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ЯЗЫКОВАЯ СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ: определение содержания концепта

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Аннотация. Концепт ЯЗЫКОВАЯ СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ впервые встречается в зарубежном исследовании по лингвистике в конце 50-х годов XX века. В последнее десятилетие данный концепт начал привлекать внимание исследователей и преподавателей в области социальных наук. Цель данного исследования – определить содержание концепта ЯЗЫКОВАЯ СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ (ЯС) путем описания характеристик данного сложного концепта и уточнения признаков СЕНСИТИВНОСТИ. Научная новизна исследования: представлены и обобщены характеристики ЯС на основе различных толкований концепта в англоязычных публикациях в области социальных наук, а также изучен объем содержания концепта СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ по толковым и терминологическим словарям. В статье приводится авторское толкование концепта ЯЗЫКОВАЯ СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ на основе критического анализа выявленных характеристик ЯС и признаков СЕНСИТИВНОСТИ, с опорой на теорию изучения языка как социальной практики. В ходе научного исследования были получены следующие результаты: выявлены три характеристики концепта ЯС, а именно: осознанный выбор лексических единиц говорящим с учетом потребностей и интересов всех участников общения, способность индивида критически анализировать контекст коммуникации и распознавать (не)адекватное коммуникативное поведение и бесконфликтное общение, результатом которого удовлетворены все участники. Метод концептуального анализа, выполненный по алгоритму, предложенному Walker и Avant, позволил выявить четыре признака концепта СЕНСИТИВНОСТЬ в структуре сложного концепта ЯС: это восприятие и реакция системы на стимул; наличие вариативности; способность выявлять незначительные изменения; свойство системы, характеризующее ее способность.

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LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY: determination of the concept content

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Abstract. For the first time the concept LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY (LS) emerged in linguistic research at the end of the 50s of the last century. Over the last decade this concept has been attracting the attention of researchers and instructors in the field of social sciences. The aim of this study is to determine the content of the concept LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY by describing its characteristics and specifying the attributes of SENSITIVITY. The scientific novelty of this study lies in describing and summarizing the revealed characteristics of the emerging concept LS based on the interpretations in the English-language publications, as well as in identifying four distinct attributes of SENSITIVITY as a core component of LS. The article provides the authors' original conceptualization of LS based on the theory of viewing language as a social practice and proposes the research agenda for further studies of the concept. The results of the research show three main characteristics of LS, namely, a deliberate choice of words by the speaker who takes into account the needs and interests of other participants; the ability of a language-sensitive individual to critically analyze the context of communication by recognizing (in)appropriate behavior; a non-confrontational communication when every participant feels satisfied with the outcomes of communication. The study identified four attributes of SENSITIVITY in the course of the concept analysis after the methodology offered by Walker and Avant: (1) perception and reaction of an entity to a stimulus; (2) relatedness to variations; (3) detection of slight changes; (4) a property which characterizes an entity's ability.

Introduction

All terms and concepts have histories of their own. Sometimes it is not easy to trace a concept, when and how it was operationalized. In this paper we will introduce the emerging concept of LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY (LS), which is relatively new in foreign studies on language and communication. In domestic research, LS has not been investigated yet and it opens new prospects for linguo-cultural study of this concept in the future. This article summarizes different interpretations of LS in the English-language publications in the field of social studies and offers the authors' original interpretation of LS which can serve a basis for different research paradigms.

Over the last decades there has been a number of foreign publications predominantly in the social sciences and linguistics which identify the importance of LS for effective communication purposes (MacEoin, 1959; Gales, 2003; Aycock, Sims, Florman et al., 2017; Markwalder, Saalbach, Schalk, 2022), as well as the articles which put LS on contemporary socio-cultural agenda (Forsdick, 2017; Spence, Brandao, 2021; Lehman, Tienari, 2024). These studies explore the significance of LS for effective professional communication, improving clarity and mutual understanding. The scholars underscore the importance of LS for enhancing respect and equity across ethnic and professional cultures and promoting multilingualism in social organizations and in workplaces.

LS attracts researchers, instructors and trainers who are regularly exposed to miscommunication and misinterpretation of problems in communication regardless of an area of knowledge. At the same time, there is no common theoretical background in the understanding of LS in the existing publications. This gap in conceptualization of LS makes its application problematic in linguistic research. Thus, the relevance of this study is explained by the necessity to theorize LS so that researchers, instructors and trainers could have a common foundation in understanding LS for developing their research paradigms and practical guides. The authors of the article think that it is time to start a scholarly discussion about the general definition of LS with the purpose of achieving shared understanding of this concept across sciences. Further investigations of LS can provide deeper insights into how language reflects and shapes social dynamics, cognitive processes, and the way power and authority are distributed and exercised in society. Exploring the use of language in various social contexts can show how the latter influences language users in their interpretation and production of meaning. This research could contribute to studies in other sciences such as applied linguistics, communication studies, pedagogy and psychology.

