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DISTANCING POLITENESS IN THE ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

The article deals with the notion of «distancing politeness» within the context of Anglo-Saxon cultural ethos and considers its linguistic implementation in the English language.

Key words: communication, culture, politeness theory, distancing politeness, approaching politeness.

Статья рассматривает стратегию «вежливость дистанцирования» в контексте англо-саксонской культурной традиции и средства её языковой реализации в английском языке.

Ключевые слова: коммуникация, культура, теория вежливости, вежливость дистанцирования, вежливость сближения.

Статья розглядає стратегію «ввічливість дистанціювання» в контексті англо-саксонської культурної традиції та засоби її мовної реалізації в англійській мові.

Ключові слова: комунікація, культура, теорія ввічливості, ввічливість дистанціювання, ввічливість зближення.

Linguists and anthropologists, considering the culture-communication correlation issues, have long recognized that communication is always culturally bound [1; 5; 9; 14; 15]. Its efficient implementation requires compliance and aptitude for learning cultural differences, as well as social interactional and pragmatic norms, determining the choice of specific communication strategies, tactics and patterns which constitute the conversational style of the target language community, formed by and reflecting cultural values.

Communication is not only the transmission of information. In Grice's view, to maintain effective communication it is necessary for the parties to cooperate. Part of successful cooperation is for the parties «to mutually understand and employ the politeness strategies for the given situation in order to acknowledge social relationships, maintain harmony, and understand the real meaning of the language used» [11, p. 41]. In this sense, politeness can be viewed as one of the social phenomena that regulates the interpersonal communication, whose purpose is to consider others' feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort, and promote rapport» or «save face» [12, p. 349].

Politeness has been given a great deal of attention in various fields: anthropology, linguistics, pedagogy, psychology [1; 10; 11; 12]. In pragmatic linguistics, Grice's Cooperation Principle, J. Searle and J. Austin's Speech Act Theory have long remained its anchor points. For the last 20-30 years dozens of articles and manuscripts have appeared on «politeness» theory [5; 6; 7; 9] whose authors study the 'politeness' category as the system of ritualized communicative strategies, aimed at a comfortable, conflict-free interaction in compliance with social ethics, and, therefore, determining the choice of appropriate tactics and linguistic devices. In 1987 Brown and Levinson proposed a politeness model which analyses politeness in two broad groups with reference to Goffman's construct of «face» («public self-image that every person wants for himself in interaction» [10, p. 23]: positive politeness (intended to avoid giving offense by highlighting friendliness) and negative politeness which is «avoidance based» [7, p. 146] (ensuring that the speaker will not interfere with the addressee's freedom of action by showing deference). Consequently, positive politeness is concerned with demonstrating closeness and affiliation, and negative – with distance and formality. Brown and Levinson proposed that the communicator's choice of strategies (bald on record, positive and negative politeness, off-record) depends on distance, power and level of the imposition. As power, distance and imposition increase, individuals will use higher level strategies. In other words, politeness strategy suggests that «negative («distancing», in Scollon and Scollon's classification [14, p. 67]) strategies are more polite than positive ones.

In Brown and Levinson's view, «distancing politeness» is the «heart of respective behavior» [7, p. 129]. It involves a set of conventionalized tactics, intended to preserve the hearer's personal autonomy, certain emotional distance («familiarity breeds contempt» [7, p. 156]), deference and regard for territory.

According to Brown and Levinson's politeness formulation, the Anglo-Saxon culture is oriented in distancing politeness. It is not surprising for the community where personal autonomy (privacy) appears to be one of the most important cultural values. Granting this fact, it seems that delving into the nature of this strategy can be of great interest and help to researchers and practitioners.

So, the focus of this study is «distancing politeness» strategy and its language manifestation in the Anglo-Saxon verbal communication. Using the framework of cultural concepts to link theoretical work on cognitive linguistics, and research in cross-cultural pragmatics, this article posits the hypothesis that «distancing» regulates the English communicative behavior, eliciting the preferred rapport tactics and linguistic means within the conceptual framework of the English culture. The aim is to elicit and describe grammatical and lexico-semantic devices of expressing the category of distancing politeness in the Anglo-Saxon oral communication, adopting a radical function-to-form approach to the matter. In analyzing the use of distancing tactics we consider their rate, type of such expressions and functions for which they are used. What predetermines the main problem of the research is the fact that «distancing» as well as other concepts «privacy», «individualism» reflects the main identities of the national character, highlighting ethnospecificity of the Anglo-Saxon mentality. The goal is to find out which conceptual and communicative dimensions

determine the speaker's choice of «distancing» strategies and how these dimensions trigger the selection of specific form types and correlate with their special semantic and grammatical features. Besides, the article aims to provide EFL teachers with ideas about classroom practices which will teach culture appropriately by fostering pragmatic awareness and interactional awareness cross-culturally.

