

# **LANGUAGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF SOCIETY: THE SITUATION IN RUSSIA**

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## **Abstract**

The article tackles two different aspects of the connection between language and society from the environmental point of view: ethnicity-oriented and discourse-oriented (including intercultural discourse). In order to better illustrate the differences between the two aspects, the environmental consciousness of the Russian society and its connection with the language spoken is studied.

The ethnicity-oriented aspect deals with two main areas: ethno-linguistic dimension of environmental consciousness and native language dimension.

The discourse-oriented aspect tackles three main sub-aspects: information field of the environmental field of society, environmental media discourse (first of all mass media) and the intercultural communication channel between Russia and other societies.

**Key terms:** language impact, Russian philosophy of name, intercultural communication, performativity, ecolinguistics, ecophilosophy, society and language.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the modern international community is living in a global information space, researchers today in all areas are inevitably coming to a level of integrated knowledge. Therefore, analysing internal problems of language functioning, one often cannot help turning to language philosophy because it is philosophy that opens the underlying mechanisms of language functioning, the basis of understanding the world and the essence of being.

I am especially interested in researching the power of language in the social context, and language impact on the development of society and on the social behaviour of people because such research tackles these vital questions. One of those questions is the environmental consciousness of individuals and society, whose low level in many countries contains the risk of leading to an environmental disaster. These problems are fully applied to my own country – Russia, where the environmental consciousness does not receive due attention. It can be explained with different facts, the most important of which are probably both the economic crises and the constant restructuring of the whole system occurring in the Soviet time and again.

The interface between linguistics, cultural studies, environmental studies, sociology, ethnology and social philosophy becomes some sort of sense-building field, within which researchers can study individual and social environmental consciousness and in the future may even be able to positively influence it.

All social processes take place in the background of information exchange, which has become so active in our time, that the entire information continuum is entangled with a network of communication channels, *i.e.* channels for exchanging different kinds of information. The catastrophe of the Tower of Babel apparently destroyed the once existing common language space, and now I see the reverse process. It is, however, not explosive or

revolutionary, but rather evolutionary: our space becomes translingual. In this regard, N.S. Trubetskoy anxiously speaks of losing God in the homogeneous human culture (cf. Trubetskoy 2007). Only in cooperation, through mutual experience, can different states achieve stable development in all areas. The questions which I am tackling have been studied by researchers from different fields, which can be seen throughout the present article.

Though a lot of attention has been dedicated to the topic, the environmental consciousness of society has not been studied much in connection with the aspect of language.

### **WORDS AND THINGS, LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY**

Language is a social phenomenon and therefore is constantly influenced by society, and in its turn influences social reality. Language impact on society is possible also because of energy contained in words as nominative units of language. Words and elements of social reality are connected not only in terms of content but also in terms of structure. Names possess a *performative* power (symbolic power; ability to become reality while being pronounced), which lets them influence social reality (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Austin, 1975; Audehm 2001). This power is actively implemented in the media discourse. Ecology today belongs not only to natural sciences but also to humanities, and it integrates social, ethical, natural and other aspects and strongly influences the epistemic sphere of society. Looking at ecology in the context of Bourdieu's social fields theory simplifies its analysis in post-industrial communicative civilization. Environmental media-discourse opens a platform for dialogue and exchange of experience in the modern space of information and communication. An intercultural communication channel exists, first of all, by means of interlingual cooperation, and can be used with the purpose of raising environmental development of one society by means of borrowing ideas from another. Environmental consciousness of society is formed by environmental consciousness of individuals. Every

human, in his/her turn, is in a certain way influenced by his/her mother tongue and the ethno-social group he/she belongs to.

Elements of language – words – show a connection to social phenomena behind them, which reveals the nature of their interaction. “Language” here refers to a certain system of meanings and connotations, its perception by the individual as well as social contexts that the latter associates or connects with this system. I see language not in the classical sense (as an instrument or as a descriptive entity), but as an entity with constructive power (sometimes being able to proscribe, and not only to describe). The constructive power of language is formed by the energy of words as main nominative elements of language, which can not only name and symbolise the already existing objects and phenomena of social reality, but also create the corresponding concepts, carrying out in such a way its performative power.