This study proposes the conceptualization of LS by completing the following tasks:

- 1) to identify and summarize characteristics of LS in the existing interpretations of the concept in the English-language publications;
- 2) to substantiate the research motivation to conceptualize LS from the view of language as a social practice;
- 3) to reveal attributes of the concept SENSITIVITY as a core component of the complex concept LS;
- 4) with the focus on the revealed characteristics of LS and the attributes of SENSITIVITY, to formulate a general definition of LS which could serve different research goals in applied linguistics and other sciences.

To perform the indicated tasks there were used the following research methods: theoretical analysis to systematize the existing interpretations of LS in the literature and derive the characteristics of LS in the process of description, the concept analysis of SENSITIVITY after Walker and Avant's (2011) methodology to identify and describe the attributes of this concept and quantitative counting method.

The material of the research is a set of ordinary and scientific meanings in the definitions of the concept SENSITIVITY (56 definitions) taken from the dictionaries, encyclopedias and online resources.

Dictionaries:

- Allaby M., Park C. A Dictionary of Environment and Conservation. Oxford University Press, 2013;
- Definitions.net: The resource for definitions and translations. <https://www.definitions.net/>;
- Laffal J. A Concept Dictionary of English. Gallery Press, 1973;
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>;
- Porta M., Last J. M. A Dictionary of Public Health. Oxford University Press, 2018;
- The Britannica Dictionary. <https://www.britannica.com/>;
- The Oxford English Dictionary. <https://www.oed.com>.

Encyclopedias:

- American Psychological Association. Encyclopedia of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/sensitivity>;
- Britannica Encyclopedia. <https://www.britannica.com>;
- Encyclopedia of Human Behavior: in 3 vols. / ed. by V. S. Ramachandran. Elsevier, 2012. Vol. 1. A – D.

Online resources:

- Explearning Online Platform. <https://explearning.co>;
- Investopedia: The resource for investors and executives. <http://www.investopedia.com>;
- Sensitivity Research. <https://sensitivityresearch.com>;
- The Systems Biology Group. <https://www.sysbio.de/projects/glossary/>.

The theoretical background includes the literature review of the existing interpretations of LS in the studies by MacEoin (1959), Aycock, Sims, Florman, Casseus, Gordon and Spratling (2017), Kim (2019), Gales (2003), and the definition of LS provided on the Portal for Intercultural Communication. On the critical analysis of the existing interpretations of LS, the authors describe its main characteristics. The theoretical background rests on the conceptualization of language as a social practice (Wittgenstein, 1967; Gumperz, 1972; Hymes, 1972; Shen, Sung, Zhang, 2015; Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2018). The authors interpret LS as a complex concept from the perspective of the social practice theory and analyze multiple meanings of SENSITIVITY as a core component of LS across sciences. The proposed original interpretation of LS relates to social and humanitarian sciences. In the conclusion section, the authors raise some problem areas and outline further research avenues.

The practical value of the research and the proposed interpretation of LS is in its applicability for other scientific studies and educational purposes across academic disciplines: applied linguistics, communication studies, pedagogy and psychology. Language users' awareness of LS helps them to be more attentive to their social roles and contexts in communication; it influences a deliberate choice of linguistic means. The proposed interpretation of LS was borne out of the authors' discussions who worked in a cross-disciplinary research team of experts in psychophysiology, social psychology, linguistics, and methodology.

Discussion and results

Literature review

The primary purpose of the literature review was to analyze if there are papers which conceptualize LS and to understand if there is a common theoretical framework which ties together the existing studies on this topic and how they can contribute to the authors' understanding of LS in professional communication. Two search engines for academic literature – Semantics Scholar and Google Scholar, as well as the digital database JSTOR – were screened to identify sources which mention the following terms: “language sensitivity” or “linguistic sensitivity” or “sensitivity/sensitive to language or language-sensitive”. The overall number of 4 800 000 identified publications mentioning these terms in the texts in different fields of knowledge and for different research purposes was narrowed down to 14 papers which contain the terms “language sensitivity” or “linguistic sensitivity” in their titles. The critical analysis of the papers' abstracts with the focus on the interpretation of LS revealed 11 available full-text publications with substantive discussions of the concept. The sources cover two areas of knowledge: predominantly social sciences and digital humanities. The analyzed publications fall into 2 groups: the studies which investigate LS as a concept and interpret it (Table 1, articles 1-5), and those which acknowledge LS and discuss it as a socio-cultural phenomenon (Table 1, articles 6-11).