The relevance of this study is due not only to the growing interest to pragmatic researches of language and especially categories of politeness in view of developing international cooperation but also to the lack of comprehensive description of language manifestation of politeness strategies in the English language. There is a need in investigating the specific communication categories in their correlation to cultural values, social interactional norms and mental identities.

The politeness strategies in different cultures have been widely investigated in academic works [2; 3; 5; 6; 7; 9]. But still little attention is paid to studying the issues of their language implementation in the English verbal communication. Recently, however, due to the development of cognitive linguistics, dealing with the language phenomena in the light of mental concepts, the topic can gain new perspectives.

There is a claim that a society can be identified in terms of a unique «ethos» which is manifested in the strategies and patterns which constitute a conversational style that can be thought of as a «summation of the social norms tied to a linguistic and cultural framework» [8, p. 191]. Brown & Levinson characterize the Anglo-Saxon ethos as a «prototypical negative face culture with a strong emphasis on indirectness and politeness in interpersonal communication» [7, p. 160]. Cultural differences in communication and politeness system can be understood in the context of culture specific social relations, cultural values and concepts.

The basic premise of the Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition, which is considered individualistic, is egocentric personal autonomy. Each person is viewed as having inalienable right to autonomy, who can't stand interference and imposition on others and show tolerance and deference for individual identities. Each individual is unique and has equal claims to this right. The notion of personal autonomy in the English language correlates with the special concepts of «privacy» and «distance».

'Privacy' is a specific English word, which is defined as «being alone or undisturbed; the right to this freedom from intrusion or public attention» [2, p. 43]. J. Paxman calls it «one of the defining characteristics of the English», «one of the country's informing principles» [13, p. 117–118]. Echoing him, Larina T. asserts that, 'personal space (privacy) is sacred in the English culture; so, any intrusion into privacy is the most blatant breach of communicative norms» [3, p. 234]. The reason is «the want of a Speaker that his action be unimpeded by others» [7, p. 156], i. e. the desire to save his «negative face», that includes being indirect, not being open, being apologetic, being avoidant, being uncertain, and being professional. These categories correspond to Brown and Levinson's «negative politeness» (distancing) strategies of «being indirect, hedging, being pessimistic, minimizing the imposition, being deferential, and being apologetic» [7, p. 167].

Byrnes, using the methodology of starting from stereotypes suggests that English conversational style «is weighted towards «distancing strategies» [8, p. 86], i. e. toward more indirect approaches which highlight avoiding imposition by providing options for the recipient. She characterizes the British conversational style as subtly «negative», i. e. deferential. She hypothesizes that such conversational style allows the individualism which the British favors ideologically, in that respect for the individuality of others protects one's own by maintaining reciprocal respect. P. Brown and S. Levinson call distancing politeness strategy the «heart of respective behaviour» [7, p. 129]. As no other strategy, it helps the English to smooth over the differences in a talk, and therefore, it results in successful and comfortable communication.

The strategy of *distancing*, manifested in lexical, grammatical and semantical levels, combines linguistic devices and social messages in patterns expressive of cultural values and sensitive to interactional context;... and their appropriate use requires that speakers know rules dictating both linguistic form and situational relevance...» [9, p. 95]. Culturally inappropriate use can cause communication conflict as well as communication breakdown, making the speakers feel uncomfortable while communicating.

Many researchers agree [2; 3; 5; 6; 8; 15] that, the notions of indirectness and politeness play a crucial role in the negotiation of «face» during the implementation of speech acts of requests. According to Brown and Levinson's «politeness theory» [7], requests are intrinsically face-threatening speech acts (FTAS), since, by making a request, the speaker infringes on the recipient's negative face (i. e., freedom of action and freedom from imposition). One way for the speaker to minimize the imposition involved in the request is to employ indirect (referring to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance as conventionalized in the language) strategies rather than direct ones.

