

Profiling the concept of Faith in God in the context of Construal Level Theory of Psychological Distance

Keywords: cognitive, construal, ethnolinguistics, faith in God, profiling, psychological distance

Abstract: In the paper the author tries to illustrate the interplay between the construal of psychological distance and conceptualisation of faith in God in modern day Polish society. It is believed that psychological distance functions as a benchmark of how people, who declare themselves to be Christians, perceive faith in God. The paper contains the presentations of results of survey-based research carried out on a sample of 150 Polish people concerning the reconstruction of linguistic worldview of faith in God. These results are organised into profiles.

Introduction

Remote entities require a more abstract representation than the proximal ones. This phenomenon finds its justification in the lack of specific knowledge [Liberian, Trope & Stephan, 2007]. In the course of forming generalized statements, we have a tendency to assume a greater psychological distance towards the phenomena on stage (we currently contemplate, perceive) than when we refer to not too distant phenomena. We do so because our perception induces us to take a global look at particular matters. As a result, we adopt a more general perspective which enables us to discuss certain issues in an abstract fashion, without going into specifics. Such perspective may be conducive to portraying ourselves as losing personal touch and real life engagement with the object of perception. On the other hand, adopting so called low-level construal we represent proximal events. They are considered unstructured and contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events [Trope & Liberman, 2010]. Such an account contains more information about the issue owing to substantial familiarity with it.

The context of psychological distance, which reveals itself in the way we think and talk about entities or phenomena, comes in useful when examining the attitude that is assumed towards really fundamental matters such as faith in God. It is believed that the notion of psychological distance functions as a benchmark of how people, who declare themselves to be Christians, perceive faith in God.

The empirical section of the present paper elaborates on selected results of a questionnaire concerning the conceptualisation of faith as a general notion in life. This

questionnaire forms part of my long term research concerning the contemporary linguistic and cultural picture of faith in God in Polish society, among people who declare to be Christians. For the purpose of the research problem, I have decided to implement a qualitative, ethnographic research perspective. This methodology focuses on exploring colloquial, folk knowledge which, according to Jean-Claude Kaufmann [2010], hides an abundant treasure. At this point, it needs to be stated that in my research I act not only as a linguist, but also as a sociologist and anthropologist in one. In the initial stage, in order to collect data I used an open-question survey and in the follow-up phase I carry out direct, recorded interviews. Both survey-based and interview-focused data collection enable me to address the following issues, namely what the contemporary understanding of the notion of faith in God is, what associations it generates, what faith means in the life of individual persons, and what place it occupies. In other words, I seek to examine what the actual conceptual picture of faith in God is. In order to achieve this aim, I have decided to study common, folk conceptualisations. Irrespective of which method is used, each time data presentation and analysis include verbatim citations. This method offers a deeper and closer look into the ways of seeing reality and the problem in question. Faith is a universal topic which to a greater or lesser extent concerns every one of us. In this article I focus on the analysis and interpretation of open-ended questions coming from the written, anonymous survey. This form of expression is an opportunity to encourage respondents to freely speak their minds and share opinions without the risk of losing face. My goal is to view the hidden points of view that are adopted while expressing opinions and attitudes. Open-ended questions offer such an opportunity. On the other hand, face to face interaction with the terrain offers yet better and more reliable data to analyse. Hence the following phase of my research deals with individual interviews.

The survey sample included 150 respondents. The results are presented in the form of semantic profiles (according to the schema A as B), a conception which finds its roots not only in the repertoire of theoretical developments of Ronald Langacker, but also and more importantly for the present paper, in the works of major figures of Polish ethnolinguistics, namely Jerzy Bartmiński or Ryszard Tokarski. In the empirical section the material is analysed with the view to deciphering hidden features of vantage point adopted by the respondents. This approach finds its roots in Langackerian cognitive linguistics developments and fits well into the purpose of the paper. On the other hand, due to ethnographically oriented methodology, the repertoire of definitions offered by Polish linguists seem to fit better into the adopted perspective. Hence, the definition of a profile I rely upon in this study is taken from Bartmiński and Tokarski.

