

## VERBAL COMMUNICATIVE STYLE FROM THE US LINGUA-CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

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*Стаття присвячена проблемі американського вербального комунікативного стилю (АВКС). Систематизовано культурні чинники, які зумовлюють комунікативну поведінку носіїв лінгвокультури США. Узагальнено й структуровано риси АВКС, які об'єктивуються в комунікації.*

*Ключові слова: вербальний комунікативний стиль, індивідуалізм, низькоконтекстуальність, низька дистанція влади; прямий, точний, інструментальний, особистісний стиль.*

*The paper focuses on the problem of American verbal communicative style. The underlying cultural assumptions that influence American speakers' verbal behavior are structured. A set of dimensions of culture conditioned verbal behavior of the US lingua-culture are systematized.*

*Key words: verbal communicative style, individualism, low context, low power distance; direct, exacting, instrumental, personal style.*

*Another culture can be different without being defective.*

R.H. Pells

Lingua-cultures have distinctive preferences for designing effective verbal messages and attach their own significance and normative value on different verbal modes of interaction [8; 10; 14; 21]. The understanding of underlying cultural values of different ethnic and national groups and their impact on communication is the key to establishing successful communication patterns and interaction between intercultural speakers (Л. В. Куликова; Т. В. Ларина; М. Clyne; C. E. Davies; J. House; T. Novinger). These considerations reveal the importance and **topicality** of verbal communicative style research from ethnic culture perspectives.

The **main objective** of this paper is to outline a set of dimensions of culture conditioned verbal behavior of the US lingua-culture. The **object** of our analysis comprises underlying cultural assumptions which mentally “program” American speakers to interact with their interlocutors in intercultural communication settings in a culture specific way. The **subject** of this paper is a set of distinctive features of American verbal communicative style.

Understanding similarities and differences in communication across cultures requires knowledge about how cultures differ. There are certain sets of variables or dimensions on which cultures can be different or similar that can be used to explain communication across cultures [12; 14]. Some of these well-known frameworks for comparing cultures include individualism vs. collectivism, T. Hall's high-context vs. low-context cultures [11], Geert Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability [11], P. Brown and S. Levinson's theory of politeness [3], Ron Scollon and Suzanne W. Scollon's [20] aspects of culture which are most significant for the understanding of a culture's systems of discourse.

The application of the above mentioned interpretative mechanisms helps reconstruct a set of American culture revealing features that have an impact on its communicative style. According to the individualism vs. collectivism dimension, the US lingua-culture is defined as individualistic in which the autonomy of the individual is reaffirmed (the personal identity is “I”, not “we”) whose interests prevail over the interests of the group [13: 51]. In such cultures “<... the ties between the individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate (nuclear) family” [ibid.]. Each person is viewed as having a unique set of talents and potentials, with self-realization being the chief virtue. People tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to all. In contrast, in collectivistic societies “<... people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty...>.” [13: 51; 10: 43].

Being predominantly individualistic because of the autonomy of individuals, the US lingua-culture is also defined as low-context, due to the tendency that most of the information is likely to be vested in the explicit, transmitted verbal part of the message; all important data are incorporated into the communication events themselves [11: 70]. Metaphorically, such cultures are named “*I mean it*” cultures: *what is said is said*. In contrast, in high-context cultures, much of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the speaker [11: 79], and correct decoding of the message depends more on the non-verbal context than on its verbal part, it requires extensive knowledge of the historical background and ethos of the community etc. For the interpretation of

the message, *who* says is as relevant as *what* is said. However, it should be kept in mind, that low- and high-context communication exists in all cultures, but one tends to predominate [10 :45].

The level of context influences communication so that members of low-context individualistic cultures tend to communicate in a direct fashion, while members of high-context, collectivistic cultures tend to communicate in an indirect fashion [10: 45]. "<...While talking about something that they have on their minds, high-context individuals will expect his/her interlocutor to know what's bothering him/her, so that he/she doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he/she will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly – this keystone is the role of his/her interlocutor...>" [11: 98]. From that, it appears that low-context cultures tend to place most of the responsibility for the correct understanding of the message on the speaker, they are speaker-oriented, while high-context cultures, on the contrary, vest this responsibility in the listeners: they are listener-oriented.