Language is influenced by society and the rules of its development, although at the same time it has an impact on society, it schematises, reflects reality. The word as the main nominative unit of language can be presented as some link to the object or phenomenon of reality, the connection between the latter and the thought about it. This turns the word into the centre of subject-object being of a thing. If an object existing in social reality does not have a name, it seeks a name (it especially refers to artefacts). If, on the contrary, in the minds of native speakers (of some language) there is a thought about some object, then, if this thought results in implementing the object behind it, the element moves from the subjective world into the objective one. In other words, the project becomes realised. It is in line with Ogden and Richards' theory of meaning, according to which, “between a thought and a symbol causal relations hold” (Ogden, Richards 1989: 11). The situation is illustrated with the author's model that can be seen in Fig. 1.

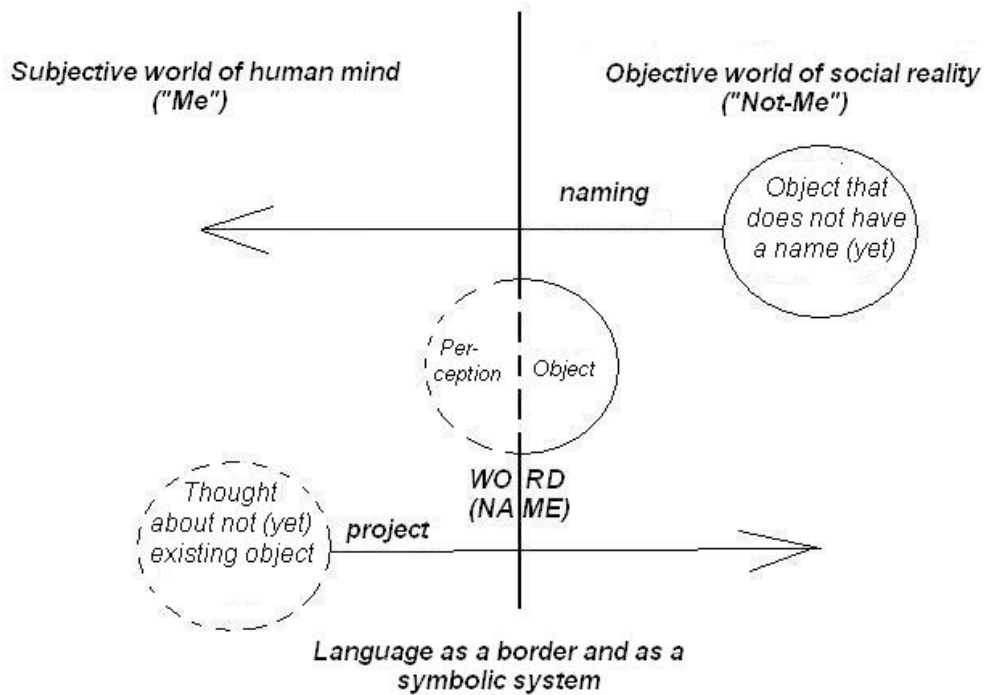


Fig. 1. The word as a link between the object and the thought about it

Russian philosophy gave to the world a theory, which is very interesting in this regard - the Russian “Philosophy of name”<sup>1</sup> (“Filosofia imeni”), which plays an important role in my research. It is represented by Pavel A. Florensky, Alexey F. Losev, Sergey N. Bulgakov, and also is part of Vladimir S. Solovyov's concept of Sophia.

According to the philosophers of name, the word is not just representative of a thing or a phenomenon. It is a symbol, because its energy as an entity is connected with the energy of the respective thing or a phenomenon and thus bears an increased supply of energy (cf. Florensky 1990). This energy is accumulated by generations of people that use the word in the process of communication and cognitive activity. Moreover, the word as a unity of form and sense has mystical (deep semantic) and magical (secret, based on individual and collective belief) nature. This way, I am trying to analyse the language impact with a substantial theory (being-oriented, essence-oriented, ontological theory).