1. Major principles and evidence of Construal level theory of psychological distance

Construal level theory (CLT) offers an account of how psychological distance influences individuals' thoughts and behavior. According to this conception, we mentally construe psychologically proximal entities (aka objects or events) in terms

of low-level, specific, and contextualized features, whereas the same objects when placed at some distance, are construed in terms of high-level, abstract, and stable properties. Construal level theory pertains to various dimensions, specifically time, space, social distance, and hypotheticality. In other words, we apply the two extreme options, i.e., low-level and high level construal, to depict various spheres of life. These construals guide predictions, evaluation and behaviour [Trope, Liberman & Wakslak, 2007]. For our purposes here in this paper, we will focus on the impact of construal and psychological distance on our understanding and evaluation of the idea of faith in God.

To exemplify the two distinct types of construal, Trope, Liberman and Wakslak [2007] discuss a situation in which two children are playing catch with a ball in a backyard. In terms of low-level construal, this event features such details as the age of the children, the color of the balls, and the temperature outside. In turn, a high-level construal of this activity might correspond to such meaning as “having fun.” Interestingly, the high-level construal sets aside certain features and highlights others. In other words, turning to a specific sort of features, it makes a decision as to which aspects of the activity are essential and central and which are not.

In other studies, Liberman, Trope, MaCrae, and Sherman [2007] examined the effect of level of construal of an event with respect to perceived temporal distance.

For example, one of their studies manipulated participants' level of construal of an activity by asking the participants either to explain the reasons behind the activity (i.e., use high-level construal) or to describe how the activity is performed (i.e., use low-level construal). When the participants were requested to estimate how much time from now the activity would be enacted, those who used high-level construal estimated the enactment time as more distant from the present than participants who used low-level construal to describe the same activity.

Fujita, Henderson, Trope, and Liberman [2006] tested the influence of spatial distance on level of construal. In one research, participants saw a video presenting an interaction between two students. Some of the participants were told the situation took place on their local campus (NYU), others heard that it was filmed on the campus in Florence. The results showed that the participants whose language was more abstract perceived the location as more distant.

Stephan [2006] scrutinized the relationship between the effect of the level of construal and perceived social distance. It transpires that participants who defined some target's behaviour in terms of global dispositional qualities, perceived the target as more socially distant. In turn, the participants whose explanation of the same behavior was in more concrete terms, considered the situation to be more proximal.

In another experiment it has been confirmed that the same rule applies to the idea of probability of events. Low-level construal increases the likelihood of future events. For example, Sherman, Zehner, Johnson, and Hirt [1983 as cited in Bar-Anan, Liberman & Trope, 2006] discovered that reading a detailed description of a future event, as opposed to a more general description, enhanced the estimated probability for this event to occur [Bar-Anan, Liberman & Trope, 2006]. It turns out that the rule of construal level theory of psychological distance is valid across such distances as temporal, spatial, social and hypotheticality of events space.

2. The notion of profile and profiling

Profiling, according to ethnolinguistic account, is a process in which meanings and certain images of a given object or entity arise [Bartmiński & Niebrzegowska, 1998]. It is a subjective operation shaping the conceptual and linguistic image of entities based on specific aspects (subcategories). Moreover, the notion of profile constitutes the central term in the conglomerate of concepts composed of vantage view, aspect, experiential frame and stage [Bartmiński, 2007].

Langacker locates the notion of profile against the background of *construal/imagery*.¹ The most exhaustive account of construal concerns his model of Cognitive Grammar.

An expression's meaning is not just the conceptual content it evokes – equally important is how that content is construed. As part of its conventional semantic value, every symbolic structure construes its content in a certain fashion. [...] In viewing a scene, what we actually see depends on how closely we examine it, what we choose to look at, which elements we pay most attention to, and where we view it from [Langacker, 2008, p. 55].

Profiling in Langacker's account would correspond to the highlighted region within the immediate scope of attention to which conceptualiser's attention is directed. “[...] an expression's profile stands out as the specific focus of attention within its immediate scope” [Langacker, 2008, p. 66]. For Grzegorzczkova [1998], Langacker's idea of profiling is based upon experiential (cognitive) basis and leads to the emergence of new concepts or names, whereas for Bartmiński, a profile refers to various aspects of the concepts that are already in use. This mechanism may eventually provoke new meanings to arise. In Bartmiński's definition [Bartmiński, 2007; Bartmiński & Niebrzegowska, 1998], profiling consists in selecting various shades of meaning construal which shape the basic semantic content. Profiles are considered culture-bound interpretation of the picture of the world [Tokarski, 1998]. What is more, they are perceived as different aspects of the object under scrutiny [Bartmiński & Niebrzegowska, 1998; Bartmiński, 2007]. In this approach, the term “profile” corresponds to the term “picture” or conceptual variant of an entity.

