In this article, the concept of hygge, a style of social interaction, is analyzed in terms of its relation to cultural values, as it is a keyword in Danish culture and a product of the distinctive Danish social ethos which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The idea of hygge as a feature of Scandinavian culture came into being in the course of its interpretation; its limitations are also discussed. The article also provides a window on cultural peculiarities connected with the keyword hygge.

Key words: hygge, cultural keyword, national identity, untranslatable words

Introduction

The latest fashionable export from Denmark from the world of interior design and high-quality television drama, hygge, is the Scandinavian country’s latest revelation to the world. Hygge is also finding its way into lifestyle supplements at a time when the idea of Denmark as the world’s happiest nation lingers in the collective imagination of public opinion all over the world. The Danish Tourist Board has even managed to use this reputation for the purposes of nation branding, diagnosing Denmark’s constant state of contentment and satisfaction as the result of the welfare state, high levels of social trust, and, finally, hygge as a lifestyle.

This small northern European country has emerged as a familiar, safe, peaceful, and yet aspirational kind of foreign land – the kind that can capture attention with a conceptually “untranslatable” and distinctive-looking word, a word that can easily be dressed up as a set of lifestyle choices attractive enough to inspire many Christmas stocking stuffer books.

It is as a noun that hygge has made its way into foreign lifestyle pages, but the term is also used as an adjective or verb. The Danish dictionary traces the verb form back to the Old Norse hygga and Old English hycgan, whereas the modern meaning (to comfort or give joy to) comes from Norwegian. But the word peppers contemporary Danish conversation in highly context-specific ways. Compound nouns can indicate seasonal variations along with associated
activities (*julehygge* during Christmas or *påskehygge* during Easter, for example) (*Den Danske Ordbog* 1926).

Much attention has recently been paid to Nordic culture-specific words relating to positive mental states, especially in media and popular culture throughout Europe. I favor the opinion that the phenomenon of their popularity can be explained by their “untranslatable” character and ability to fill semantic gaps in other languages on one hand, and to offer windows on other cultures, and thus potentially on new ways of perceiving the world, on the other (Lomas 2016: 548). According to Anna Wierzbicka, “words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society, but also ways of thinking” (Wierzbicka 1997: 5). Furthermore, these “untranslatable” words are attractive to linguists, anthropologists and ethnographers, among others, if not to translators. Perhaps the most common examples deriving from the languages of the Nordic region are Danish *hygge*, Swedish *lagom*, and Finnish *sisu*. These words are not untranslatable in the sense that their meaning cannot be conveyed in a sentence or paraphrased. Rather, they are deemed untranslatable because there is no single word or phrase in other languages for the phenomenon they denote (Lomas 2016: 548). These are words specific for a given culture, “around which whole cultural domains are organized” (Goddard 2005: 78). The Danish word *hygge* is the most frequently cited example of such an “untranslatable” word and a cultural keyword (Wierzbicka 1992: 98), and therefore it is the object of interest of this paper.

The aim of this article is to provide an ethnopragmatic and semantic analysis of the concept hidden in the cultural keyword *hygge*. The main questions are: what does this word mean? Which cultural values are construed by means of *hygge*? How culture-specific is *hygge*?

1. Cultural keywords

There is an ongoing debate about the importance of such words. Here we can refer to a well-known theory, that of linguistic relativity (Hussein 2012). This theory, first developed by Herder and Humboldt, German philosophers, gained recognition following research conducted by the linguist Sapir and his student Whorf. Known as the ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’, this postulate underlines the constitutive role that language plays in regard to what people experience, how they perceive the world, and how they understand it (Lomas 2016: 548). According to Benjamin Lee Whorf:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleido-
scopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language (Carroll 1956: 213–214).

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was the starting point for other postulates. Its most radical variation takes the form of linguistic determinism, according to which thoughts and cognition are entirely constituted and driven by language. Lomas mentions here Whorf’s argument that, for instance, the Hopi people experience time differently due to particularities in their grammar system, which lacks a linear sense of past, present, and future (Lomas 2016: 459). This deterministic approach has been criticized by, for example, Pinker, according to whom the way the Hopi experience time is not particularly different from that of Western cultures (Pinker 2007: 63). Linguistic relativism, however, maintains that the structure of a language affects the thoughts or cognition of its speakers. This form of the hypothesis is generally accepted by most anthropologists and other scholars (Perlovsky 2009: 248).

