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**THE CORE AND PERIPHERIES OF THE CONCEPT  
OF HAPPINESS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH  
AND IN POLISH: A CROSS-CULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION APPROACH****Introduction**

The main purpose of the present article is firstly to define the core and peripheries in the semantics of the concept of happiness referring to three components accounting for its meaning – universal, cultural and individual. Secondly, it aims to illustrate its cultural semantics in respective American and Polish cultures by means of a contrastive analysis of chosen aphorisms in American English and in Polish. It is to reveal the existing culture-motivated differences, which have been explained by assigning them to the already widely known dimensions of cultural diversity from the model of culture proposed by Geert Hofstede [1994]. It thus continues the research in cross-cultural semantics, which because of its pragmatic value has resulted in many publications [cf. the works of Nessa Wolfson 1981, Anna Wierzbicka 1999 and Anna Lubecka 2000].

Referring to the above claim, we posit that the core or universal meaning derives from various philosophical doctrines. In the case of both European and American cultures, they have been mainly created by Greek, Roman and Christian philosophers and thinkers. Their doctrines serve to define the basic values which are essential for the concept of happiness found in all languages and cultures. In turn, the periphery or rather peripheries are constituted by culture-specific dimensions of the notion which become conspicuous when we analyse its semantics in different languages. The second component of the peripheries are individual and subjective meanings of the term, which, however, are kinds beyond the scope of the present research. The reason is that they escape any strict classification and their influence on the social semantics of happiness is rather small.

Aphorisms have been chosen as the linguistic material to investigate culture-specific differences in the concept of happiness. Thus they are the most conspicuous use of language whose meanings are socially, not individually constructed. As such aphorisms belong to sociolect and are carriers of culture-specific semantics.

The choice of American and Polish cultures as well as their corresponding languages has been accounted for by the characteristic traits of postmodern global culture. Its often used synonym, Americanisation, means that the model of American culture has been found attractive and widely accepted all over the world. Similarly, English as a modern *lingua franca* imposes a certain worldview and understanding of reality. After 1989 Poland has become a part of the global culture, which has resulted in some changes in Polish cultural ethos. Thus, an indirect objective of the present article will be to show to what extent the periphery of the concept of happiness as developed in Polish culture reflects the world-wide changes.

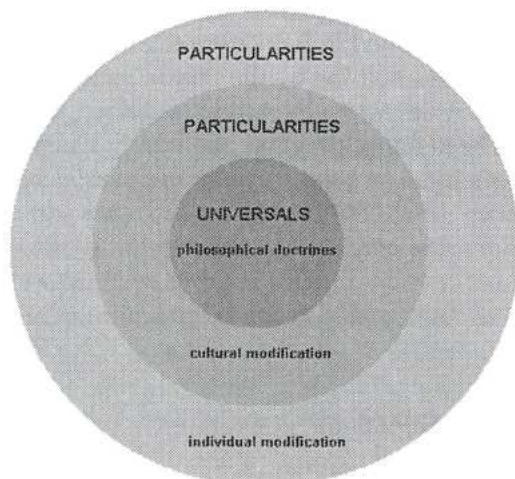
### **Language, philosophy and culture**

Philosophy and culture are united by language which conveys meaning and serves as a means of communication. Similarly to Wierzbicka's 'linguistic trio' [1999] where it is stressed an undeniable relevance among language, mind and culture in perceiving and understanding the world, another sensible relation can be formed, this time involving language, philosophy and culture. While analysing the concept of happiness, we posit that philosophy appears to be a conceptual game played in the field of culture by means of language.

Philosophy as a discipline of science belongs to humanities and is claimed to be an important outcome of both culture and, on a more general level, civilisation. For example, American and Polish cultures are part of Western civilisation that displays a set of universal values with their roots in Greek, Roman and Christian philosophical ethics and expressed by means of language. As Hofstede claims culture is the software of the mind, which appears to have a significant effect on people's thinking, which results in the universal and abstract concept of happiness becoming language- and culture-specific. Consequently, there do exist differences in its perception in national cultures and its expression in national languages.