3. Language cues and the level of construal

Low-level construal bears the properties of being specific, contextualised, and unstructured, whereas high-level construal is characterised by abstract, stable and selective description. I would also add that this distinction surfaces not only on formal grounds, but also on the level of lexical selection. If respondents define faith through the prism of their needs, feelings, refer faith to the context of own life then they incline towards

¹ The authors of CLT of psychological distance do not specifically define how they understand the notion of *construal* as such. Hence, when analyzing the level of construal underlying statements I assume Langacker's cognitive idea of *construal* as a synonym of *imagery*, *obrazowanie* in Polish.

the lower level of construal. If, in turn, we discuss faith from the point of view of rules, regulations, church requirements, then this account corresponds to the higher level construal. However, the border line between these two levels of construal is not fully clear-cut and the features overlap. For instance, one respondent says that for him/her faith equals religion. This statement reveals a personalized opinion (*faith is religion for me*) mainly because of the pronoun *me*. Yet, at the same time the statement contains the word *religion*, which is associated with a more formal, detached perspective towards to idea of faith. Obviously, the questionnaire does not offer access to the full knowledge we have about faith. One may be authentically and personally engaged in fulfilling the rules of religion. However, based on the research material, I conclude that there can be observed a considerable regularity between the lexical selection and the psychological distance. If, while defining faith in God, we mention words such as religion, church rules and regulations, we construct statements that correspond to higher level of construal. In turn, if we personalize our experience of faith, reflect upon faith from the point of view of needs, we highlight smaller distance and hence lower level construal.

We may ask ourselves a question, namely what other specific verbal or linguistic cues guide the communication process to infer proper interpretation of it. Since faith in God belongs to the repertoire of rather personal and emotionally loaded notions, it seems that the scope of cues will be richer in the case of low-level construal. Based on my own observations and the empirical material, I have decided to elucidate a number of criteria which correspond to different levels of construal.

The pragmatic strategy of politeness says that more words correspond to a greater distance between interlocutors. Consistently, more formal occasions require longer statements than informal situations (*I take thee to be my lawful wedded wife*). In non-verbal terms, this phenomenon is matched by physical proximity, called proxemics. However, if, for example, the structuring of the statement is chaotic, the amount of wording may testify to a completely opposite perlocutionary effect and evoke a different effect. All in all, we may conclude that long and structured statements reveal rather higher level construal, whereas long or short but unstructured statements pertain to lower level construal.

In the communicative dimension, the emotive/expressive function aims at verbalising one's beliefs and emotions. This function, according to Jacobson, focuses on the addressee to evoke certain emotion, either real or pretended [Jacobson, 1989]. It is common knowledge that expressing emotions stimulates interaction between us. More importantly, emotions and expressing values are closely related. In Helm [2009] we read that emotions release evaluative reactions in particular contexts. What follows, when we refer to axiological issues, we often become more emotional. This entails lower level of construal.

For Laskowska [2004], expressing emotions fulfils the interactive function of language. There are lexemes or phrases that name feelings in the same way as other elements of reality are called. The difference lies in the possibility of verifying whether the content of a statement is true or not (*Ann is giving John a hand* vs. *Ann is glad that John has come*). In other words, in order to judge the authenticity of verbalised emotions, certain symptoms of the described feelings must arise. Such condition

emphasises the physical dimension of emotions and their bodily context. This is an interesting point in our discussion but more relevant in the case of interview-based data collection.

Another factor that may cause shortening of psychological distance in language is the use of pronouns, specifically personal pronouns, intensifiers such as “very” or so called “great quantifiers”,² such as: “always”, “never”, “none”, “neither”. By such words we first of all express evaluation, individual attitude, we manipulate and persuade. There is also some dose of emotional load involved, hence statements such as “great significance” or “the highest value” are considered more personalised and pertain to lower level of construal. Also the use of the superlative degree of adjectives and adverbs reveals a more individual stance.