In regard to “untranslatable” words, there is a comparable discussion. One extreme deterministic approach suggests that unless a person is immersed in a given culture from which a specific word derives, he or she is unable to understand or experience the phenomenon that the word refers to (Lomas 2016: 549). The philosopher Charles Taylor favored this approach, which he formulated in an argument proposing that there is no exit from the “hermeneutic circle”. This means that ideas or notions can only be understood in reference to other ideas and notions within the same language (Perlovsky 2009: 249). Taylor puts it this way: “We can often experience what it is like to be on the outside [of the circle] when we encounter the feeling, action, and experiential meaning of the language of another civilization. Here there is no translation, no way of explaining in other, more accessible concepts” (Taylor 1985: 23–24).

However, from the relativistic view supported by Wierzbicka, it appears that we can indeed exit the hermeneutic circle and get an idea of these “untranslatable” words and what they refer to. She also makes the reservation that those who are not immersed in a given culture may not be aware, compared to those who derive from the culture, of the depth and richness of a notion (Wierzbicka 1999: 7). Wierzbicka argues that “verbal explanations of such concepts cannot replace experiential familiarity with them and with their functioning in the local stream of life” (Wierzbicka 1999: 8). Nonetheless it is still possible to bridge this gap, as “it is not true that no verbal explanations illuminating to outsiders are possible at all”, because notions and concepts specific to a given culture are complexly constructed and therefore can be deconstructed into smaller parts that are commonly understood (Wierzbicka 1999: 8).
Adopting Wierzbicka’s perspective enables one to assert that “untranslatable” words may potentially enrich one’s conceptual vocabulary (Lomas 2016: 549). However, if we reject this perspective, we still have the beneficial outcome of expanding one’s understanding of other cultures. Related to hygge specifically, as in this article, this special kind of mental exercise may complement our emotional landscape. Perlovsky proposes a term: “emotional Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” (Perlovsky 2009). It implies that positive emotional states (in this case, those concerning well-being) exist which have hitherto only been explicitly recognized by a particular culture – in the context of hygge, the Danish culture. It does not imply that people originating from other cultures have not had an equivalent experience; rather, it means that they lack a specific term for it. Consequently, such people have arguably not had the opportunity to specifically identify that state of hygge, which eventually becomes “an unconceptualized ripple in the ongoing flux of subjective experience” (Lomas 2016: 550). As Ferguson puts it, there is a possibility that “entire feelings, entire concepts went unexpressed, simply because no word had ever been coined to capture them” (Ferguson 2003: 10). The advantage of encountering such cultural keywords is that once people are introduced to a foreign term such as hygge, it may then serve as a contribution to the expression of these hitherto “unlabelled” states. The example of Danish hygge is one of the most recent in the context of European languages and cultures. In this particular case, although European languages lack a precisely equivalent term, the phenomenon, emotions, or feelings it refers to have been experienced, or at least are not unknown, to people from outside of Denmark. Consequently, given the lack of a native term, the word hygge was at some point simply imported and used in other languages.

2. The concept of hygge

The concept of hygge has been approached by scholars mainly from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Judith Friedman Hansen has elaborated on hygge in her book We Are a Little Land (Hansen 1980). Hygge is only one of the elements of Hansen’s analysis, in which she employs proxemics as a tool for her analysis in order to explain her own role as a participant observer in Denmark in the 1970s. For example, she remarks that a typical setting for hygge is a:

Dinner party with close family and friends, where guests are drawn close together around a table much narrower than its American counterpart, where people are seated on armless chairs and shared benches close enough that their elbows touch, where alcoholic beverages are poured generously, and where food is passed on trays to encourage an atmosphere of conviviality. After dinner, everyone moves to sit around a coffee table, where later in the evening dessert and coffee will served (Hansen 1980: 82–83).
Hygge has many dimensions, one of them being perception and arrangement of space. According to Friedman Hansen, hygge goes hand in hand with closeness and familiarity (Hansen 1980: 83). In Danish material culture, similarity and the way of arranging domestic space enhance feelings of familiarity and being close to home. The material goods and products known to the public (including outside the country) as icons of Danish design extend a sense of domestic familiarity and closeness. The most famous example is a “super-elliptical” table that can be found in many Danish offices, government buildings and homes (Øllgaard 2017: 15).