Cultures also differ in the way they handle inequality [13: 23]. As a matter of fact, there is any inequality in any society, as some people acquire more wealth, status and respect than others. Societies that promote power equalization, and in which differences in power are associated with power abuse are called small/ low power distance societies [ibid.]. In contrast, those cultures which accept that power is distributed unequally are large/ high power distance societies. Power distance can therefore be defined as "<... the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally ...>" [13: 28]. In Hostede's study, the US lingua-culture is predominantly low power distance which describes it as follows: there is a common practice that inequalities among people are likely to be minimized (but not expected and desired), parents tend to treat children as equals, subordinates tend to expect to be consulted (instead of the norm that subordinates expect to be told what to do), hierarchy in organizations typically means an inequality of roles, established for convenience (but does not reflect the existential inequality between higher-ups and lower-ups), privileges and status symbols are typically frowned upon (but not expected or popular), the use of power is normally legitimate and is subject to criteria of good and evil (instead of the cultural norm that might prevails over right: whoever holds the power is right and good) [ibid:37].

Power distance is useful in understanding the behavior of the individuals from a lingua-culture in role relationships, especially those involving different degrees of power and authority [10: 47]. Edward Finegan [9:3 11] points out that social inequality between interlocutors, e.g. boss and employee, doctor and patient, teacher and student, is often reflected in how often and when interlocutors claim turns: "<... in American work settings, superiors commonly begin conversations by asking a question and letting subordinates report;... thus subordinates hold the floor for longer period of time than superiors;... in some cultures, superiors talk, while subordinates listen...".

Furthermore, it is claimed that American verbal interaction style tends to emphasize the personhood of the speakers and aims for informality: "North Americans tend to treat other people with informality and directness... they shun the formal codes of conduct, titles, honorifics, and ritualistic manners in the interaction with others... they instead prefer a first-name basis and direct address... [19 : 27]. This rhetoric preference stems from the American cultural emphasis on "doing" vs. "being", i.e. an individual's achievement and development are more important than their birth, family background, age etc. [19]: "*What the speaker does*" carries greater significance than "*what he is*". The proclivity toward "doing" is found in such common American expressions as "*How are you doing?*" or "*What's happening?*".

Power distance also helps understand how speakers know how to show respect or intimacy without making errors that insult addressees; in high power distance cultures special linguistic markers – honorifics – are used to signal respect toward an addressee [2: 89]. In the US lingua-culture, the most frequently used address forms are: First Name (FN) and Title+Last Name (TLN) with three possible exchanges of these forms in two-party conversations [2: 83]: 1) reciprocal FN (each participant calls the other by FN); 2) reciprocal TLN; 3) nonreciprocal FN-TLN (one speaker uses TLN but receives FN or vice versa).

Speakers select the options depending on the perceived relationship between themselves with the occupational status and relative age are the most significant factors in the choice of forms [5]. Reciprocal FN is the most common address form used by status equals, reciprocal TLN is used

between adults who have only recently become acquainted, and speakers tend to shift from TLN to FN fairly quickly, especially if both interlocutors are young and/or of the same gender [*ibid.*]. The underlying meaning of FN in American communicative style is both “intimacy and condescension”, whereas TLN marks “distance and deference” [*ibid.*:380].

American address is additionally complicated by possibilities of multiple patterns of FN forms: full FN *Thomas*, shortened FL *Tom*, diminutive *Tommy*; nicknames or abbreviated or otherwise forms of LN are also possible (e.g. *Ferguson* = *Fergie*) [20: 84]. When used mutually between adults, diminutives signal intimacy and affection.

