STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE BIOGRAPHICAL ENCYCLOPEDIC ARTICLE: CASE STUDY OF AMERICAN AND BRITISH LINGUISTIC CULTURES

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Abstract. The article focuses on the structure and functions of the biographical encyclopedic article, the problem of biographical discourse in linguistics and variative features of biographical articles (case study of American and British linguistic cultures). The article aims at achieving different tasks: to define the terms “discourse” and “biographical discourse”; to distinguish the functions of biographical articles; to analyze the structure of biographical articles. In our research we used such methods as: functional, definitive and structural-semantic analysis.

Keywords: biography, structure, functions, encyclopedic article, American linguistic, British linguistic.

Introduction

The imagery of outstanding personalities which deserve to be remembered and acknowledged is different in every nation. It is determined by the national experience of the past; mentality; conception of the world; ideological factors; social, political and cultural interests which are peculiar for every nation. V. Popyk (2008) notes that the value of every personality in the open society presupposes the introduction of printed and electronic memorials. They contain the almost information about the representatives of almost all the spheres of human activity.

Looking around any bookstore or library, one could notice that biographies are placed in a category of their own. If you look more closely, you will find that there are biographies on people from diverse backgrounds. The range includes actors, politicians, musicians, sportsmen and many others. Every week, book–length biographies and magazines containing feature articles with a biographical focus are issued. Biographies are appealing to us, as readers, because we are intrigued by the private life of people whose lifestyles are very different from our own.

The purpose of the article is:

- to define the terms “discourse” and “biographical discourse”;
- to distinguish the functions of biographical articles;
- to analyze the structure of biographical articles (case study of American and British linguistic cultures).

Biographies are usually of book–length, but magazines often publish biographical articles too. A book–length biography presents a detailed account of the subject’s life, whereas a feature article may focus more on the person’s current achievements. The encyclopedic biographical article presents a life story of a person in chronological order.

In our research we study the encyclopedic biographical article as a type of text of biographical discourse. In contemporary linguistics there is no appropriate definition of the term “discourse”. Teun Adrianus Van Deyk, Netherlands linguist, (2000) proposed such a definition of discourse: “discourse is a complex communicative phenomenon which contains, except the text, extralinguistic factors (knowledge about the world, thoughts, intentions and aims of addressee) that are necessary for understanding of a text”. This definition became generally applied and relevant for our research.

Biography (as an independent type of text) depicts the life story by the third person, while the subject of presentation focuses on the outstanding person itself. Biography is rendered as a model of construction, a shape of people’s life representation (Volynskaya, 2013).
Under the term “biographical discourse” we understand depicting of biography or life story, whereas the biography itself on the level of narration depicts events. Discourse is always connected with historical epoch, social and cultural demands of the people in this chronological period. Biographical discourse is connected with normative conception about the life of individual in society. Biography always consists of the following events: biographical facts which are chosen by the narrator. That’s why biography reflects a life experience of the personality represented by the third person. The main types of texts of biographical discourse are: biography, autobiography and memoirs.

Although biographies are often classified as non–fiction. We must realize that the biographer may present its ‘version of reality’ and therefore a more appropriate term to describe biography is ‘non–fiction narrative’. According to the style, the encyclopedic biographical article refers to publicistic one. The Russian researcher M.M. Bakhtin (1979) suggests such a definition for genres of publicistic style: “relatively stable thematic, compositional and stylistic types of expression”. There are three groups of genres of publicistic style: informational, analytical and literary-publicistic. Our type of text refers to analytical group of texts.

Publicistic texts fulfill two main functions: informative and pragmatic. In our research we adhere the point of view of Demetskaya V. (2006), who distinguishes such functions of dictionary article as a type of text as: informative, communicative, systematizing, didactic, cumulative, pragmatic and ideological.

Results

Encyclopedic biographical article is a type of publicistic text of biographical discourse that contains biographical data of outstanding figures and is presented in special encyclopedias in the form of chronologically ordered informative texts. Our type of text is characterized by such text categories: informational content, anthropocentricity, pragmatic content, integrity (unity of thematic direction), coherence (logicality, chronological order of material arrangement).

Glottopedia suggests the rules of writing a biographical article for encyclopedia. Biographical articles (Category:BIOG) are a type of article that discusses the life and work of linguists. All articles should have the same structure: they consist of up to six sections, which always have the same headings and occur in the same order, while only the first section (Introduction) is obligatory.

The following sections are dominating at the moment:

- **Introduction** (contains the name, the birth and death dates, and a brief characterization of the personality);
- **Life** (career stages etc.);
- **Contribution** (description of the most important contributions);
- **Links** (e.g links to obituaries or other websites);
- **Works** (list of most important data);
- **References** (references to the person, especially obituaries).

According to these rules we can make a conclusion that when we examine a biography, we need to consider the following features:

- structure
- selection of detail
- fact and opinion
- choice of language
- values and attitudes.

Basic details include:

- Date and place of birth and death
- Family information
- Lifetime accomplishments
- Major events of life
- Effects/impact on society, historical significance

The biography is usually written in third–person narrative. The biography is usually structured in chronological order and therefore begins with the subject’s birth, childhood and family background and then explores the subject’s experiences and achievements. The conclusion offers an opinion or reflection on the person’s life. The writer’s point of view on the subject reflects its own values or what he/she believes to be important, that will influence the attitude to the subject.
We have studied 24 biographical articles of outstanding women: 12 from Columbia Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia Americana (1997, p.1241) and 12 from Britannica.