Table 1. Interpretations of language sensitivity in social sciences and digital humanities

Nº	Areas of knowledge	Authors	Interpretations of LS
1	Linguistics	MacEoin, 1959	<i>Interpretation 1.</i> “Language sensitivity, the ability to find the right word and the right phrase, to give it its exact place in the sentence and the paragraph, and to provide the maximum of meaning with the minimum of expression, is a characteristic of all good writing.”
2	Intercultural communication and education	The Portal for Intercultural Communication (https://www.hyperkulturell.de/language-sensitivity/)	<i>Interpretation 2.</i> “Language sensitivity defines the sensitive handling of the most important means of communication of human beings in order to enable a communication without misunderstanding and a problem-free communication for all parties involved.”
3	Healthcare, nursing	Aycock, Sims, Florman et al., 2017	<i>Interpretation 3.</i> “Language sensitivity is the use of respectful, supportive, and caring words with consideration for a patient’s situation and diagnosis.”
4	Education	Kim, 2019	<i>Interpretation 4.</i> “Language sensitivity is not only sensitivity to language expressions, but also ‘the sense of being able to respond and question the cognitive system that has structured and operated human relationships over a long period of time’.”
5	Organizational research	Gales, 2003	<i>Interpretation 5.</i> Linguistic sensitivity is defined as “the awareness of how language can affect communication and understanding across different cultures.”
6	Cognitive science	Markwalder, Saalbach, Schalk, 2022	“Linguistic sensitivity as an indicator of a natural pedagogy shared by all humans”. The authors refer to Csibra and Gergely (2009) who proposed “a particular sensitivity of humans to generic statements in pedagogical settings.”
7	Digital humanities	Spence, Brandao, 2021	“From a digital humanities perspective, language sensitivity amounts to far more than the simple awareness that multilingualism exists as a box to tick; it foregrounds how languages (plural) are bound up with notions of culture and community in forming the sense of location and perspective in our work.”
8	Communication, governance, policy making	Forsdick, 2017	“The term ‘linguistic indifference’ has been deployed to describe the alinguistic attitudes in a number of fields, and ‘Translating Cultures’* (<i>the title of the source</i>) has sought to challenge these with an active linguistic awareness or sensitivity.”
9	Language education	Dubovitskaya, Kamalova, 2021	“There is a number of overlapping terms that point to the fact that education has been moving in the direction of cultural tolerance, empathy and understanding. These are cultural sensitivity, cultural awareness, cultural competence, cultural humility and others. In the linguistic realm we come across such expressions as politically correct language, linguistic diversity, language variation, transnational language, linguistic sensitivity.”
10	Scholarly writing	Lehman, Tienari, 2024	Linguistic sensitivity refers to a linguistic position from which an author writes a paper. The factors of a mother tongue, norms and conventions of a national language shape the linguistic identity of a writer which may confront the norms and conventions of writing in English.
11	Qualitative research methods (interview)	Muthanna, Alduais, 2023	“In interviews, <...> sensitivity is the concept that deals with awareness and an understanding of interviewees’ needs, interests, and preferences. <...> Sensitivity also means that a qualitative researcher’s needs to be careful in selecting words while interviewing or observing participants so that interviewees are not unintentionally offended.” “Sensitivity includes the features of awareness, understanding, carefulness, and caring.”

In addition to the interpretations of LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY (Table 1, articles 1-4, 7), we considered the use of the concept LINGUISTIC SENSITIVITY (Table 1, articles 5-6, 8-10). Gales (Table 1, article 5) determines LINGUISTIC SENSITIVITY as “the awareness of how language can affect communication and understanding across different cultures”, which points out the relationship between culture and the use of language in intercultural communication. An alternative interpretation of LINGUISTIC SENSITIVITY from a writing perspective is provided by the scholars Lehman and Tienari (Table 1, article 10), who argue that norms and conventions of a national language shape the linguistic identity of a writer. It often happens that English-language editors require authors to adopt the norms and conventions of writing in English, the hegemonic language of publications in the majority of leading scientific journals. The authors

question this world-wide practice and invite the research community to develop linguistic sensitivity to the modes of expression by non-native English writers who have their own uniqueness and specificity (Lehman, Tienari, 2024).

The literature analysis has demonstrated that the term “language sensitivity” is used more frequently in the publications. Probably the first interpretation of LS was provided by MacEoin in 1959 who looks at this concept from the linguistic perspective: “Language sensitivity, the ability to find the right word and the right phrase, to give it its exact place in the sentence and the paragraph, and to provide the maximum of meaning with the minimum of expression, is a characteristic of all good writing” (Table 1, interpretation 1). MacEoin emphasizes that LS is “a mark of basic culture, no less important than the ability to speak grammatically or to observe the standard rules of etiquette at table” (1959, p. 214).