Moreover, as posited by Hofstede [1994: 8–9] the difference between particular cultures are due to different systems of values proper to each of them. They do not appear at random but create patterns with an implied hierarchy and can be classified into four basic dimensions of cultural diversity: high/low power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, high/low risk avoidance. Thus what makes an individual assign a final meaning to particular universal concepts is the order of values typical of their mother culture as well as a dimension of cultural diversity his/her culture belongs to. Let me repeat after Hofstede that culture as

a programming of people's mind accounts for the way reality and also the concept of happiness are defined in particular speech and culture communities.



**Fig. 1. Three levels of understanding the concept of happiness**

The mutual dependence among language, philosophy and culture applied to the concept of happiness could be shown in the onion graph above (Fig. 1). It illustrates a distinction between its two complementary spheres – core and periphery, where the second term consists of both culture-specific as well as individual components.

### **Philosophical background on the concept of happiness**

The concept of happiness has always been high on the agenda of philosophers and thinkers. Since the very beginning of the European culture every philosophical school and most philosophers have made an attempt to define this emotional category. Naturally, it is impossible to refer to all of them because their contribution is of different value and importance. Their short review given below focuses, first of all, on the input of hedonists, epicureans, stoics and Christian thinkers. They have been explored till modern times and are found in the concept of happiness which is used today. Holowchak [2004: XIII] seems to be right saying that ancient Greek ethical thinking was 'robust and integrative' – that is it had a deep concern for problems that touched the everyday lives of everyday people. This, in large part, is why the Greek philosophers are still worth reading today. There are always difficulties inherent in the study of cultures that are long past. These difficulties notwithstanding, there is the promise of substantial reward: As with the study of any



different culture, past or present, the immediate pay off is a greater understanding of human nature through the common thread of our shared humanity.'

De vita beata? or what is happiness? is the question which has been asked since antiquity. A possible answer to it is offered by the Greek concept of eudemonia, which when directly translated into English means happiness or good fortune.

Eudemonia is an ethical doctrine claiming the pursuit of happiness to be the highest good and the only right condition of moral conduct. It also stresses a close connection between an investigation of the sense of life and the concept of happiness. At this point it is right to mention Aristotle whose ethic focuses on understanding happiness as good life in which natural needs of man are obtained. The philosopher states that for some people happiness means pleasure, wealth, recognition, for others – success or power. However, following the distinction by Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins [1996: 85], they cannot constitute true happiness since they depend on other people's good or bad will while the true nature of happiness is absolutely independent and virtuous behaviour, in accordance with the mind. Virtue or in Greek *arête* is the basic value for the Greek concept of happiness. Thus, Aristotle believes that a happy life must be an active one filled with virtues understood as such general features of man like bravery, justice, truth, beauty, friendship or even a sense of humour.

In modern society there can easily be identified Greek philosophical doctrines, often epitomised in proverbs, sayings and other types of linguistic expressions dealing with the perception of happiness and an approach to life in general. The saying 'Eat, drink and be merry' seems to suitably reflect one of the most paramount definitions of happiness formulated by hedonism that was supposedly founded by Aristippus of Cyrene in the 4th century BC. As follows from its name – *hedone* means pleasure in Greek – hedonists state that the only sense of life is pleasure, believed to be the sole intrinsic good in life. Moreover, the main aim and the highest human good is the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification that should be a driving force of one's action. Interestingly enough, the understanding of happiness via the criteria of hedonism may be simplified to a metaphorical concept of happiness, that is, happiness is pleasure where the concept of happiness is partially understood in terms of the concept of pleasure<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, a hedonist is a person whose aim is to experience as much pleasure as possible and to avoid any kind of pain at the same time.

Epicureanism, another philosophical school of thought, whose name derives from Epicurus (341BC – 270 BC) is claimed to be a form of hedonism. Epicureans assign the main role to common sense in the pursuit of happiness in life. The peace and pleasures of mind and also friendship or contentment are central to their doctrine. Epicurus considers them as better, that is, higher forms of happiness in comparison to sex, eating or drinking, since the latter are not free of pain or

<sup>1</sup> For further details concerning the semantic function of metaphor in defining concepts in accordance with cognitive criteria, see Paduch 2009.

suffering. 'Happiness, it seems to me, consists of two things: first, in being where you belong, and second – and best – in comfortably going through everyday life, that is, having had a good night's sleep and not being hurt by new shoes'<sup>2</sup>.