Cultural norms set boundaries not only for forms of address, but for conversation topic choices which are typically based on the combination of personal interest and sensitivity to preferences of co-participants [2: 91]. According to Nancy Bonvillian, <... formal settings predetermine a specific range of topics, informal settings are less constraining, but cultural values are relevant to choice of topic, too. Certain topics will be selected or avoided for discussion with some people, for example, in the US lingua-culture, it is considered highly inappropriate to talk about one’s personal problems to a stranger or even to a casual acquaintance: such a topic selection would likely be evaluated as a symptom of a psychological disorder; ... discussion of bodily functions during meals is generally countered with such admonitions as “Don’t talk about it at dinner table!” or “I don’t want to hear about that while I’m eating!”...> [*ibid.*: 82; 91].

In accordance with the above analyzed dimensions of cultural variability worked out by various scholars, the US lingua-culture can be described as individualistic, low context, low power distance. These features are indispensable in understanding culture specific nature of American communicative style.

Though the terms “communicative style”, “verbal style”, “conversational style” (treated as synonymous within the framework of this paper) are widely used in current linguistic discourse, there is no explicit definition of the corresponding notion. In the broadest sense, style is defined as a meta-message that contextualizes how interlocutors should accept and interpret a verbal message [10:100]. The main function of style is that it carries the tonal coloring of a message through shades of tonal qualities, modes of nonverbal channels, and consistent thematic developments in the discourse process [*ibid.*: 100]. Overall, “verbal interaction styles reflect and embody the *affective*, *moral*, and *aesthetic* patterns of a culture” [16: 1].

A conversational style can also be thought of as ‘a summation of the social norms tied to a linguistic and cultural framework’ [6: 191]. The claim is that a society can be identified in terms of a unique ‘ethos’ which is manifested in the verbal interaction of its members. Scholars [3] offer two primary styles identified as solidarity (due to the human need to be included) and deference (due to the need to be free from interference). Brown and Levinson [3: 102] characterize American ethos as solidarity based, and emphasize the following common ground on which members of this lingua-culture may build relationships: 1) notice, attend to Hearer; 2) exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with Hearer; 3) claim in-group membership with Hearer; 4) claim common point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, empathy; 5) be optimistic; joke; 6) indicate that Speaker knows Hearer’s wants and is taking them into account. Imposition avoidance and providing options for the addressee are considered typical of American conversational style [6: 198]. This is seen as the result of the individualism and the absence of a clearly defined society’s class and power structure.

The term “verbal style” can also refer to a method proposed by Roderick P. Hart to analyze the rhetoric of US presidents which is actually a computer-based content analysis of the words spoken by presidents during speeches [1]. These word counts are subjected to statistical analysis to determine the strength of the four variables (dictionaries) in presidential speeches: activity, certainty, optimism, and realism, where Activity refers to motion, or change, or the implementation of ideas; Certainty includes statements demonstrating resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness; Optimism statements endorse someone or something, offer positive descriptions, or predict favorable occurrences; Realism expresses tangible, immediate, and practical issues [op. cit.]. Taken collectively and analyzed as such in a presidential speech, these variables help construct a rhetorical picture of the president. This mechanism can work well in constructing rhetorical “portraits” of individual speakers, but it is not so effective in the venue of verbal communication typical of a lingua-culture.

The most relevant theoretical representation of the communicative style which can be applied to the American verbal behavior description, in our opinion, is presented by the authors of the book "Culture and Interpersonal Communication" who isolate the following four stylistic modes and give a description of their distinctive features: 1) direct vs. indirect style; 2) elaborate vs. succinct style; 3) personal vs. contextual style, and 4) instrumental vs. affective style [10: 100].

In line with this framework of reference, American verbal interaction style can be defined as 1) *direct* (speakers tend to freely reveal their intentions through explicit verbal communication); 2) *exacting* (the speaker's contribution in verbal interaction is neither more nor less information than required); 3) *personal* (using certain linguistic devices to enhance the sense of "I"); and 4) *instrumental* (sender-oriented language usage relying heavily on accomplishing goal objective).