Another interpretation of LS is offered by the experts in intercultural communication: “the sensitive handling of the most important means of communication of human beings in order to enable a communication without misunderstanding and a problem-free communication for all parties involved” (Table 1, interpretation 2). By specifying the desirable outcome of communication as “a problem-free communication for all parties involved”, this statement, as we interpret it, contributes to the conceptualization of LS as an ability of speakers to control communication processes in order to secure a non-confrontational interaction for all participants.

The third interpretation of LS developed by Aycock, Sims, Florman et al. pertains to professional communication in healthcare. The offered model of effective communication RESPECT (Rapport, Environment/Equipment, Safety, Privacy, Encouragement, Caring/Compassion, and Tact) places LS in the center of a communication act between a nurse and a patient. LS is defined as “the use of respectful, supportive, and caring words with consideration for a patient’s situation and diagnosis” (Table 1, interpretation 3). We notice that this interpretation of LS like the one offered by MacEoin (Interpretation 1) emphasizes a deliberate choice of words by a nurse with an attentive consideration of the communication context, which is often sensitive in the healthcare field. For health carers, LS becomes a factor of successful professional communication as it influences “patients’ self-management of medical conditions, adoption of preventive behaviors, and satisfaction and quality of care” (Aycock, Sims, Florman et al., 2017, p. 517). The ability to demonstrate LS serves pragmatic purposes: “The importance of sensitivity holds even more significance because in many institutions, one of the measures of quality of care is patient satisfaction” (Aycock, Sims, Florman et al., 2017, p. 518).

The fourth interpretation of LS by Kim (Table 1, interpretation 4) relates to the area of higher education. It emphasizes that “language sensitivity is not only sensitivity to language expressions, but also the sense of being able to respond and question the cognitive system that has structured and operated human relationships over a long period of time” (Kim, 2019, p. 177). We find this interpretation standing out from the above-mentioned ones because it defines LS not only as a careful and appropriate use of language but also points out an individual’s critical response to a big variety of social interactions. By interpreting LS this way, we may consider LS as a mental power, not an automatic reaction to the external stimulus.

The identified interpretations of LS disclose its different characteristics. Each interpretation acknowledges that a language-sensitive speaker is the one who makes a deliberate choice of linguistic means in the process of communication. However, the purpose of a sensitive attitude to language varies. For example, in the field of healthcare the aim is to consider a patient’s state (Definition 3). Hence, in professional communication, the purpose of careful consideration of the context comes into the forefront among other influencing factors while in the linguistic study (Interpretation 1) the choice of correct words and their grammatical use in speech is emphasized. In intercultural communication the goal is to avoid misunderstanding and secure problem-free communication for all participants (Interpretation 2). Regarding educational environment, the purpose of being sensitive to language is associated with the ability to critically respond and evaluate conventional social practices (Interpretation 4). In other words, a language-sensitive individual should be able to demonstrate the following abilities: (1) to critically analyze social interactions by distinguishing an appropriate behavior from an inappropriate one; (2) to recognize and respond to human behavioral differences appropriately.

The other group of the reviewed publications (Table 1, publications 6-11) demonstrates a variety of research ideas pointing out the topicality of studying LS for the contemporary research agenda. For example, Dubovitskaya and Kamalova examine LS from the perspective of educationalists and treat it as “a particular sensitivity of humans to generic statements in pedagogical settings” (2021, p. 2). The social scientists Forsdick (2017), Spence and Brandao (2021) have a global look at LS and call for its wide-scale inclusion into professional communication agenda “ranging from local government and communities to health, from international business and enterprise to the creative economy” (Forsdick, 2017, p. 2). In the field of digital humanities research, the scholars warn “to get away from (1) seeing ‘languages’ in narrowly linguistic terms, separated from their cultural context and (2) viewing this as a purely ‘technical’ problem, which can be resolved by digital tools alone” (Spence, Brandao, 2021, p. 10). Thus, the experts call for a global vision of the societal issues connected with languages: “Language sensitivity and diversity in digital studies start with awareness of the scope of the challenges, and this in turn depends on visibility – of language communities, their languages and their cultures” (Spence, Brandao, 2021, p. 16).