A totally different view on the sense of life and the concept of happiness is created by the Stoics. Stoicism as an ancient school of philosophy most probably founded by Zeno of Citium (334 BC – 262 BC) stresses virtue, independence and freedom from personal emotions and desires. Furthermore, the Stoics claim that some kind of isolation from the outer world is necessary to avoid emotional disturbances of the mind. The pleasures of life do not bring happiness, so people should not pay too much attention to them. Tolerance, patience, passiveness and endurance appear obligatory for someone who strives to be happy.

Apart from the ancient Greeks' philosophical views on happiness whose terminology reflects their ideas and vividly exists in modern languages, there are also other schools of philosophy which have played a prominent part in establishing some universal groundwork for understanding the concept. For example, the Christian vision of happiness is directly connected with God and his conception of man and universe. Following the doctrine the only true happiness can be obtained in heaven in the afterlife. As such it has little to do with everyday pleasures. Interestingly enough, Christian philosophers like Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas rely on the Greek ethics: the former makes use of Plato's idealistic philosophy of life and the latter makes reference to Aristotle's comprehension of happiness.

Interestingly enough, in the twentieth century two Polish scholars, Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Andrzej Banach, touched on the problem of happiness and endeavoured to define its nature. In fact, their definitions seem to tally with the thesis of the present research and confirm its rightness. Combining the visions of happiness by both thinkers, one can easily identify its core and peripheries. Tatarkiewicz [1985] tends to focus mostly on the universal meaning of happiness whereas Banach [1988] is particularly concentrated on the cultural and individual perceptions of the notion.

### **A semantic analysis of the concept of happiness in American English and in Polish – a cross-cultural communication approach**

An analysis of a number of chosen aphorisms<sup>3</sup> on happiness in American English and in Polish allows us to examine culture-motivated differences in

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Fontane, a German writer, is the author of this aphorism (1819–1898).

<sup>3</sup> All the American aphorisms are taken from the following websites: <http://www.quoteagarden.com/happiness.html>, <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/topics/happiness>, and <http://www.thinkexist.com/quotations/happiness/4.html>

American vs Polish views on it, its concepts and linguistic expressions. The aphorisms belong to writers, actors and politicians.

The first one, 'Happiness is a butterfly which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you' has been assigned to an outstanding American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864). He implies that happiness does not seem to be easy to acquire. It is particularly inaccessible when people insist on searching for it. If seeking happiness becomes an obsessive target in one's life, it is unlikely to be found. The metaphorical concept of happiness has a lot to do with the stoic philosophy of its understanding: you are advisable not to hunt for it as it does not belong to things that can be acquired in this way. You need to be patient and calm, and wait for your happiness as it can be neither bought nor borrowed or taken at your most convenient time. Happiness is not a deliberate action performed in order to grasp it.

For Harrison Ford, a top American actor, 'Being happy is something you have to learn. I often surprise myself by saying "Wow, this is it. I guess I'm happy. I got a home I love. A career that I love. I'm even feeling more and more at peace with myself." If there's something else to happiness, let me know. I'm ambitious for that, too'. His understanding of happiness seems to be typical of an average American who is fond of living a comfortable life. The warmth of family, a prestigious job, inner calm and also a professional success are a part of the concept. It relates to the idea of American Dream, so deeply rooted in American culture and in the mind of each American.

A very pragmatic understanding of happiness has been offered by Andrew Carnegie, an industrialist, businessman and philanthropist (1835–1919). For him, 'If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy, and inspires your hopes'. His definition, which can be called normative, reflects typical American values, individualism and low risk avoidance seen as a visionary action focused on creating a better future. In order to be happy, you need to go your own way, to create your own path of achieving success which can be obtained only through your mind. It is to guide you to fulfill your dreams, expectations and hopes. You are the creator of your own happiness.

A similar concept of happiness, closely connected with an individual attitude to life, belongs to Abraham Lincoln, the 16th American president (1809–1865). He believes that 'Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be'. Thus happiness lies in a mental ability to find satisfaction as well as in eagerness to engage in definite activities making dreams come true. Obviously, if your approach to life is optimistic, you are likely to succeed in various spheres of life. If not, you should not be surprised to fail as your mental inclination matters a lot and decides on your ultimate level of happiness.

