mischievous depictions of East European Jewish life with numerous images of 'flying fiddlers' that contribute to the modern image of *shtetl* as a small Jewish town in eastern Europe where

a population of 'unfortunate' but industrious Jews worked and studied, all the while seemingly accompanied by Jewish klezmer music. Interestingly, as Shandler (2014:59) observed, "it does not take a professional historian to realize that such a static representation of the populous and geographically dispersed Jewish communities of eastern Europe does not reflect historical reality". It can be suggested that the popular concept of 'fiddlers' image of *shtetl* life has often neglected the great diversity of ideas and experience schemes, as argued by Sharifian (2011), which characterized these communities.

The Origin of the *Shtetl*

According to Shandler (2014), the word *shtetl* is a Yiddish term meaning "town". It has been observed that *shtetls* were small market towns in Russia and Poland that shared a unique sociocultural community pattern during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The *Shtetl* ranged in size from several hundred to several thousand residents. Forests and fields often surrounded these small towns. Gentiles tended to live outside of the town, while Jews lived in the settlement itself. The streets were, for the most part, unpaved, and the houses were constructed of wood. Public spaces included synagogues, often wooden, the *beit midrash* (the study house), the *shtiblekh* (a smaller, residential houses of prayer), a Jewish cemetery, Christian churches, both Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox, depending on the location in eastern Galicia, bathhouses, and the focal point of each *shtetl*, the marketplace. It is worth noting that the *shtetl* Jewish community was typically governed by a community council known as a *kahal*. As explained in the cultural schemas, the kahal as a center piece governed civil and religious affairs, from collecting taxes to dispensing charity, which is an integral part of Jewishness. Although religion guided community daily life, interestingly, it was not, as has often been portrayed, the sole occupation of the Jewish man. It has been observed that the scholarly class was a small, elite segment of the Jewish community. In prewar eastern Europe, most shtetl Jews, both men and women, worked hard to support their families, typically in commercial or artisanal trades, and then, more frequently, as time and industrialization progressed, in numerous factories scattered across Galicia. It has to be noted that modernization, migration, emigration, and revolution contributed to the decline of the shtetl in a great way. Sadly, the Holocaust destroyed any remaining vestiges of the previous east European shtetl life.

Shtetl: Separate and distinct entity

According to Sharifian (2011, 2017), one can observe that the shtetl can be characterized by common cultural concepts. First of all, thousands of *shtetls* existed

in eastern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, and while many Jewish communities shared a similar organizational structure, they were not identical. For example, politics, dialect, and religious customs varied across eastern Europe, as evidenced by what has become known as the 'gefilte fish line'. As observed by Hoffman (2007:103):

> This is an imaginary line that extends across eastern Europe, dividing those Jews to the west who season their gefilte fish, a traditional Sabbath dish, with sugar from those to the east who season the fish with pepper. This culinary equator highlights the fact that each shtetl had its own history and traditions, inspired by the local milieu. Each shtetl had its own recipes, stories, legends, and klezmer tunes.

In terms of religion, it has been pointed out that different approaches to the faith could be observed as well. It has to be stressed that Hasidism thrived in all places, with many communities simultaneously supporting several distinct groups of Hasidim. Interestingly, where one could find Hasidim and Misnagdim, the opponents of Hasidism were likely to exist. Once can argue that cultural schemes of image, role and event are present in the life of the *shtetl* that can be illustrated in different flavors of gefilte fish to different flavors of Judaism, and the small market towns of eastern Europe that supported their own distinct identities.

Polish *miasteczko*

It is worth mentioning that non-Jews often constituted the majority of a *shtetl* population. As explained by Estraikh (1998): "It is a distorted picture of the shtetl that completely excludes its non-Jewish residents or reduces them to extras (e.g. the Shabes goyim, Gentile helpers for Sabbath chores) in an all-Jewish saga". In reality, shtetls were characterized by daily contacts between Jews and Gentiles, as shown and indicated in the interviews of Holocaust survivors and the first generation American Jews. Jewish-Gentile relations have been noted to range from peaceful to explosive. Interestingly, shtetl memories, however, tend to focus on the pogroms – anti-Jewish riots – to the exclusion of more harmonious daily interactions. Once can conclude that Polish *miasteczko* were primarily market towns, and, as such, their residents, Jewish and Gentile, merchant and farmer, buyer and seller, conducted daily business transactions and maintained social contacts as well.