The concept of SENSITIVITY is the focus in the qualitative methods study on the interrelationship of reflexivity, sensitivity and integrity in conducting interviews (Muthanna, Alduais, 2023). The authors highlight that in the interview process “sensitivity includes the features of awareness, understanding, carefulness, and caring”, because it deals with “awareness and an understanding of interviewees’ needs, interests, and preferences”. The scholars claim that these qualities are crucial in persuading interviewees to participate in interviews, selecting words during interviews and monitoring the process so that interviewees are not unintentionally offended. These qualities should be purposefully developed with students. In this vein, the researchers support the consideration of sensitivity as the ability of using “respectful, supportive and caring words” by specialists in healthcare, which was earlier raised in the research by Aycock, Sims, Florman et al. (2017). Muthanna and Alduais (2023, p. 218) compare the advanced level of sensitivity with “adult moral development”, which makes us think that LS becomes an indicator of maturity of a linguistic personality.

To sum up, the literature review shows that the research interest in the concept LS lies mainly in the empirical studies in the field of social sciences. Integration of the knowledge from the identified interpretations of LS allows us to designate three main characteristics of the concept. Firstly, LS stands for a deliberate choice of words by the speaker taking into account the needs and interests of other participants. Secondly, LS is interpreted as an ability of an individual who can critically analyze the context of communication by distinguishing an appropriate behavior from inappropriate one and respond adequately. Thirdly, LS aims to secure nonconfrontational communication when every participant feels satisfied with the outcomes of communication. Based on the analysis of the identified interpretations of LS, we can conclude that all of them have one main commonality – they treat LS as the ability of an individual to be sensitive to the use of language. Formulated for different research and communication purposes, these interpretations are complementary to each other in terms of critical analysis and use of linguistic resources by a language user in the process of communication.

However, the identified interpretations of LS lack a common theoretical framework which ties these studies together and explains the concept regardless of a field of study. This gap stimulated our research motivation to conceptualize LS. We argue that a general definition of the concept LS becomes an essential condition of its practical application for communication purposes in different areas of knowledge. From our perspective, to conceptualize LS we need to turn to social practices theory and a view of language as a social practice. The following parts of the article explain what is understood by social practices and how the approach to viewing language as a social practice contributes to the conceptualization of LS.

Social practices theory

Social practices theory has been developed by the philosophers and social scientists (Reckwitz, 2002; Holtz, 2014; Haslanger, 2018) to explore the interconnectedness of human behavior and mental activities which help individuals understand and know how complex objects interact with each other. Social practices refer to “everyday practices and the way these are typically and habitually performed in (much of) a society. Such practices – going to work, cooking, showering – are meaningful to people as parts of their everyday life activities” (Holtz, 2014). To perform such activities or social practices, people may need to integrate different elements: “...bodily and mental activities, material artefacts, knowledge, emotions, skills, and so on. Practices are social because they are similar for different individuals at different points of time and locations” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249).

An American philosopher Sally Haslanger develops this view of social practices and explains that “the social world does not begin when psychologically sophisticated individuals interact to share knowledge or make plans. Instead, culture shapes agents to interpret and respond both to each other and the physical world around us. Practices shape us as we shape them” (2018, p. 231). People as social and cultural human beings produce, negotiate and follow rules, norms and regulations which are called social practices as “a site of socially organized agency, a nexus where individual agency is enabled and constrained by social factors” (Haslanger, 2018, p. 232).

It is worth noting that “practices are defined by a set of rules that are prior to the behavior and states of mind of the participants. The practices render our action meaningful. They constitute reasons for action” (Rawls, 1955, p. 25). This argument signals that effective communicators generate and agree upon the conventional rules and norms of behavior to follow before they begin to communicate. Such rules and norms determine human behavior and make speech meaningful. On the other hand, a lack of social agreement or neglecting the rules of social practice can cause possible communication breakdowns. The opportunity to observe the social practices as “patterns of learned behavior” and to better control interactions make a methodological platform for the view of language as a social practice.

View of language as a social practice

The conceptualization of language as a social practice treats language as a product of social actions when meanings are created by participants in the process of interaction (Wittgenstein, 1967; Gumperz, 1972; Hymes, 1972; Shen, Sung, Zhang, 2015; Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2018). The theory of language as a social practice suggests that language “does not have a permanent residence *a priori* and does not exist without people co-constructing it, making use of their linguistic resources in specific situations” (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2018, p. 1003). Co-created shared meanings come as the result of coordination and mutual responsiveness to each other’s behavior that enable us to create, distribute, manage, maintain, and eliminate things that have value (Halliday, 1975, p. 245). In terms of being sensitive to language, it becomes important for all participants of a communication act to share the norms, conventions and meanings which navigate their communicative behavior and make use of linguistic resources appropriate to the situation.

In the interpretation of language as a social practice, it is crucial to analyze various layers of context which make an impact on the use of language, such as corporate, cultural, communicative, and societal. This idea increases the significance of studying the context of a communication act and the interacting socio-psychological factors or independent variables such as speakers’ motivation and attitude, personal traits, background education and professional expertise, communication style, interests, age, gender, etc. which impact the effect of communication. The interpretation of the context by a communicator becomes a key to an appropriate response. With reference to Hymes, an appropriate response in social interactions requires a speaker’s knowledge of “when to speak, when not”, “what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner” (1972, p. 277).