Also Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet, lecturer and essayist (1803–1882) shares the idea of Lincoln. Claiming that 'Nothing can bring you happiness

but yourself', he stresses the role of an individual in creating his/her own happiness as each person thinks, feels and acts in his/her unique way. She or he also has his/her own way to understand happiness. Thus, if one wants to be happy, one needs to do one's best and make effort to accomplish the goal.

'Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city' is an aphorism of happiness by George Burns (1896–1996), an actor and a writer. His words can be attributed to an average American who cherishes such values as privacy, personal independence or career which are often more important than family and family life. Masculinity and individualism are Hofstede's categories of cultural diversity which are reflected in the aphorism.

American pragmatism and a rather materialistic attitude to life are reflected in the saying by Joan Rivers, an actress and a popular television personality. She states that 'People say that money is not the key to happiness, but I always figured if you have enough money, you can have a key made'. Especially in the American society dominated by the culture of consumption, money appears an effective tool for obtaining happiness. The statement has also a lot to do with the concept of American Dream which entails extensive desire for success, recognition, power and wealth. Money and comforts of life are in the centre of every American attention.

A feminine version of the previous aphorism has been provided by Marilyn Monroe, a Hollywood movie star of the 1950s and 1960s, who once said that 'Money does not bring happiness, only shopping does'. Surely enough, women love spending huge sums of money on extravagant outfits in order to look beautiful, glamorous and sexy. Obviously, money, clothes and attractive looks make them sufficiently content, which also tallies with a pragmatically oriented American philosophy of success and happiness.

The same pragmatic but also humorous approach to happiness is found in its concept by Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) for whom 'Happiness is simply good health and a poor memory'. It is a cognitive definition where the target domain is partly defined via the source domains, good health and a poor memory. Good health is the most precious asset of human life while poor memory facilitates our forgetting bad things and moments of unhappiness.

Examples of Polish aphorisms<sup>4</sup> dealing with happiness in Polish culture are many. Their authors are also famous writers, people of culture, public persons. For Magdalena Samozwaniec (1894–1972), a successful woman writer, 'Szczęście podobne jest do motyla – nigdy nie goni za człowiekiem, tylko człowiek za nim' ('Happiness resembles a butterfly – never does it chase a man, a man pursues it instead.'). Happiness is elusive, and, like a butterfly, it goes its own way without

<sup>4</sup> All the aphorisms come from the following websites: <http://www.cytaty.info/temat/szczęście>, <http://www.cytaty.eu/motywy/szczęście>, and <http://www.pl.wikiquote.org/wiki/szczęście>. The English translation of each Polish quotation is provided by the author of the article himself.

meeting people's dreams and expectations. The picture of a butterfly, very feminine and fragile, but also beautiful, is very romantic and spiritual.

Polish spiritualism and religiosity account for the concept of happiness by Józef Tischner (1931–2000), a philosopher and a priest for whom 'Bóg jest Miłością – to znaczy, że Bóg jest tym gniazdem człowieka, w którym czeka na niego oswojone szczęście. Szczęście oswojone to szczęście, które nie ucieka. Jest wieczne' ('God is Love – it means God is this nest for man in which he can find tamed happiness. Tamed happiness is the one that does not escape. It is eternal.'). Unlike in the first aphorism, his happiness is built on solid fundamentals – God, and thus it is eternal. It is free from any traps, betrayals, disappointments or simply temporary moments of being happy because it is secured by God's love. Tischner's concept of happiness corresponds with its Christian ideal where earthly happiness cannot be compared to the sort of happiness God has prepared for man. In fact, many Poles would approve of this definition of happiness since over 90% of them are declared Catholics.

The aphorism which deals with a definite aspect of happiness has been created by Stefan Wyszyński (1901–1981), a Catholic cardinal and Primate of Poland who builds it on the Catholic ethos and the value of family and children in it. A child is a symbol of God's love to people and an extension and continuum of the Lord's design. A child as a human being is also the highest value of all. Consequently, Stefan Wyszyński deeply believes that 'Największym szczęściem jest dziecko! Może stu inżynierów postawić tysiące kombinatów fabrycznych, ale żadna z tych budowli nie ma w sobie życia wiecznego' ('The child is the greatest happiness! A hundred engineers may build thousands of factories, but none of these buildings contains eternal life.').