Direct vs. indirect style refers to the extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit verbal communication [Gudykunst et al 1988:100]. It is surmised by some that communicative styles of certain cultures are more direct (given to 'overstatement'), the styles of others more indirect (given to 'understatement') [7: 960]. Direct verbal messages embody and invoke the speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and desires; ...the value orientations of individualism propels North Americans to speak their minds freely through direct verbal expressions [10: 100], e.g. North Americans tend to use explicit words, employing such categorical words as "*absolutely*", "*certainly*", and "*positively*". Verbal styles of North Americans reflect notions of individual worth, the positive value of assertiveness, and the tendency to conceptualize relationships as egalitarian [15: 458].

The American cultural preference is for clear and direct communication. D. Levine describes it this way: "The American way of life... affords little room for cultivation of ambiguity. The dominant American temper calls for clear and direct communication. It expresses itself in such common injunctions as "Say what you mean", "Don't beat about the bush", and "Get to the point" [17: 28]. Americans typically associate direct, frank and open communication with honesty [*ibid.*].

The use of the exacting style is characteristic of speakers in the U.S. middle class white culture [10]. This style strives to accurately represent fact, technique, or expectation, and to avoid emotional overtones and suggestive allusions [17]. Repetition is obviously a negative feature: to repeat something over and over again, or to be *wordy* or *verbose* – for Americans may have several implications: a) that the statement was not heard or taken seriously, and thus it is necessary to repeat it; or b) that the listener was not paying attention or perhaps it not mentally capable of comprehending [21: 252].

The USA belongs to the cultures where speakers use instrumental style of communication, constructing their messages for the purpose of persuading and producing attitude change [19: 36], in other words, "...speakers assert themselves or make themselves understood by talking". Speech intelligibility has traditionally been viewed as a property of the speaker [22, speaker 89]. William Penn's quote explicitly expresses this preference: "Speak properly, and in as few words as you can, but always plainly; for the end of speech is not ostentation, but to be understood".

The American cultural preference tends to directly link words and actions which is evident in many common American expressions: "*Practice what you preach*", "*Do what you say*", and "*Walk the walk, and talk the talk*". The word vs. deed gap in the speaker's rhetoric may contribute to a stereotypical image of a lazy and dishonest person from this cultural perspective.

Vocalics as an umbrella term embracing any vocal-auditory behavior except the spoken word is also culture specific. Tracy Novinger claims that vocalics indicate the manner of speaking, i.e. *how* something is said and can be divided into: 1) vocal characterizers (laughing, crying, yelling, sneezing, etc.); 2) vocal qualifiers (volume, pitch, tempo, resonance, and tone); 3) vocal rate (the speed with which people speak); 4) vocal segregates/ hedges (sounds like "*un-huh*", "*shhh*", "*ohh*", "*uh*" and "*mmh*") and silence [18: 72]. Loudness of voice "<... seems aggressive to North Americans; <...> who often think Latin Americans are arguing when they are just having a conversation...> [18: 72]. Ralph Waldo Emerson's quotation well describes the US lingua-culture attitude to this vocal qualifier: "What you do speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you say." At the same time, for example, loudness can connote sincerity and strength to Arabs. Vocal rate can also have a culture specific meaning in American communicative style; a fast talker using exaggerations may be viewed as glib and untrustworthy: "<...trying to puff himself up ...hurts the

ethos of a communicator ...> [22, speaker 27]. Middle class white Americans are generally not comfortable with silence in conversation, the golden rule of it is "No gaps, no overlaps".

In sum, the US lingua-culture communicative style obviously has a set of underlying cultural assumptions, such as individualism, low context of verbal communication, low power distance characteristics which influence the communicative behavior of American speakers in a predictable way. Members of the US lingua-culture tend to display preferences for direct, exacting, personal, and instrumental style of communication involving the manner of revealing their communicative intentions, the amount and quality of shared information, the way of expressing the speakers' personhood, and responsibility for achieving the communicative objective in verbal interactions.

Perspectives of further investigation of this problem may be depicting the qualities of an ideal speaker from the US lingua-culture perspective and comparing them with the prescriptions of Ukrainian and other cultures' communicative styles.

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