Collective Memories of *Shtetl*

Let us briefly discuss *shtetl* in Jewish consciousness. It should be pointed out that for American Jews, a majority of whom are of Ashkenazic origin and of

Eastern European descent, the *shtetl* serves as "a mythical point of origin", as argued by Shandler (2014:36). For most Jewish Americans, this image schema can be explained as a simple, down-to-earth culture, often a colorful combination of religion and folklore the Jews in America hailed from. Although the *shtetl* life, as one can maintain, was unavoidably changed by industrialization and modernization, it was definitely destroyed by the Holocaust. Therefore, one can argue that *shtetl* life, for most Jews, has been sanctified with an 'aura of martyrdom'. Interestingly, in Jewish history and Jewish collective memory, the *shtetl* coexists with the concept of *Yiddishkeit*, Jewishness. As observed by Sharifian (2011, 2017) the cultural linguistics schemes describe the life of a certain cultural group, here, it consists of the Rabbis, less influential *rebbes*, Yiddish language, klezmer music and, on a more mystic level, floating fiddlers. These were the cultural aspects that characterized these small market towns, but they were also defined by much more than these stereotypical images. Interestingly, as Hoffman (2007: 65) observes:

> On a micro level, each shtetl had a unique local history. at the macro level, societal changes, including the economic upheaval caused by industrialization and demographic change, and the ideological upheaval wrought by socialism and Zionism, made life in the society a dynamic experience. A more nuanced vision of shtetl life makes it easier to appreciate why so many Jews left the place they now view with such nostalgia even before that centuries-old way of life was ended by the Holocaust.

Conclusions

The study was designed to assess and introduce the concept of cultural linguistics and to examine the image of *shtetl*. This article has presented and identified different cultural schemes in reference to the concept of a *shtetl*, namely event schemas, image schemas, proposition schemas, emotion schemas, and role schemas as proposed by Sharifian (2017). These schemas, which are part of our conceptual world, set of ideas and beliefs, rooted in our distinctive culture in which we grew up, enable us to understand the image of a *shtetl* for, predominantly, American Jews. In summary, the model and approach presented in this paper emphasise the importance of viewing cognition as a property of cultural groups and not just individuals. It has also been shown that the conceptualization of *shtetl* is different for Holocaust survivors, either first, second, or the fourth generation.

The cultural schemas of the *shtetl*, which have been presented in this paper, show the importance of images and collective memory. To conclude and illustrate the complexity of the *shtetl* image, let me provide an example from the American series *Mad Men*, season five, episode 9. In this episode, Jewish American winemakers from Manischewitz are trying to persuade an SCDP advertising agency to bring

their product to a wider American market. Roger Sterling, who is the owner of the very advertising agency, wants to assess how 'assimilated' the Jewish American wine producers are. He is trying to assess this by asking them "How Jewish are they?" he asks. "Fiddler on the Roof: audience or cast?"

References

Estraikh, Genaddy (1998). *Shtetle Image and Reality*. Oxford: Legenda.

Ferraro, Gary (2006). *Cultural Anthropology: An applied perspective*. Cengage Learning.

Hoffman, Eva (2007). *Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews*. New York City: Public Affairs.

Lakoff, George & Johnson, Mark (1987), *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Palmer, Gary B. (1996). *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Shandler, Jeffrey (2014). *Shtetl. A Vernacular Intellectual History*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.

Sharifian, Farzad (2011). *Cultural Conceptualisations and Language: Theoretical framework and applications*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Sharifian, Farzad (2017). *Cultural Linguistics*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1992). *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition: Universal human concepts in culture--specific configuration*. New York: Oxford University Press.