In addition, verbalising one’s point of view may be treated as a symptom of low-level construal because by saying “I”, “me”, “mine”, an individual contextualises the problem under scrutiny in relation to his/her own life.

In turn, higher level construal in language reveals itself in generalised, decontextualised, impersonal and usually neatly organised statements. Such a conceptualiser does not allow his/her personal opinion to emerge in a very direct manner. In such statements the emotive, interactive function of language does not dominate. It transpires that the major function in this sort of wording is the “denotative”, also known as “referential”, function because the subject’s intention is to define a notion with maximal accuracy.

4. The construal of psychological distance in the statements about faith in God

The analysed data seems to testify to the psychologically proven conceptions concerning the relationship between the level of construal and the structure or wording used in forming particular statements. For the sake of comparison between the two distinct modes of construal I have selected more distinctive quotes which throw light at the interplay between level of construal and psychological distance. The table contains selected quotes (9 for higher level (A), 9 for lower level (B) construal) in Polish – as the original language of research – and their English equivalents. The quotes are followed by explanations concerning the language determinants standing behind each profile. Each citation completes with a profile that describes its content.

² A direct translation from Polish “wielkie kwantyfikator.”

Table 1. The distinction into higher-level vs. lower-level construal statements

A. Higher level construal Sample statements	B. Lower level construal Sample statements
<p>A1. – <i>Wiara to szczerze przekonanie o tym, że istnieje Bóg, oraz o tym, że należy się Mu oddanie w odpowiedniej formie (“praktykowanie wiary”). (Faith is an honest conviction that God exists and that He deserves loyalty in the right form (“practising faith”).)</i> – an extended and neatly structured statement; the speaking ego not revealed; the occurrence of “adequate” and “form” – abstract words that require further explanation in this context (FAITH AS CONVICTION)</p>	<p>B1. – <i>Wiara ma dla mnie ogromne znaczenie, ponieważ pozwala mi ona wierzyć w lepsze jutro. (Faith has a great significance to me because it helps me to believe in a better future.)</i> – a personalized statement by the use of personal pronoun “me”; well structured; the speaking ego revealed; the use of superlative degree of adjective; the use of “better” as an evaluating word; the word “future” as a word related to hope (FAITH AS HOPE)</p>
<p>A2. – <i>To umiejętność przyjęcia i stosowania się do zasad obowiązujących w Kościele. (It is the ability to accept and putting into practice the rules that are compulsory in church.)</i> – a neat and well organized statement; reference to church norms and regulations; the use of the word “compulsory” – indicates external source of influence, “ability” – indicates that faith can be trained (FAITH AS RULES)</p>	<p>B2. – <i>Wiara jest bardzo istotna, pomaga pokonywać przeciwności, trudności. (Faith is very important because it helps to overcome difficulties.)</i> – the use of the intensifier “very”; reference of life problems (FAITH AS HELP)</p>
<p>A3. – <i>Wiara to pewien akt wewnętrzny oparty na akceptacji czegoś, co nie jest poparte badaniami empirycznymi (...). (Faith is a certain inner act based on the acceptance of something which is not supported by empirical evidence.)</i> – a well structured and neatly organized statement; abstract statement; the speaking ego not revealed; the words that assume external, materialistic perspective such as “certain”, “something”, “empirical evidence” (FAITH AS SPIRITUALITY)</p>	<p>B3. – <i>Wiara to dla mnie najważniejsza wartość w życiu. (Faith is for me the most important value in life.)</i> – a personalized statement by the use of the pronoun “me”; the use of the superlative degree “the most important”; reference to life (FAITH AS VALUE)</p>
<p>A4. – <i>Wiara to według mnie religia (...). (Faith is religion for me.)</i> – a short statement; faith is compared to religion – a system of norms (FAITH AS RELIGION)</p>	<p>B4. – <i>Wiara to zaufanie, zawierzenie Bogu, że On wie wszystko, mówi prawdę, wobec czego mogę na Nim polegać. (Faith is trust, believing God that He knows everything, that He tells the truth, so I can rely on Him.)</i> – the use of words that denote deeper insight into the notion of faith; relating faith to God and His truthfulness; faith is synonymous with trust; a less neatly structured statement (FAITH AS TRUST)</p>
<p>A5. – <i>Wiara to coś, co trzyma ludzi przy życiu. Jest to zespół reguł, według których ludzie postępują. Ma ona na celu doprowadzenie do życia wiecznego. (Faith is something that keeps people alive. It is a collection of rules according to which people act. Its aim is to lead people to eternal life.)</i> – a neatly organized and extended statement; quite abstract; speaking ego not revealed; the use of words and expressions such as “something” – materialistic perspective, “collection of rules” – reference to external source of influence, “eternal life” – abstract notion (FAITH AS SUPPORT; FAITH AS RULES)</p>	<p>B5. – <i>Daje nadzieję, pocieszenie przed śmiercią. (It gives hope, consolation before death.)</i> – relating faith to human life, hope and comfort; the use of emotionally-laden words such as “hope” and “consolation” (FAITH AS CONSOLATION)</p>
	<p>B6. – <i>Wiara jest dla mnie osobistym przeświadczeniem, światłem płynącym od Ducha Świętego. (For me faith is a personal conviction, the light coming from the Holy Spirit.)</i> – the use of personal pronoun “me”; reference to “personal conviction”; the use of the name of one person of the Holy Trinity – the Holy Ghost (FAITH AS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)</p>