<sup>1</sup> Here “name” actually can be applied to “word” in general, *i.e.* these concepts may be considered synonymic.

Russian philosophy of name is not often applied to modern research connected to media and to environmental consciousness. However, I think it has great potential beyond topics directly related to the religious, highly ontological philosophy, because it goes into the very essence of things allowing us to conduct a deep philosophical investigation of the connections between language and environmental consciousness of society.

The ability of language to influence society and social reality can also be explained with the help of a conventional theory (the theory which considers the origin of language as conditional) through the performative (symbolic) power of language, *i.e.* through socially established symbolic power, through action that is caused by the word during its pronunciation (cf. Bourdieu 1977; Audehm 2001). It is advisable to talk about the performative power of name, because names have the greatest socio-instrumental power. Performativity and intentionality (*i.e.* the orientation on the recipient) of the language largely determine the whole of today's communicative reality, creating simulacra. Such processes are possible exactly because the modern information space lacks a single code (that it used to have) and because negative social power of language is implemented with the intention of manipulating public opinion. Opposed to this type there is also positive power of language. It also can be conscious or unconscious. In the context of environmental communicative (media) reality, due to moral and ethical components, the positive conscious power of language becomes particularly important.

Language and society are connected not only through mutual influence, but also through structural parallelism of their hierarchies. The morpheme as a set of variations in its function is comparable to the social role and its attributes (Bock, 1964: 393-403). Developing Bock's theory further, we could compare the word – to the social institution, and the sentence – to a society as a set of institutions. That has to do with the fact that within an institution those functions of roles are implemented that cannot be implemented outside of

the institution. I see the same within the word: morphemes, meaningful units of language, in a certain sense acquire the nominative function. The vocabulary of a language, although determined, is still very mobile. In their turn, social institutions (possessing certain stability) can take many forms: their composition is relatively constant but not completely determined. Institutions ensure the stability of society, which, as well as social institution, exists as a realisation of one of the possible models but - unlike the latter - does not have such a clearly prescribed structure. In addition, the sentence, though formed according to patterns existing in language, *de facto* acquires variations. Thus, it has more freedom than the word. The model in Figure 2 describes the parallelism of language and society.