Language as a social practice is characterized as a dynamic, open and adaptive complex system. Understanding language through the lens of these characteristics requires “a fluid approach to language use” (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2018). From this perspective, the scholars call to view language not as a set of static elements

which are analyzed through one prism like proficiency in a language. The interpretation of language as a social practice transcends linguistic competence as the ability to choose appropriate linguistic means and use them in a specific situation (Kassis Henderson, 2005). The use of language is analyzed in terms of sociolinguistic competence of a communicator. Sociolinguistic competence, as a component of communicative competence framework, refers to “the sensitivity to, or control of the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use context; it enables us to perform language functions in ways that are appropriate to that context” (Halliday, 1975, p. 94). The definition of sociolinguistic competence heightens the significance of studying the context of communication and interacting socio-psychological factors or “independent variables” such as speakers’ motivation and attitude, personal traits, cultural background, education level, professional expertise, communication style, dialects, interests, age, gender, etc.

To sum up the main points of the view of language as a social practice, this theory emphasizes the role of context in the interpretation of social meaning of language and co-creation of shared meanings in the process of communication. The view of language as a social practice stimulated our research interest to investigate what “sensitivity to the conventions of language use” is on the operational level. Also there arises the question – what psycholinguistic actions performed by a language user enable the interpretation of social meanings of language? What could be indicators of appropriate interpretation of social meanings of language?

SENSITIVITY: the concept analysis

Conceptualization of LS necessitates the exploration of concept SENSITIVITY as a core component of this complex concept. The research method of concept analysis after Walker and Avant (2011) was employed to find out different meanings of SENSITIVITY. The process of the concept analysis was split into two stages – the conceptual study and the empirical study with the 4 steps in each one (Table 2).

Table 2. Framework of the concept analysis method (Walker, Avant, 2011)

Steps	Stage 1. The conceptual study
1	1. selecting a concept
2	2. determining the aims or purpose of analysis
3	3. identifying all uses of the concept
4	4. determining the defining attributes
	Stage 2. The empirical study
5	5. constructing a model case
6	6. constructing borderline, related, contrary cases
7	7. identifying antecedents and consequences
8	8. defining empirical referents

In this article, we present the findings from steps 1-4 of the framework, which were necessary to know a variety of meanings of SENSITIVITY in normal or ordinary use and across sciences. The findings showed the frequency of using certain general words in the interpretations of SENSITIVITY and amplified our understanding of this concept as a core component of the complex concept LS.

Step 1. Selecting the concept

The concept SENSITIVITY is analyzed from the perspective of its normal or ordinary meanings offered in the dictionaries and its scientific definitions in social, natural, humanitarian, and STEM studies.

Step 2. Determining the aim of analysis

The concept analysis aims to summarize a variety and count the frequency of usages of SENSITIVITY in different areas of knowledge and to elucidate the meaning of SENSITIVITY for our original conceptualization of LS.

Step 3. Identifying all uses of SENSITIVITY

The analysis embraced 56 identified definitions of this concept across 4 areas of knowledge: social sciences, natural sciences, STEM and the humanities (Table 3, Appendix). The analysis distinguished between two categories of definitions – ordinary/normal and scientific. The material to study included 3 types of resources: (1) the explanatory dictionaries: Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the Oxford English Dictionary, “A Concept Dictionary of English” by Julius Laffal; (2) the domain-specific dictionaries: Dictionary of Environment and Conservation by Allaby and Park, the online resource for investors and executives (Investopedia), American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology, the online resource of definitions (Definitions.net); (3) the encyclopedias: Britannica Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia of Human Behavior.

Out of 56 definitions of SENSITIVITY, there were 7 ordinary or normal usages and 49 scientific usages respectively. All the identified definitions were categorized as 23 subgroups according to the appearance of the same general word(s) in the definitions (Table 2, Appendix). The frequency of using the general words in every analyzed area of knowledge varies and leads to some interesting conclusions.

There has been identified 4 general words in the ordinary or normal usages of the concept: “quality”, “property”, “state” and “tendency”. The method of quantitative counting of the repeating general words demonstrated that the most frequent usage of SENSITIVITY is through the word “quality”, for example, “the quality or state of being sensitive or hypersensitive” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) and “the quality of needing to be handled in a careful or secret way” (Britannica Encyclopedia). SENSITIVITY is also defined as a living being’s “state or property of being capable of sensation (sensation, or of perceiving sensations of a particular type)” (The Oxford English Dictionary), as well as “the tendency to become upset about things that are done to you, are said about you, or relate to you” (Britannica Encyclopedia). The latter refers to an affective or emotional side of human behavior.