Yet another perspective on hygge can be found in Steven Borish's participant observer analysis and history of Danish culture, where he devotes a chapter to this cultural keyword (Borish 1991). Though some scholars accuse Borish of being somewhat sentimental and romantic (Borish 1991: 15), more current researchers agree with Borish's connection of three elements:

- Denmark's past as a powerful empire contrasted with its present as a small, relatively powerless country; its resulting homogeneity; and a worldview strongly influenced by Nikolaj Frederik Grundtvig, who set out along with a group of supporters in the mid-nineteenth century with the explicit goal of establishing a national identity based on “individual freedom, classical liberalism, voluntarism, free association, popular education, and the development of civil society and social solidarity” (Campbell, Hall and Pedersen 2006: 22).

To Borish the concept of hygge is a unique Danish distinguishing mark, a phenomenon that has its roots in a capacity to enjoy the moment. He combines it with the above-mentioned traits of Danish national identity, based on his own experience in two Danish folk high schools (folkehøjskole). This kind of school is a cultural institution established by Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, a Danish pastor, author, poet, philosopher, historian, teacher, and politician (Bean 2011: 16).

The phenomenon of hygge recalls positive traits of Danish national identity to such an extent that in the 1960s a marketing campaign was launched aimed at turning hygge as a style of living into a world-known brand associated with a trip to Copenhagen. At that time Danish design had become a world-class export product, boosting Denmark's economic power in terms of exports. This resulted in improvements in airport infrastructure in order to enable efficient plane connections between the US and Europe, which in turn played a part in improvements which led to the design and construction of Arne Jacobsen’s famous SAS hotel.

According to various scholars, hygge is a complex experience. Anja Melby Jørgensen's conclusion is that hygge is closely related to national identity, home, and family (Jørgensen 1996). Moreover, she claims that there is also a psychological or emotional dimension of hygge, which is a result of the “golden middle way”, a principle connected with culture that Jørgensen associates with a feel-
ing of balance between tradition and modernity. This is probably what Friedman Hansen indicates as the quality of *hygge* and Jørgensen calls “moderation” (Bean 2011: 16). Correspondingly, a political analysis of today’s Denmark relates this cultural tradition to the way the Danish political and economic system has been able to integrate elements that in other countries would be considered as strongly contradictory, such as a strong union system along with the ability of enterprises to make workers redundant for nearly any reason at any time (Campbell, Hall and Pedersen 2006: 30).

In fact, the visual evidence of the link between *hygge* and national identity takes shape in the phenomenon Michael Billig has labeled as “banal nationalism.” Anthropologist Christopher Tilley defines this as “something practiced and reproduced in everyday life, something so commonplace and ordinary that it is taken for granted rather than discussed” (Tilley 2008: 219). According to Tilley’s example of Sweden, the majority of his Swedish informers did not perceive the flag as a vehicle of nationalism:

> The flag instead was a sign of greeting. You flagged, or welcomed, the visitor who was arriving by raising the flag. Flag poles in the past have generally been characteristic of larger houses and gardens, and especially country gardens, a national symbol primarily associated with royalty, the military, and the well off, but in recent years such flagging has become ‘democratized’ and has swept through suburbia (Tilley 2008: 242).

In Denmark, we can observe that many Danes, especially those living in the outskirts of city centers, fly the national flag. The Danish flag is also present as a symbol invoked at particularly *hyggelige* occasions, such as birthday celebrations or anniversaries, where a little Danish flag decorates the table and presents and is hung on the walls in the form of garlands. Members of the royal family are remembered on their birthdays by little Danish flags which fly on public transport buses. Furthermore, shops selling different kind of goods regularly have birthdays and anniversaries, which are always associated with promotions; in addition, the interior of such a shop will also be covered with Danish flags.