A. Higher level construal Sample statements	B. Lower level construal Sample statements
<p>A6. – <i>Wiara jest to wyznawanie czyichś zasad oraz stosowanie się do określonej religii. (Faith is subscribing to rules and following a particular religion.)</i> – a comparison to norms of religion; speaking ego not revealed; words and expressions such as “subscribing to rules”, “particular religion” – reference to reliance on external influence (FAITH AS RULES)</p>	<p>B7. – <i>Wiara uspokaja, pozwala pozytywnie spojrzeć w przyszłość i wytrwać w trudnych chwilach. (Faith reassures, it helps to positively look into the future and remain in difficult moments.)</i> – the use of value-laden words such as “(...) reassures”, “(...) positively look into the future and remain in difficult moments” (FAITH AS REASSURANCE)</p>
<p>A7. – <i>Wiara to potwierdzenie jestestwa Boga. (Faith is a confirmation of God’s being.)</i> – a short and very abstract statement; speaking ego not revealed; the expression “confirmation of God’s existence” – materialistic perspective used with reference to supernatural power (FAITH AS PROOF)</p>	<p>B8. – <i>Jest elementem mnie. Jest dla mnie bardzo istotna. Pomaga nam stawać się lepszymi ludźmi, nadaje życiu sens. Jedna z najważniejszych wartości w życiu. (It is part of me. It is very important to me. It helps to become better people, it makes life meaningful. It is one of the most important values in life.)</i> – a very personal statement, relating faith to the essence of someone’s life – “(...) part of me”, “(...) very important to me”; and the axiological dimension – “(...) become better people”, “meaningful”, “most important values in life” (FAITH AS MAJOR CONSTITUTENT OF LIFE; FAITH AS HELP; FAITH AS VALUE)</p>
<p>A8. – <i>Wiara wiąże się z wyznawaniem w życiu wartości oraz sił ponadnaturalnych, np. Bóg (...). (Faith is connected with subscribing to values in life and supernatural forces, e.g. God.)</i> – faith is compared to values and abstract forces; speaking ego not revealed (FAITH AS VALUES; FAITH AS SUPERNATURAL FORCES)</p>	<p>B9. – <i>Esencją mojego życia, bez której nie wyobrażam sobie żyć, istnieć, mieć radość z czegokolwiek lub nadzieję. Głównie mówiąc, jest to dla mnie wszystkim – (...), kim jestem, skąd pochodzę, dokąd idę, po co żyję, po co umrę i do kogo należę. (It is the essence of my life without which I cannot imagine my life, existence, having joy from anything or hope. Generally speaking, it is everything to me – (...) what I am, from where I come, where I go, why I live, why I die and to whom I belong.)</i> – a personal statement – “(...) essence of my life”, and the reason to live; a less structured, lengthy statement; the use of emotionally and value-laden words such as “joy”, “hope”; the use of the great quantifier “everything” (FAITH AS GIST OF LIFE)</p>
<p>A9. – <i>Wiara jest częścią wewnętrznego życia człowieka. (Faith is part of man’s inner life.)</i> – a short and abstract statement; inner life as a synonym of spirituality; speaking ego not revealed (FAITH AS SPIRITUALITY)</p>	

5. Emergent profiles as reflections of psychological distance

In the table I have collected the most distinctive statements made by respondents. The application of Construal level theory of psychological distance has proved useful in analysing the current images of faith among Polish people who declare to be Christians. It transpires that there are two major tendencies that complement the distinction into higher vs. lower level construal.