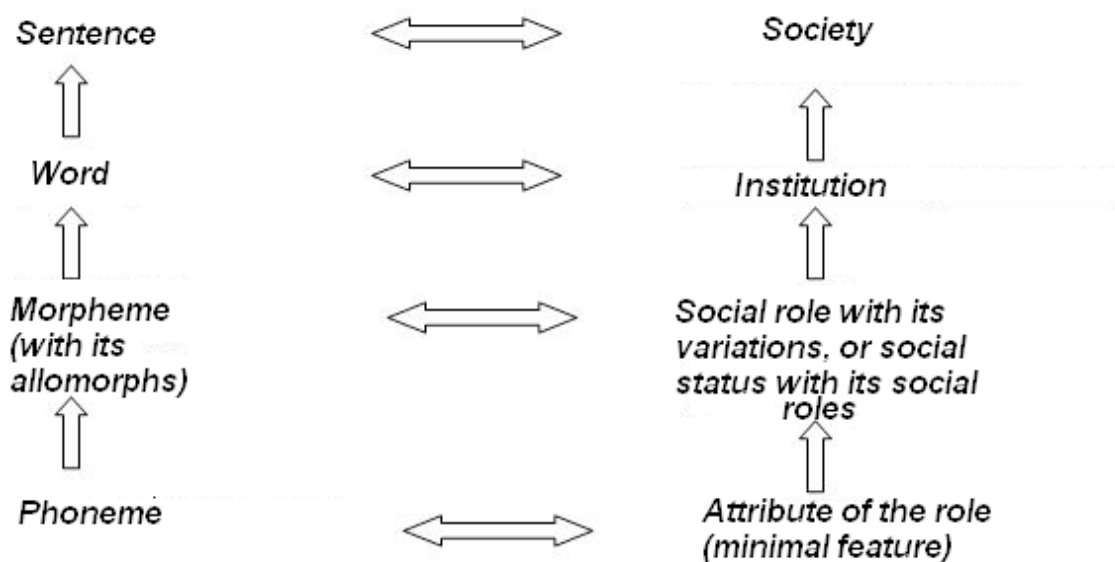


Fig. 2. Structural model of sociolinguistic parallelism

This discussion would be incomplete without mentioning the philosophy of language, the nature of correlation between language and reality, language emergence and functioning in society, which are important in the philosophy of Augustine, Aristotle, L. Wittgenstein, D. Dennett, J. Derrida, D. Davidson, O. Jespersen, E. Cassirer, E. Coseriu, S. Kripke, Plato, V.S. Solovyov, M. Heidegger, *et al.*

## FROM INDIVIDUAL TO SOCIETY

In this part of the article I look at the impact of language on environmental consciousness of society within the ethno-social aspect, *i.e.*, how the language spoken by certain humans affects their environmental consciousness, and thus, that of the whole society. It can be presented as moving from the individual to the social environmental consciousness, while later I look at the power of language in the environmental field going from the social to the individual consciousness. Keith Chen (2013: 32), analysing the impact of native languages of people's economic behaviour, wrote about “the possibility that language acts only as a powerful marker of some deeper driver of intertemporal preferences”. In my opinion, it could also partly be applied to the environmental behaviour of human beings.

Throughout the history of humanity, different nations have been developing different environmental consciousness, and they have socially determined causes, some of which are connected with the languages spoken by these societies. Every nation in its own way determines its relationship with the environment because of natural, territorial, social, and other factors. However, there is no doubt that the ethnic factor makes the root for linguistic determinism of environmental consciousness and environmental education of the individual; because language reflects the consciousness of people, it grows and develops together with them and it is a condition for an ethnic community. That is why problems of sociogenesis should be studied along with linguistic aspects. These issues are studied within ethno-ecology, cultural ecology, anthropology, and ecology of language. The latter is a highly interdisciplinary knowledge combining different related areas; it is represented by E. Haugen, A. Fill, M. Jung, P. Mühlhäusler, *et al.* Environmental consciousness, as well as the mythological one, shows some universal structures and categories for different ethnic groups. It can be explained through collective consciousness – a supra-individual social



reality, which all social actions and rules come to (cf. Durkheim 1961: 105-106). Probably also the unconscious plays a certain role in universal eco-behavioural models. A more obvious reason may be the universality of natural laws and their perception by the human spirit. A structural parallel can be drawn, too, between the environmental consciousness of society and its religious beliefs: the latter depend on the individual, although they often exclude free choice, because behavioural patterns are determined by prevailing social trends and because the human tends to strive for group-belonging, security, and integration into society.

Unfortunately, the environmental consciousness of modern Russian society is not as high as it is in many other countries; there is still a long way to go here. However, it is by far not the only thing to be said about environmental issues in Russia. What is more, this situation is far from the ideal in the whole world, not only in Russia. The economic environmental discourse in the whole world was for a long time based on the opinion that nature has limitless resources and is meant to satisfy humans needs, which then resulted in exhaustion of nature (cf. Khryapchenkova 2011b). It took the environmental culture of Russia centuries to emerge, to form itself, to accumulate the attitude of different generations and of different social and economic orders towards nature. Historically, Russian folk were deeply connected with nature, which found its reflection in numerous legends, fairy tales, stories, etc. The Soviet period brought equivocal trends into this relationship: On the one hand, collection of waste paper, scrap metal and other secondary raw materials was encouraged. On the other hand, the Soviet government saw the technical progress as submission of nature, and nature as a tool on the way of humanity to the future. This resulted in a lowering interest towards environmental problems in Russia. In the closed society, it was hard for environmental activists to develop their actions. This trend (economic and not environmental development as a priority) was supported by some great writers of that time