Regarding the scientific interpretations of SENSITIVITY, the analysis disclosed the most frequently used general word “ability” in the definitions (16 mentions). Noteworthy, most of the mentions relate to the usages in the social sciences which can be explained by a primary scientific focus on the study of human behavior and social interactions. In psychology, sensitivity is defined as “the ability of a sensory system to perceive stimuli” (American Psychological Association. Dictionary of Psychology). More specifically, the multidisciplinary community of scholars who perform manifold research on SENSITIVITY, determine it as “the ability to perceive and process information about the environment” (Sensitivity Research), pointing out that all people have the ability of being sensitive by nature although some people are considerably more sensitive than others.

There were identified 5 mentions of SENSITIVITY through the general word “awareness” in the social sciences. It mostly refers to “the awareness of needs and emotions of others” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), as well as “awareness of and responsiveness to the feelings of others” (American Psychological Association. Dictionary of Psychology; Encyclopedia of Human Behavior).

In natural sciences, the interpretations of SENSITIVITY through the general word “ability” are also quite frequent. For example, in physics, sensitivity of a device is interpreted as “the ability to respond to physical stimuli or to register small physical amounts or differences” (Definitions.net). SENSITIVITY in biology is treated as “the ability of an organism to perceive, process and conduct emotional and sensual stimuli” (The Systems Biology Group), while the experts in neuroscience define SENSITIVITY as “a behavioral quality with multifaceted origins whose effects are situationally and developmentally specific” (Thompson, 1997, p. 595).

As for the usages identified in the technical sciences, SENSITIVITY is viewed as “the ability of a device to sense very small changes in something” (Britannica Encyclopedia). This definition is specified in the systems theory which treats it as “a measure for the strength of the reaction of a system to a certain stimulus”. In physics, SENSITIVITY is studied as “a property of an entity, possibly modeled as a black box, and characterizes the ability of the entity to produce a variation of its output in response to a variation of the received input” (Mencattini, Mari, 2015).

Such a diversity of ordinary and scientific usages of SENSITIVITY allows the authors of the article to trace some interesting patterns in the usage of SENSITIVITY. It was found that the ordinary as well as scientific meanings of SENSITIVITY across sciences have specific and sometimes complementary meanings. For example, two sets of the definitions in the social sciences – those through the general word “ability” and those through the general word “awareness” are complementary in part they acknowledge two essential sides of human behavior – cognitive and affective. The emphasis on an affective side of human behavior is also supported by the ordinary usage of sensitivity: “awareness of the needs and emotions of others” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Along with the focus on awareness, communication studies emphasize the necessity “to strike the balance between the right amount of sense and the right amount of feeling (sensitivity)” (Explearning Online Platform).

Step 4. *Determining the defining attributes of SENSITIVITY*

The concept analysis method demonstrated that the identified interpretations of SENSITIVITY are context-bound and science-specific. The findings indicated that SENSITIVITY refers to physiological, cognitive and emotional states of an individual; it also acts as a measure of a system.

In social studies, in which the interpretation of SENSITIVITY refers to a level of intelligence, mental power or a scope of knowledge and expertise of an individual, the concept is defined as an ability which can be developed. In this sense, SENSITIVITY is sometimes determined as a human mindset which is applied in one’s everyday life (Hart, Carlson, Eadie, 1980).

However, in natural and technical studies, SENSITIVITY is viewed as a property of an entity characterizing a particular ability of the entity. Both considerations of sensitivity as an ability and that of a property of an ability exist because they cover different dimensions of the complex system for different interpretation purposes. For example, in the educational context, for the purpose of designing and implementing language and communication courses, it is important to understand that LS can be developed, measured and evaluated.

According to the view of language as a social practice, which makes the theoretical foundation of this study, LS transcends the linguistic ability of an individual and it embraces a set of interacting factors which influence the use of language in various social contexts. Each interaction is thought to be unique in that a concrete outcome of communication and the processes of decision making about what to say and how to say are subject to variations.

The findings obtained from the concept analysis of SENSITIVITY have led the authors of the article to conclude on its 4 defining attributes: (1) it is perception and reaction of an entity to stimuli, (2) it relates to variations (situational, contextual, developmental), (3) it can detect slight changes, (4) it stands for an ability or property of an entity which characterizes the ability of that entity.

