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**COMPREHENSION OF WRITTEN UTTERANCES’
COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURE BY RUSSIAN LEARNERS OF
ENGLISH**

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Abstract

The article deals with the results of reading comprehension research of English written utterances with different communicative centre position by the Russian learners of English. The analyses of the Russian subjects’ interpretation of the communicative variants’ meaning and their classification are introduced. Detailed study of Russian subjects’ comments on the differences between examples with the same semantic and syntactic structure but different nucleus position is given. Alongside with the correct understanding of utterances’ communicative orientation, zones of difficulties in comprehension of their meaning are revealed. The data presented are of importance for the English language teaching methodology on the level of learners’ communicative competence improvement. The experimental material analysis provides foundation for further research of comprehension and interpretation the meaning of English written and oral utterances by foreign learners. The research contributes to the study of pragmatic aspect of communicative centre position in the process of speech comprehension and its role in the achievement of speakers’ communicative objectives.

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1. Introduction

The strategies of the English language teaching process remain relevant for linguists, English teachers and foreign learners, in spite of having been actively developed in the last decades. The improvement of teaching methodology of the English language is still under discussion in modern literature. The process of choosing teaching goals, however, has undergone several changes. Acquiring different language skills of higher level was replaced by achieving “minimum general intelligibility” (Gimson, 1980). This was caused by the growing necessity of foreign speakers, whose number is constantly increasing, to use English as a lingua franca or a “global language” (Crystal, 2003). The goal of reaching linguistic accuracy was announced to contradict with the necessity of a foreign student to speak English to other non-native speakers. These ideas, introduced in the works of J. Jenkins (Jenkins, 2007) have been supported by many authors (Nagy, 2016). Recent years are marked by appearance of numerous studies applying English as Lingua Franca components to academic (Björkman, 2013) and business environment (Fanha Martins, 2017), as well as research of its use by the English language learners with different linguistic background (Batziakas, 2017).

However, this approach hasn't been accepted by everyone. Can a teacher feel satisfied if a student keeps making mistakes even though he or she successfully uses English as means of communication? M. Swan claims, that certain situations require highly accurate language (Swan, 2017). The focus of the discussion of English as a lingua franca touches upon such problems as language intelligibility, accuracy and variation (Chapman, 2015).

2. Problem Statement

Goals in teaching pronunciation have also been reconsidered in the literature on teaching methodology. The issue has attracted even more attention with the introduction by J. Jenkins the “lingua franca core for international pronunciation”. Type of tones and nuclear tones configurations, which Russian teachers of phonetics have traditionally been concentrated on, are not found in the list of pronunciation elements, obligatory for acquiring today. Placement of the nuclear stress or nucleus, on the contrary, has been announced to be among core features, as its wrong position can cause miscommunication (Jenkins, 2002).

Nucleus or intonation centre most often coincides with the communicative centre of an utterance and serves as its marker, highlighting information which the speaker considers to be most important.

Alongside with semantic and syntactic means, nucleus helps express speaker's communicative intention. The change in its position is enough to form several utterances on the bases of one sentence. (Paducheva, 1996).

As English and Russian languages differ in means of utterances' communicative organization, the linguistic interference of the Russian learners' mother tongue can prevent them from correct choice of communicative centre placement.

3. Research Questions

The fact that communicative and intonation centre position is crucial in the process of English speech comprehension, proves the significance of this research aimed at the study of the Russian learners' ability to comprehend written utterances and distinguish differences in their meaning. Detailed analysis of comprehension and interpretation the meaning of communicative structure variants in English by the Russian speakers, undertaken by the author of the article, has not been conducted before.

4. Purpose of the Study

The research aims at revealing and classification of English written utterances' types which can cause difficulties in the process of their comprehension by the Russian learners of English. The experiment's task includes the analyses of the Russian subjects' answers and comments, demonstrating their ability of identifying speaker's communicative intention or its absence.

5. Research Methods

The material included 24 English sentences, semantic and syntactic structure of which allowed possibilities of their communicative structure and hence different intonation centre positions. 49 experimental utterances formed on their bases can be divided in two groups: the first one contains examples with the possibility of realization of logical stress; the second group consists of the English sentences with the potential possibility of emphatic realization. The number of utterances, which are not numerous, can be explained by the preliminary character of the experiment.

These examples were placed in minimal context consisting of a stimulus, which limited the communicative centre options in the reply. The word being the communicative centre and potentially the nucleus was capitalized.

The subjects participating in the research were the second year students of Ural State University of Economics with level of English B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) system, who intend to use English language in their future professional activity in the field of business and management.

The stimuli and variants of the replies given in pairs were introduced to 19 Russian students in the written form. The subjects were to answer the following question in writing:

“Is there any difference between two (three) phrases?”

If the subjects gave an affirmative answer to the first question, their next task was to give a comment on the difference between two (or three) variants of the same sentence with different capitalized words.

The author did not give any explanation of the terms “communicative structure” and “communicative centre” to the subjects. The experiment was aimed at receiving any data from “naïve” English language learners without any serious linguistic background. While preparing for the task's fulfilment the students asked about the words in capital letters. They were given the explanation that those were the most prominent lexical items, bearing the sentence nuclear accent. All the subjects proved to understand what nucleus is.