The structure of American biographical articles. We can confirm that American articles consist of biographical-informative units (thematic units) rendered in chronological order. But such units as childhood, youth and family information are variative ones. Only in 4 out of 12 articles include the detailed information about childhood, youth and family of personalities (that comprises up to 33.3 %). In the other articles there is just a sentence about the parents of the personality, e.g.: “Kate Elizabeth Winslet is the granddaughter of two theater managers (her maternal grandparents founded Reading Repertory Theatre) and the daughter of two actors” Katherine Anne Couric, “he youngest of four children of John, now a retired journalist and public relations executive, and his wife Elinor...” Meryl Streep is “the daughter of a pharmaceutical executive and a commercial artist” (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1997, p.788). Ella Fitzgerald “grew up in an orphanage in Yonkers” (The Encyclopedia Americana, 1997, p.339). Barbara Jordan “grew up in a poor black neighborhood in Houston, Texas. The daughter of a Baptist minister...”. In 3 articles there is no information about parents and childhood at all (that comprises up to 25 %).

To another variative feature of American biographical articles belongs the name of each thematic unit, e.g. “Early Career”, “Big Break”, “Continued Success”, “Personal Life”, “Early Life”, “Discoveries”, “Marriage”, “Accomplishments”, “Recent News”, “Today Show”, “Childhood Talents”, “Life as a successful minority” and many other. But we observed the names of thematic units only in 6 biographical articles (that comprises up to 50%).

We can also distinguish quotations and autoquotations as a separate structural element of the articles, e.g. "I could announce one morning that the world was going to blow up in three hours and people would be calling in about my hair!"– Katie Couric. "I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution," she said in a nationally televised speech during the proceedings. "My presence here... is one additional bit of evidence that the American dream need not forever be deferred.". The Magazine, she said that the hardest part was remaining objective and "keeping the analyst in me separate from my political views." Rice told Ebony magazine it was a "truly amazing time to be working in the White House." However, she also recalled, "I remember thinking that the odd thing about it was that [the counselor] had not bothered to check my record. I was a straight-A student in all advanced courses... I was a figure skater and a piano student. That none of that occurred to her I think was a [quiet] form of racism. It was the problem of low expectations [for African Americans]". We think that availability of quotations and autoquotations, especially self-appraisal, can express the sign of democracy in USA. The number of sentences in each article varies from 7 to 89. We think it may have two reasons: the biographers couldn’t collect enough information about the personalities or they thought that these personalities were not enough important for American history.

The structure of British biographical articles. The British biographical articles also consist of biographical-informative units (thematic units) rendered in chronological order. Such units as childhood, youth and family information are also variative units. But out of 12 British articles we can mark out only one – biography of Emily Dickinson where more or less detailed information about her family could be found (that comprises up to 8.33%): “The second of three children, Dickinson grew up in moderate privilege and with strong local and religious attachments. For her first nine years she resided in a mansion built by her paternal grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, who had helped found Amherst College but then went bankrupt shortly before her birth. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a forceful and prosperous Whig lawyer who served as treasurer of the college and was elected to one term in Congress. Her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, from the leading family in nearby Monson, was an introverted wife and hardworking housekeeper; her letters seem equally inexpressive and quirky. Both parents were loving but austere, and Emily became closely attached to her brother, Austin, and sister, Lavinia.” In 4 articles there is a mention about the parents in a couple of words (that comprises up to 33.3%): Harriet Beecher Stowe “the daughter of the prominent Congregationalist minister Lyman Beecher and the sister of Catharine, Henry Ward, and Edward, she grew up in an atmosphere of learning and moral earnestness.” “Winslet was raised in a family of actors.” Katie Couric “the daughter of a writer and a journalist”. There is no information about the family status in 7 articles (that comprises up to 58.33%). But in British articles the accent is made on education: almost all the articles include a detailed description of schools and universities that women attended to, e.g. “...graduated the University of Virginia with a degree in American studies”, “school in Hartford”, “Theological
Seminary”, “Texas Southern University in Houston”, “Boston University Law School”, “Tuskegee Institute”, “Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York”, “Yale University”.

To another variative feature of British biographical articles belongs the name of each thematic unit, e.g. “Early Years”, “Prime Minister”, “Later Years”, “Development as a Poet”, “Mature Career”, “Assessment”. But we observed the names of thematic units only in 2 biographical articles (that comprises up to 16.6%).

In British biographical articles we didn’t find quotations and autoquotations and that can be an evidence of conservatism of British linguistic culture. The number of sentences in each article varies from 15 to 200 (approximately).

Discussion
The linguistic analysis of American and British biographical articles shows that American culture is more democratic. The information about the families, relationship and childhood of outstanding personalities is very important for Americans, because they consider it to be the source of human character formation. British culture is more conservative, because the British are firstly interested in the education of a person, while the personal life and family relationship is a closed topic for British people.

We think it is reasonable to make an analysis of lexical level of biographical articles to understand what features of character and qualities are valuable for each linguistic culture.

References