On a linguistic level, the range of available language means with which to manipulate the imposition and soften the impact of the request involves a set of lexical (word choice, interpersonal and emphatic markers, hedges and down-toning expressions) grammatical and syntactical mitigators (modals, active and passive voice forms, interrogative constructions, subjunctive mood, etc.). Modality plays a very important role in the language implementation of «distancing» strategy. Modal verbs in English are strong indicators of the degree of politeness inherent in a request. They help to avoid «the appearance of trying to control or impose on the hearer» [7, p. 156] and, therefore, seem to be more polite. There is, above all, the system of modal verbs – *can, could, may, might, must, ought to, will, would, shall, should* and quasimodal verbs *have (got) to, need to, had better*.

Could, might, would in interrogative constructions are much milder than *can, may, will* and are employed to make request/offers, critical remarks sound less imperative and direct: 'Could you please bring me...'; 'Will/would you do that for me?'; 'How would you feel about doing... whatever?' The English use them for interpersonal communication to avoid direct expression of their will. They are involved in numerous 'fixed' polite formulae as patterned constructions – conditional, subjunctive and interrogative.

Modal verbs are often preceded by various hedges ('*I don't know*') or mental verbs (*see*) which make request more tentative and polite, followed by a suppositional clause: 'I wanted to see if it would be possible to miss tomorrow night

because there's going to be a concert'; 'I don't know if you could give me a ride here to the closest gas station or if you would be able to tell me how um to take a taxi or something to get there'. The patterns 'would+ *say, call, think*' ('I'd say.../I'd think...'), or '*would+like/prefer*' ('I'd like to.../I'd prefer...') which are more common in wishes and offers make them more polite. Asking 'Would you like a cookie?' is preferable to 'Do you want a cookie?' In requesting for advice: 'There's something I'd like to ask you to do'; 'I'd like to know your opinion/what you think about this' they imply respect for the person asked.

Modal verbs in conditional constructions with *if* are very common in requests, advice and offers: 'I wonder if you might be interested in...'; 'If I were you, I'd...'; 'It would be better if...'; 'It would be good/nice if you could do...'. Using conditional structures, the requestor can pose his question so that the refusals should not sound very rude, and a favor/assistance shouldn't be intrusive: 'It would be really nice if you could, but don't worry if you don't have the time'; 'I could go and see him if that would help'. Overall, the use of conditional or subjunctive forms to convey an indirect request seems to be the preferred strategy to produce a politeness effect. This kind of an internal modification may serve as a distancing tactic to express deferential politeness, distancing the speaker from the content of the proposition and the recipient.

A number of researches [2; 3; 15] suggested including in the set of linguistic elements, expressing modality, modal expressions *be able, be going to*, modal adjectives and adverbs *necessary/necessarily, probable/probably, possible/possibly, presumably, definitely, perhaps*, and some parentheticals *I think, I believe, I'm sure*: 'Is this film worth seeing? – Yes, I think so'; 'Perhaps you'd better not do that/ It might be better for you not to do that'; 'I don't think I can/ I'm afraid I can't/ I don't really agree with you'.

The speaker might also try to reduce the size of imposition of the request and use past-tense and future-tense verb forms that distance the speaker from the subject of request/question, shifting the latter somehow into past or future and, so giving freedom in choosing responses. Instead of very imperative 'Leave the room'; 'Join us in five minutes', correct English would be 'You will need to leave the room'; 'Will you join us in five minutes?' or 'I was wondering if I could talk to you...'; 'I was really hoping if I could have the weekend free'. The past indefinite and continuous forms make the request seem less direct and urgent.

The continuous-tense forms make requests/questions sound as casual remarks, and intentions or offers tend to be less demanding. compare: 'Will you be leaving this afternoon?' (enquiring about one's plans); 'Are you going to leave this afternoon?' (pressing for a decision) and 'Will you leave this afternoon?' (request/ordering).

The other ways of distancing in English are *understatement* (when what is said is less important than it actually is) and *overstatement* (on the contrary, what is said is more significant than it really is). Both tactics are intended to make communication emotionally neutral, polite and natural.

Understatement tends to reduce the significance and the importance of what is actually said, and aims to carefully treat the interlocutor and his/her feelings. When it comes to something very intimate, delicate (sharing one's feelings/impressions, announcing grave news), or, on the contrary, something very negative (negative attitude, complaints), we employ *understatement* strategy. In such situations, the main goal is to keep a friendly talk, avoiding any discomfort and uneasiness of the utterance: 'I am not too well at the moment' instead of 'I'm very ill'; 'It's not good enough' instead of 'It's very bad'; 'I'm a bit disappointed' instead of 'I'm desperate', etc. Some scholars interpret this strategy as «Language of Doublespeak» [2, p. 55]. The «weight» of the utterance and the severity of imposition on the hearer can be regulated with different mitigating devices:

1. Devices that are employed to minimize the imposition on the recipient (*just, a bit/a little, only*) and assertive words (*somehow, somewhat*). They nullify undesirable emotions when making an excuse or apologizing, and help to conceal despire: 'She could give *a little* more attention to details'; 'I know, it was *just* a sketch and she is *only* making her first steps in drawing, but she seems *a bit* slow, I'd say'; 'Oscar, lower it *a bit*, would you?'