An emotional aspect has become a core of the aphorism of happiness created by Wacław Buryła (1954–), a priest and a poet: 'Czasami trzeba usiąść obok i czyjąś dłoń zamknąć w swojej dłoni, wtedy nawet łzy będą smakować jak szczęście' ('Sometimes it is necessary to sit down next to and close someone's hand in yours – then even tears may taste like happiness.'). Friendship which implies a close relationship, trust, affection, security and empathy is a special form of relationships, especially appreciated when we are faced with life hardships. The same emotional component can be also found in the concept of happiness by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1884–1980), a novelist, poet and essayist. Saying that 'Szczęście jest wówczas pełne, gdy światło poranka budzi dwoje ludzi do dnia pełnego wspólnych czynów i rozmów' ('Happiness is only full when the morning light wakes up two people ready to live a day full of mutual deeds and talks.'). he believes in the power of people who, if they get together, can do a lot. He stresses the importance of mutual cooperation and dialogue in achieving success. When people do not act alone, the likelihood of being happy is definitely increasing. When they are together, every morning they can stand a good chance to start something special, which may bring



them real happiness. Such universal values as faith, hope and love, appear crucial to understand the meaning of the concept of happiness.

The same values are essential for the concept of happiness by a poet and a writer, Józef Bliziński (1827–1893) when he asks the following question: 'Czy wiesz, jak ja sobie wyobrażam szczęście? Oko utopione w oku, w którego głębiach obietnice raju, dłoń w dłoni, której dotknięcie wzbudza bicie mojego serca' ('Do you know how I imagine happiness? Eye drowned in eye in whose deepest part – promises of paradise, hand hidden in another hand whose touch makes my heart beat'). Again, the definition of happiness is focused on a close tie between two people. And again, the person proves to be in the centre of understanding of the notion.

Hope, a typical Polish value testified in painful moments of Polish national history, is found essential for the concept of happiness by Aldona Różanek (1960–), a writer and a journalist. She believes that 'Droga do szczęścia jest ciemna i ciernista, lecz oświeca ją nadzieja' ('The road to happiness is dark and thorny, but it is lit by hope.'). Hope is a virtue which guides the Poles to a given target despite any burden, trouble or obstacles that may appear on different walks of life. It also seems to have a lot in common with religious dimension and the purpose of human existence. For those who follow Christian beliefs and rules, earthly pleasures of life are of minor importance; what does count is the final destination of people's journey, that is, heaven.

Moderation and satisfaction with even the smallest material goods is a condition of happiness for Władysław Grzeszczyk (1935–), a satirist and an aphorist. He posits that 'Szczęście to nie tylko to, co los daje, ale i to, czego nie zabiera' ('Happiness is not only what fate gives, but also what it does not take away.'). People are more likely to become happy if they are able to appreciate what they possess and be satisfied with it. The statement also refers to the ethos of moderation found as a basic Catholic virtue.

The concept of happiness where happiness has a temporary value and is associated with youth appears in its aphorism by a contemporary writer, Wiesław Myśliwski (1932–). He claims that 'Jedynie krótki czas młodości uzmysławia nam, jak mogłaby wyglądać szczęśliwa wieczność' ('Only a short time of youth makes us aware what eternal happiness could look like.'). The power of youth derives from its being cheerful, carefree, strong, fit, attractive to the other sex, with no serious duties and responsibilities. It seems to be based on the author's personal experience and relates to the individual level of defining the concept of happiness.

## Conclusion

Happiness is found to be a universal value, but its semantics is culture-specific, which accounts for an existence of its many various definitions. In all of them there

can be distinguished two mutually complementary components. The first one, a core, consists of universally recognised values, which stem from philosophical doctrines originated mainly from the Greek antiquity. This part of the concept is general and found across all cultures. The second one, a periphery, shows the impact of national cultures and consists in a practical implementation of the values envisaged by the philosophical doctrines into an everyday understanding of the term.