According to the tendency represented by the higher level construal section, faith is conceptualized in terms of obedience to God, conviction concerning God's existence, norms and regulations governing the life of a believer and in terms of abstract spirituality. One person associates faith with values. Yet s/he does not reveal whether this is the value s/he follows or not. Moreover, the statements reinforce rational and distanced attitude to faith. They mostly start from the word "faith" ("wiara"), which enables the respondents to hide more personalised views. None of the citations, except one (A4), contain words denoting personal stance. However, despite the use of the personal pronoun *me*, example A4 reflects a distanced attitude to faith. The comparison of faith to religion, so to a system of norms and believes is the dominant determinant of the level of construal here. Hence the use of *me* does not cancel the overriding point of view which depicts faith as a system, not as a personal value.

Furthermore, statements in the left-hand side section are logical, well structured and clear. Some statements are built upon words relating to materialistic and physical dimensions (e.g. "certain", "something", "confirmation of God's existence", "empirical evidence", "adequate form") or the legal one ("collection of rules", "subscribing to rules", "compulsory"). In addition, this group is also characterised by the use of abstract words that would require further explanation (e.g. "eternal life", "inner life", "supernatural forces"). The general image that emerges from this collection of quotes can be summarised in the following way: Faith is an abstract, yet provable phenomenon that can be trained, that is governed by rules and that confirms God's existence.

The other emerging tendency complies with the lower level construal of psychological distance. Respondents in this group openly admit that they have faith in God and that they strongly rely on it. Secondly, they treat it very personally and it is a very important value in their lives. The answers they provided include the following range of meanings: a major part of life, consolation, help, essence of life, trust, hope, reassurance and conviction that God's words are trustworthy. This tendency discloses a much more intimate relationship between the human being and faith. Respondents readily associate this notion with the person of God or even use more specific names of God, e.g. The Holy Spirit. It transpires that they not only have knowledge about Christian faith, but also directly experience it. What is more, in this section respondents use less neatly structured statements, emotionally loaded words, words verbalising positive values, the intensifier "very", great quantifiers and personal pronouns. As aforementioned, the use of emotive words or words denoting emotional states are very powerful because they stimulate interaction and evaluation. Respondents in many cases use words that bring us closer to the sphere of positive emotional states or values, e.g. "joy", "hope", "trust", "consolation", or "truth". Thus, we may conclude that faith in God is seen as a whole life venture and that this selection of citations matches lower level construal of distance.

Column A features such profiles as: FAITH AS CONVICTION, FAITH AS RULES, FAITH AS SPIRITUALITY, FAITH AS VALUES, FAITH AS SUPERNATURAL FORCES, FAITH AS PROOF, FAITH AS RELIGION, FAITH AS SUPPORT.

Column B, in turn, contains the following solutions: FAITH AS MAJOR CONSTITUENT OF LIFE, FAITH AS HELP, FAITH AS VALUE, FAITH AS GIST OF LIFE, FAITH AS REASSURENCE, FAITH AS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, FAITH AS TRUST, FAITH AS CONSOLATION, FAITH AS HOPE.

The choice of wording for each type of profile could be different. However, I have managed to achieve one interesting effect, namely the names of profiles in column B are longer and more descriptive than in A. This reflects the difference in the level of construal between these two sections. Detailed descriptions divulge lower level of construal, hence greater intimacy. Less detailed names of profiles are in line with higher level of construal which, by definition, evinces more abstract, neutral and detached attitudes.

To conclude, the undertaken research does not exhaust the full list of possibilities of reconstructing the conceptualisation of faith in God. At the follow-up phase, individual, face to face, recorded interviews should offer a deeper insight into the personal stance concerning the issue in question. On the basis of oral testimony, I am hoping to unearth yet more interesting semantic nuances of construal and understanding of Faith in God in the modern Polish society.

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