It has become common for some Danes to seemingly fail to notice the proliferation of the *Dannebrog*, the red and white flag, which might sometimes seem visually dominant to such an extent that to an outsider it takes the form of an alarmingly propagandistic element (Bean 2011: 17). For instance, the Danish flag has become one of central symbols of the conservative anti-immigrant Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), a development which has resulted in annoyance among those Danes who feel this new dimension of meaning has limited their ability to display the flag (Dencik 2006).

It thus does not come as a surprise that it has become quite common to perceive the experience of *hygge* understood as a process of alienation from the out-
side world. As Jonathan Schwartz, American historian and resident of Denmark, states, the typical Danish:

> House is surrounded by protective trees and bushes. What is Danish in Denmark is so obvious to the foreigner here. Hygge (coziness), tryghed (security), and trivsel (well-being) are the three faces of Danish culture and socialization. Faces look toward a common gård (yard), or a table with candles and bottles on it. Hygge always has its backs turned on the others. Hygge is for the members, not the strangers (Schwartz 1985: 124).

An exclusive variant of hygge is reflected in the most atomic part of the society, which is the family unit, understood basically as a couple; however, it is also strongly connected to the nuclear family, that is, husband, wife, and children. The close relation of hygge to family life is the main field of interest of the Danish ethnologist and scholar of consumption Jeppe Trolle Linnet. According to him, hygge and interiority emerged as an organizing concept in the course of his ethnographic study of four middle-class families in Copenhagen (Linnet 2011: 23). Hygge is also a main category in an analysis of home life by the Danish educational anthropologist Ida Winther, for whom the most hyggelig time is Saturday morning, when children watch cartoons on TV with a stock of sugary candy (Winther 2006: 76).

There is something particularly Nordic about the conception and experience of hygge. Regional distinctiveness is understood here as residing in a particular constellation of social structures, historical experiences, cultural values, and currents of thought, all of which may be found elsewhere, but which achieve a particular interrelationship in a regional context. Whereas most elements of hygge, when looked at separately, can be found in many non-Nordic contexts, a distinct Nordic character and atmosphere arise in the particular cultural interaction of certain elements. This also partly explains two dimensions of hygge that seem entirely specific within the Danish context: even if the mode of sociality referred to as hygge is universal and goes by other names elsewhere, no other culture has, to my knowledge, elevated this particular mode of sociality into an icon and distinguishing mark of their community. Also, in no other culture that I am aware of, are ritual references to this form of sociality so widespread in everyday encounters. The combination of the national iconicity and everyday omnipresence of hygge seems distinctly Danish, even if the experience and practice of the phenomenon is common.

**Conclusion**

This paper outlined the beginnings of a positive cross-cultural lexicography of the “untranslatable” word hygge pertaining to well-being, as well as being concerned with the social phenomenon of hygge, which in Denmark has an almost iconic
status, in representing a style of being together that people from other cultures often consider specifically Danish. The phenomenon of hygge has been interpreted as located within central aspects of Scandinavian culture and everyday life, such as egalitarianism, home-centeredness, middle-class life, romantic and religious ideals, and concerns for “inner spaces”. I also problematized the popular perception of hygge as being a feature exclusive to Danish culture, discussing its core analytical aspect of “interiority” as a cross-cultural recurrence rather than an example of local particularity.

The culture-specific semantic configuration in hygge provides a window on Danish culture in its dimension of sociality and social values and the way hygge relates to Danish cultural scripts – in particular, scripts of social cognition, communicative style, and sensation. It has also been argued that hygge is a guide to understanding certain specifically Danish symbols, in particular, the message of the Danish flag. The roots of Danish sociality are grounded in indigenous concepts such as hygge.

After the turbulent, not particularly cozy year 2016, it’s not hard to grasp why hygge has usurped mindfulness as the well-being trend of the moment. As one commentator has observed, hygge is “a soothing balm for the traumas of 2016” (Cartner-Morley 2016).

References


HYGGE AS CULTURAL KEYWORD