like M. Gorky. Nonetheless, many Soviet writers (*e.g.* M. Prishvin, B. Ryabinin, V. Bianki, I. Sokolov-Mikitov, K. Paustovsky), just like writers from the time before (I. Turgenev, L. Tolstoy *et al.*), advocated for the protection of nature and the connection between humans and nature, which contributed to the positive development in this regard (*cf.* Shtil'mark 1992).

In matters of environmental consciousness, language consolidates society, activates the ethno-psychological mechanisms inherent in it. The human, considering him-/herself a part of a language group, unintentionally adopts the environmental behaviour patterns common for this group, perceives the environmental world-view in a certain way. In this case, the world adjusts to the word. All the environmental education of the nation (as well as education in general) cannot be built without language. Looking back at history, it must be said that the connection between language and mentality was studied by W. von Humboldt, E. Sapir, B. Whorf, L. Weisgerber *et al.* Ethnological and ethno-ecological questions are discussed in the works of L.N. Gumilev, M. Mauss, C. Lévi-Strauss *et al.*

### **FROM SOCIETY TO INDIVIDUAL**

Moving from the environmental consciousness of society to that of an individual, the method can be the following. The socio-ecological space might be seen as an informational-communicative social field consisting of functionally related elements. This field has a discursive expression and is entangled with a network of communication channels. It is connected with the public demonstration of environmental consciousness. Ecology now has the status of existing not only as a natural science but also as a human science – a science about universal connections, an integrated science. By uniting with other disciplines, ecology forms adjacent areas: social ecology, deep ecology, environmental ethics, ecology of language, the concept of sustainable development. These processes are closely related to building environmental consciousness - the perception of the relationship between humans

and nature. Sharpening environmental consciousness of society leads to the “ecologisation” of modern knowledge: the latter leaves the linear model in order to become synergetic, cyclical, democratic, tolerant, pure, non-anthropocentric, compensatory, co-evolutionary, “noospheric”; it negates the superficial, consumerist approach to nature and environmental issues. That is why I see ecology (and its information field) as an epistemic integrator of society, *i.e.*, a universal concentration of knowledge, cognition, understanding, information in a unique general context - in a field, whose symbolic expression is which is realised in discourse. It is an information flow where data are processed and shared. In this field, the main role is played by the structure of positions and the forces operating between them, and not the agents constantly occupying these positions. Thus, significance within the system exceeds individual value (cf. Bourdieu 1994: 20-28, 53-54). Unlike the field of economics, the information field of ecology is not so focused on profit, though such an interest still exists.

The questions of social ecology, ecology of science, ecological ethics, deep ecology and related areas, *i.e.*, ecology as an interdisciplinary humanist knowledge, are represented in the works of the following philosophers (many of who are Russian): V.I. Vernadskiy, F.I. Girenok, V.A. Kutyrev, N.N. Moiseev, V.A. Šchurov, P. Curry, D.E. Mariett, A. Naess, P. Teilhard de Chardin. These are also partly tackled in the theory of systems and synergy by L. von Bertalanffy, I. Prigogine, etc.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL MEDIA DISCOURSE**

The abstract, theoretically existing informational-communicative field described before finds its practical, applied, discursive manifestation in the environmental media discourse being formed through language. Thus, the field here is shown in terms of interaction between language community members. I understand environmental discourse as a collection of texts where the relationship between humans and environment is identified in

public, and where the impact of human behaviour on the environment or the reverse reaction are discussed (Jung 1996: 151).