2. Fillers (*a kind of, a sort of, so to speak, more or less*, etc.): i. e. items that soften the directness of the utterance: 'You see, I *kind of* borrowed your son's car, *so to speak*, it worked *more or less* alright but then suddenly the engine *sort of* ceased to work'.

3. Verbs of intention (*to be inclined, to tend, to intend*): instead of 'He criticizes everyone lately', more correct variant would be 'He *tends to* be rather critically minded lately'.

4. *Negation* as a way of realising the significance of the utterance is presented in three constructions: direct negation, hidden (implied) negation and double negation. The direct negation relates to the verb, or is transferred to the verb of thinking (*transferred negation*), or can be expressed with non-assertive words. The direct negative construction tends to replace the emotionally-coloured word in the positive construction by choosing a more neutral synonym: 'It's not too exciting' instead of 'It's dull'; 'I'm not quite clear on...' instead of 'I don't understand'; 'I'm not particularly fond of snakes' instead of 'I'm afraid of snakes'.

The hidden negation can be presented «implicitly» in positive sentences by replacing the direct negation with negative adverbs (*hardly, barely, scarcely*) or adverbs minimizing the significance (*few, little*), or appropriate verbs and participles (*fail, lack*): 'He *barely* touched his drink' instead of 'He didn't touch his drink'.

When negative words with negative prefixes or prepositions are used in negative sentences, we deal with double negation: 'He *doesn't* look *unfriendly*; he *is not* likely to be *devoid* of human weaknesses' (= 'He looks friendly and human').

Overstatement, unlike *understatement*, exaggerates and enhances what is said to produce a positive effect in spoken and conversational discourse. The English apply it when praising, expressing sympathy, thanks and gratitude, or apologizing, etc. The strategy of *overstatement* employs a number of hedging and intensifying devices with adjectival or adverbial modifying functions: emphatics and amplifiers *how, so, too, extremely, terribly, awfully, much, exact, total* are common in positive and exclamatory sentences, expressing praise or complimenting: 'You were a

great help, and I am *really* thankful'; 'Thank you for a *most* lovely party!'; 'All those *extremely* funny surprises!'; 'That was *very* considerate of you!'.

Another way to exaggerate the significance of the utterance is to employ emotionally-coloured, semantically positive verbs *love*, *hate*, or adjective *great*, *awful*, *silly* with intensifying function. For English speakers, there is only one standard response to 'How are you?' That is 'Fine/Great/OK/Pretty well/Super, thank you'. In answer to an invitation such as 'Would you come to our place for dinner next Friday?' the English version is 'I'd be delighted/glad/I'd love to'. A few simple phrases will suffice for most situations (bothering someone, bumping into someone, having forgotten something, giving unintentional offence): 'I'm (so/really) sorry, please, excuse me'; 'I hate to bother you during the lecture/I'm awfully sorry to interrupt your lecture but... '.

In the same vein, the English are inclined to follow the rules of a *small talk*. Trying to win the interlocutor, they say what the former would love to hear, exaggerating ones' merits and their weaknesses and showering praises and compliments. On the whole, speakers of English lingua cultures use the «addressee's positive evaluation» strategy more often (e. g. It looks gorgeous/ fantastic/ wonderful/ superb / fabulous!) than Ukrainian or Russian speakers.

To sum up, the preference for conventional indirectness and elaboration in «distancing» politeness strategies, which prevail in everyday encounters, reflects the importance of personal autonomy in the Anglo-Saxon culture. The English seem to place a higher value on privacy, cultural norms demand a more «distant and formal system of behavior» [3, 240].

Culturally-specific politeness strategies form a culturally distinct interactional communicative style. In interpersonal communication the English style is indirect, deferential. It can be called Hearer-oriented. The main emphasis is put on the form of the utterance and on softening the imposition. It manifests itself on different linguistic levels – lexical, grammatical syntactical (modal verbs, understatements, overstatements, nominatives, etc.).

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