Conclusion

Research findings. This research investigated the concept LS as a socio-cultural phenomenon which first was determined in the article on linguistics in the middle of the 20th century (MacEoin, 1959). The study revealed that the existing interpretations of LS in the English-language publications by foreign scholars lack a common theoretical framework for conceptualization of LS and they mainly serve for pragmatic communication purposes. The article presents the research findings according to the tasks stated at the beginning of the study:

1. There were identified and summarized three main characteristics of LS: (1) a deliberate choice of words by the speaker who takes into account the needs and interests of other participants; (2) the ability of a language-sensitive individual to critically analyze the context of communication by recognizing (in)appropriate behavior, and (3) a non-confrontational communication when every participant feels satisfied with the outcomes of communication.

2. The article conceptualizes LS from the view of language as a social practice which shows that language operates as a dynamic and open complex system within context-bound social interactions. This perspective raises the importance of analyzing and evaluating the context in the interpretation of a social meaning of language in the process of communication.

3. The concept analysis of SENSITIVITY after Walker and Avant (2011) as a core component of the complex concept LS helped the authors specify the general word in their original definition of LS. There were revealed four attributes of SENSITIVITY: (1) perception and reaction of an entity to a stimulus; (2) relatedness to variations; (3) detection of slight changes; (4) a property which characterizes an entity's ability.

4. Based on the critique of the existing interpretations of LS, the view of language as a product of social practices and the analysis of SENSITIVITY, the authors determine LS as a degree to which a language user detects contextual variations in the use of language when interpreting, evaluating and predicting. LS as a property of a language user's ability to detect contextual variations in the use of language includes the processes of interpreting, evaluating and predicting contextual variations on the scale from broad contextual cues to more nuanced or granular contextual cues. The ability to detect more nuanced or granular contextual cues indicates sensitivity of an individual to the use of language. The authors believe that the proposed definition of LS can be considered universal across different sciences and serve as a framework for specific research paradigms. At the same time, the proposed definition of LS needs a broader academic discussion because of the qualitative nature of the social practices theory which views different social contexts as coincidental and unique. This poses a significant challenge to the empirical testing of LS since every communicative situation is always open for interpretation. A fresh look at the situation may bring about another reading of a communicative act and change the overall understanding of the context. The offered definition of LS can serve as a platform for further empirical studies that could contribute to studies in other sciences such as applied linguistics, communication studies, pedagogy and psychology.

LS as a property of a language user's ability to detect contextual variations in the use of language is subject to development, measurement and evaluation in the process of learning. The proposed definition includes performing three skills – interpreting the detected contextual variations in verbal and non-verbal communicative behavior of oneself and others, evaluating and predicting the outcomes of (in)appropriate communicative behavior. Interpretation, evaluation and prediction of context-specific language and other contextual cues result in an appropriate response by a language user.

Further research perspectives. The diversity of contextual cues as indicators of language-sensitive social interactions will be described in the following stage of the research. All context cues will be classified as 2 groups – broad contextual socio-cultural cues and granular contextual cues revealing nuances of social interactions. By detecting and understanding the implications of granular context cues, language users consider them when interpreting, evaluating and predicting the effect of context-specific language. By doing so, the authors think that a language user demonstrates sensitivity to the use of language. Findings obtained at the following empirical stage of the research will be applied for educational purposes, in particular in shaping learning practices how to develop and measure LS in communication.

The authors also think that the understanding of LS opens up new perspectives for higher education worldwide, that is why it needs to be investigated so that educators could integrate it into their subject-specific course syllabuses, such as pedagogy, psychology, communication, business and management courses.

Appendix. Table 3. Distribution of the general words in the definitions of the term “sensitivity” across sciences and in ordinary (normal) usages (compiled by the authors)

#	General words in the definitions (the number of mentions)	Ordinary (normal) usages	Social sciences						Natural sciences					STEM fields		Humanities
			Communication studies	Psychology	Medicine, healthcare	Pedagogy	Business ethics	Neuro-science; human behavior	Physics	Physiology	Environment	Biology	Finance	Computer studies	Experiment (method)	
1	ability (16)		• • •	• • •		•	•	• •	• •	•		•			•	•
2	awareness (5)		•	• • •		•										
3	quality (5)	• • •						•		•						
4	capacity (3)			• •						•						
5	measure (3)				•							• •				
6	human trait (2)			• •												
7	degree (2)								•		•					
8	property (2)	•							•							
9	state (2)	• •														
10	tendency (3)	•						• •								
11	response											•				
12	responsiveness									•						
13	perception						•									
14	probability			•												
15	susceptibility			•												
16	criteria														•	
17	dimension							•								
18	magnitude												•			
19	fraction													•		
20	quotient								•							
21	frequency				•											
22	mindset		•													
23	desire (to motivate oneself)		•													
	Total (56)	7	6	12	2	2	2	6	5	4	1	4	1	1	2	1

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