A selection of different types of environmental discourse can be carried out, according to which media discourse plays the most important role in shaping environmental consciousness. It happens because media discourse looks to a wide audience and has a capacity to influence consumers' minds. Media discourse is a reflection of the technological development of society, where the viability of environmental technologies is verified and where different societies exchange their opinions. Environmental media discourse has performative nature, which provides it with symbolic power and with profitable opportunities for managing collective environmental consciousness. These opportunities are associated with the appellative and intentional nature of this discourse type, *i.e.*, with its focus on the recipient and its impact on the opinion of the latter. They are widely used in environmental journalism, public relations, and advertising. The discursive aspect of the information field of ecology is largely determined by the consumer society and fetishism, showing dominance in the post-industrial civilization. However, they do not generate a new language (Baudrillard 2007: 203-205). The Internet plays an important role as a new “fine-tuning area” of environmental terminology.

Like everywhere in the world, the environmental media discourse in Russia dominates in affecting the environmental consciousness of people. Environmental journalism in Russia<sup>2</sup> does not only have an informative function, but also encourages the text receivers to action, trying to stabilize a personal contact with them. The journalist gains the trust of people, a certain power over them, and uses this to realise his/her intentions. Here we can see a connection with Bourdieu's concept of performativity and the concept of the

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<sup>2</sup> Under “environmental journalism” I understand both the “green media” (purely environmentally oriented editions) and regular media covering some environmental issues, with the latter having more “power” in terms of influencing the readers since they are read by a much broader audience, whereas the former are not very popular in Russia.

speaker's power. According to it, the power of language arises from the faith of the social actors in the legitimacy of the language used and the competence of the speaker (cf. Khryapchenkova 2011b; Audehm 2011; Bourdieu 1977, 1994).

The environmental journalism in Russia is now in a difficult state: It is hard to change people's minds after so many years of a completely different social and economic order, after such a heterogeneous history, having in mind all the existing problems like corruption. A democratic, uncensored culture of environmental journalism in Russia requires a long time to emerge (Kokhanova 2007: 182).

### INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION CHANNEL

Languages are representatives of the societies where those languages are spoken, and communication between these societies is primarily carried out through language, since direct communication between societies is less feasible. The boundaries of the contact languages are vague, in contrast to the boundaries of different societies: they represent the behaviour of liquids in communicating vessels – though mingling, they still are in some kind of equilibrium. The model, presented in Figure 3, illustrates the contact of different languages and societies.

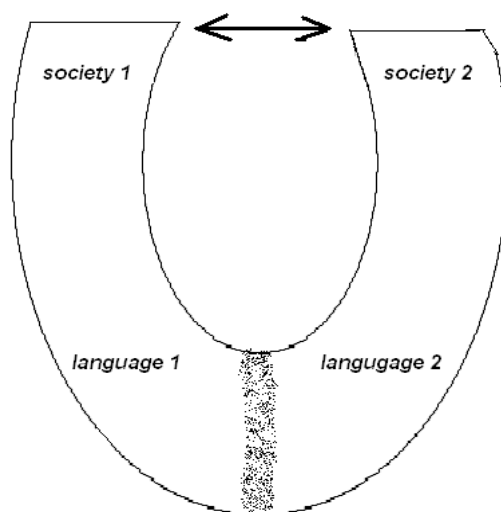


Fig. 3. Model "Communicating vessels" (languages as representatives of societies)

Thus, language shapes the intercultural communication channel – some contact tube - through which messages are transmitted from the sender to the receiver, over different societies and cultures. The receiver can decode the information sent to him/her, under the condition of possessing specific knowledge needed to decrypt the message. Absence of some elements or failure to comply with communication conditions can lead to communication noise – noise in the channel – and thus make it difficult to receive information. It often takes place in the environmental context, since the field of ecological sphere is constructed within the global information continuum.

The role of intercultural communication channel in building environmental consciousness of the individual (and therefore of society) increases within the following factors: innate personality traits, environmental education in the family as well as in educational institutions, expertise, and media.