Consequently, a linguistic and cultural analysis of chosen American and Polish aphorisms has shown differences in the way both the Americans and Poles conceptualise and perceive happiness. The differences are visible in the peripheries while the core is the same. The core embraces such values as family, work and professional career, easy, successful and satisfactory life, friendship, spiritual self-fulfilment, religion, good health. The differences are seen when particular general values are analysed against a cultural background which gives them some specific and detailed meaning. Let us focus on the concept of family and their cultural models in respective American and Polish cultures. In Polish culture children constitute its biggest value and also its *raison d'être*. Such a picture of Polish family is transmitted by the aphorism of Wyszyński. It is indirectly completed by the pictures emerging from the aphorisms by Tischner, Iwaszkiewicz and Bliziński, for whom happiness is others as well as the relationships we create with them. Others give a purpose to our life, help overcome difficulties, create a feeling of familiarity and belonging. They account for personal well-being and life satisfaction in the sense that they allow for sharing both good moments and difficulties. Others, but first of all family and friends, inspire positive emotions which enrich the experience of oneself and of the world.

Spiritual life, little concern for material values, lack of daily pragmatism replaced with hope in pursuing happiness together with a strong belief that a locus of happiness is external as its final source is God and religion belong to other features of the Polish concept of happiness. It is also important to stress that for Polish people happiness is an ability to find joy in petty aspects of life. When the wheel of fortune stops and hardships start, people should not lose their hearts because they are not alone. They find support in God and friends.

As for Americans, the relationship with family is less personal, close and emotional. If necessary, family has to be given up to have other priorities met, e.g. good job opportunities. Weekend families have become a norm in the American society, which is referred to by Burns. Pragmatism and materialistic values, money and consumption, and more exactly shopping, are referred to as necessary conditions of happiness in the aphorism by Rivers and Monroe. According to Ford, happiness can be learnt and success in becoming happy depends on how ambitious we are. For Carnegie, in turn, it is a goal in life which can be achieved by means of hard work, determination and perseverance. His ideas are shared by Lincoln and Emerson who deeply believe that happiness depends on the willingness of each individual to achieve

it. It does not result from external forces, it is not a destiny but a personal decision as well as an individual predisposition to take risk while searching for it.

The American concept of happiness embodies the values built into the American Dream. Its main determinants are freedom, individualism, materialism and consumption as well as an active attitude towards it consisting in hard work to achieve it. In contrast, the Poles tend to view and depict the notion of happiness in terms of religious, spiritual and interpersonal values. They are also more passive in searching for it and dominated by external circumstances in their quest.

The concepts of happiness as viewed through their culture-specific values are consistent with the dimensions of cultural variability by Hofstede. First of all, it closely refers to American individualism and Polish collectivism. A less direct relation can be detected considering chosen aspects of American masculinity and Polish femininity, first of all conspicuous in the emotional and spiritual versus pragmatic, materialistic and consumption-oriented components. A relatively low power distance proper to American culture and a rather high power distance found in Polish culture have also had an impact on perceiving happiness. Low power distance, typical of American culture, can be understood as a belief in the personal right to happiness because its locus is in each individual. More high power distance oriented Poles only hope for happiness as it does not depend on them but most often on God. Consequently, Americans are more adventurous in their efforts to become happy. They will take risk more often and more eagerly to have their goals met, while the Polish people will be more passive waiting for happiness to become a part of their life. The latter behaviour is supported by the dimension from Hofstede's model, namely risk avoidance, which is low for American culture and rather high for Polish culture.

The research should be continued to find more evidence in favour of the today widely accepted statement that culture belongs to important determinants of the use of language.

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**CENTRUM I PERYFERIA POJĘCIA „SZCZĘŚCIE” W AMERYKAŃSKIEJ ODMIANIE  
JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO I W JĘZYKU POLSKIM: Z PERSPEKTYWY KOMUNIKACJI  
MIĘDZYKULTUROWEJ**

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest próbą określenia, co tworzy centrum i peryferie pojęcia „szczęście” w odniesieniu do trzech poziomów jego rozumienia: uniwersalnego, kulturowego i indywidualnego. Analiza semantyczna dokonana na materiale wybranych amerykańskich i polskich aforyzmów dobitnie ukazuje różnice w konceptualizacji tego pojęcia silnie związane z kulturami narodowymi oraz odmienności w jego językowym obrazowaniu.