The intercultural communication channel allows exchange of terminology in environmental discourse, and the transition of a terminological unit into a new language (where it does not yet exist) can increase the chances of the respective object or phenomenon in the “host” society. Examples of such new terms are those terms that have no equivalent yet. These are terms that do not exist in a certain language while they do in the other. The equivalent here is impossible due to uneven distribution of achievements in science, technology or in the social sphere for different societies (*i.e.* extralinguistic causes) (cf. Nelyubin 2003). The name “temporarily equivalentless term” for the sake of brevity can be substituted or complemented with a shorter and clearer one, based on Latin roots: “**consequend**” (lat. *consequendus* – *someone/something that is being followed, that is to overtake; from lat. verb consequor – to follow, overtake*<sup>3</sup>). “Consequends” show that discourse and its channels have a productive power within the information field of ecology

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://www.wikiled.com/Latin-English-consequor-default.aspx>.

(Khryapchenkova 2013a; Khryapchenkova 2011a). With the example of Russia, the following can be said: The environmental culture and consciousness of Russia can hardly be formed autonomously, apart from the development of the world, because all the countries live in a common information community, exchange experience, and profit from the legacy of the world's cultures. The environmental culture of Russia absorbs some elements of other societies, more developed in this regard. And here – in exchanging environmental experience between countries – we see how the intercultural communication channel finds its way into environmental journalism. In practice, it works like this: The more a consumer hears about the environmental developments and technologies of those countries, the more interested he/she becomes. He/She can hear about it in different ways: from foreign press (translated or not into his/her native language), from everyday life in which new environmental vocabulary is introduced “from above”, and from social networks.

A good illustration of the consequents in the Russian context might be *Pfandflasche*. It is a German word meaning “refundable bottle” or “deposit bottle”, *i.e.* a bottle which has to be paid for by the consumer while buying its content (mineral water, lemonade, etc.) and to be returned to the supermarket after using in order to receive the money back. Russian speakers living in Germany often refer to it as *Pfandflasche* even while speaking Russian, because this concept does not exist in Russia, and so does not a word for it in the Russian language. If with time this object gets into the everyday life of the Russian society, it is sure to receive a name (perhaps something like *zalogovaya butylka*). Also it is possible that the word somehow gets established in the Russian language, and so the equivalents of the German *Pfandflasche* will reach the Russian market (see Fig. 1). Learning new words of this kind stimulates the human to process the information behind the key word and reflect about the respective object, which probably does not exist in his/her society. So, if a Russian hears about this „zalogovaya butylka“ (refundable bottle), he/she might like to know more about

these kinds of bottles, and if it is the whole society who wants it, the object is not that far anymore from being introduced. Another example – a variety of German words for „*natural park*“ or „*nature reserve*“ („*Naturschutzgebiet*“, „*Teil-Naturschutzgebiet*“, „*Landschaftsschutzgebiet*“, „*Nationalpark*“, „*Naturpark*“ etc.), which cannot be easily translated into Russian („*zapovednik*“ would be the most suitable words for the group, but it hardly covers the whole taxonomy). Another example - „*Grüner Punkt*“ („*zelenaya tochka*“ - ”green dot” – a package recycling symbol on some European commodities) (cf. Khryapchenkova: 2011a).

### CONCLUSION

Overall, the relationship between language and society is complex and can be analysed both as a whole and at the level of units (words and objects of social reality), not only in terms of content but also in terms of form and function. A very useful research area in this regard is the Russian philosophy of name, whose representatives provide us with the interpretation of word as an energy-containing symbol. One of the findings of the present paper is introducing this philosophy in the context of language and environmental worldviews. This is relevant for the research of the triad “language – nature/environment – society”, because it can help to explain the language impact on individual and collective social consciousness within the environmental aspect both from ethno-social and discourse-relevant point of view. Another finding of the article is presenting these two points of view on the relationship between language, society, and its environmental consciousness.

Environmental knowledge, as a part and characteristic of knowledge, can be considered as a universal social integrator and as a field of information and communication where intercultural communication channels are playing an important role. In its practical realisation, this theory helps us to look at the environmental consciousness in modern Russian society, greatly dominated by the environmental media discourse.



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