6. Findings

The analysis of the Russian subjects' 456 answers allows to present the discussion, the purpose of which is to describe and interpret the author's findings. The Russian subjects proved to experience significant difficulties in distinguishing variants of one sentence with different communicative centre position and understanding the difference in their meaning. 84% of the experimental pairs of sentences, introduced to the participants in minimal context were either evaluated by the Russian students as "equivalent" or "meaning the same", or their meaning was misunderstood.

The detailed analyses of these examples as well as the study of the participants' comments allow dividing the experimental phrases into two groups. The utterances in the first group proved to be more difficult for the Russian learners of English. They differ in "subtle shadows" in meaning, which are hard for a non-native English speaker to perceive, for example:

- Sorry, I am really busy this Friday.
- Let's meet NEXT week, then.
- Let's meet next WEEK, then.

In the first utterance the interlocutor suggests having a meeting on Friday next week, and in the example with capitalized "WEEK", he means any day next week. Only three out of nineteen students identified the difference between two replies. One of them (Subject 3) offered the following explanation of their meaning: "in the first sentence the speaker says that the meeting will be next week, and in the second variant he means that it'll be next week, but not next month or next year". Such explanation looks contradictory and demonstrates that Subject 3 (S3) didn't understand the speaker's communicative intention, in spite of identifying the variants' non-equivalence. Explanation of S2 is closer to the correct interpretation: "Sorry, I am busy this Friday – the first; see you next week – the second." The absolute majority of the speakers, as it has already been mentioned, evaluated the examples of this group as complete equivalents.

The second group of phrases, causing Russian subjects problems in their comprehension process, contains variants which differ in the degree of the emotional coloring or the degree of emphases.. The reply in the next dialogue can serve as a typical example of this group:

- His face looks familiar.
- I've NEVER met him.
- I've never MET him.

Only 4 Russian subjects proved to realize the difference between these two replies. 15 students characterized them as "meaning the same". S11 and S4 gave similar comments, revealing their understanding of the speaker's communicative goal: "In the first case, the speaker has never met the person they are talking about, and in second case he could have heard of him." S1 gave a remark that a "complete denial" is expressed in the first reply, while the variant with capitalized "MET" means that "in spite of the fact that they have never met, he knows something about the man they are speaking about". S15 wrote, that "highlighted "never" "gives strength and makes the sentence more emphatic".

Difficulties in distinguishing the difference between phrases containing intensifiers are confirmed by the examples given below:

- I am so bored!

- Why? It's very INTERESTING!

- Why? It's VERY interesting!

Only 6 Russian students managed to connect the communicative centre position with the utterances' meaning: "interesting enough, not boring – in first case, and really exciting in the second" (S16). "In the second sentence the author really wants to convince his listener" (S1), "the emotional coloring increases in the second phrase" (S10).

Evaluation of variants with the adverb "really" demonstrates better results. As a rule, nucleus on this intensifier serves to express doubt, mistrust, and extreme surprise.

- The picture is very nice.

- Do you really LIKE it?

- Do you REALLY like it?

11 subjects out of 19 (more than a half) identified the difference between the compared examples, describing it in the following remarks: "in the second sentence the accent serves to verify the truth" (S1), "there is some doubt in the second variant" (S5), "in the second case the speaker added some emotions as he did not expect anybody to like the picture" (S17). Such comments prove that these subjects cope with pragmatic comprehension of the experimental utterances, containing intensifiers.

Analyses of the remained 12% of the experimental material, comprising the phrases, which caused no comprehension difficulties to the Russian learners of English, allow defining the type of these utterances.

They all are characterized by logical stress realization possibility:

- I've just seen Pat.

- What is SHE doing here?

- What is she doing HERE?

In opinion of the Russian students the difference between two variants is the following: "change of meaning", "accent on certain information", "what the speaker wants to know is who performs the action or where the action is performed". One of the subjects (S3) gave an additional commentary, proving his understanding of the role of nucleus in marking the capitalized communicative centre: "place of accent depends on the situation", "accent means the greater degree of importance". Moreover, when answering the questions, some subjects gave recommendations on the use of these variants. S14, for example, wrote, that "answering these questions you must be sure what exactly you are asked". S19 gave the following remark, proving his correct understanding of the example with highlighted pronoun "she": "the person asking is very surprised to see her there". S 16 explained that "the person who is asking isn't very happy to see her".

Another example of this type:

- Tom is in his office.

- Why is he here TODAY?

- Why is he HERE today?

- WHY is he here today?

S6 noticed that "difference is the same, as in the previous example - importance of time and place is underlined, and in the last case the reason is most important". S14 and S15 also gave comments about the importance of time, place and reasons: "the information the speaker is interesting in, is highlighted",

“by means of accent it is possible to get a clear answer”. S1 added such a comment to the first variant: “It’s his day off! Why is he here today?”. S9 connected the idea of contrast with the choice of certain lexical items as nuclei: “today, but not tomorrow; here, but not there”.

7. Conclusion

The discussion draws us to the following conclusion. The results of the experiment confirmed that most participants face serious problems when distinguishing the difference between communicative variants of one sentence and interpreting their meaning. Most Russian subjects evaluated examples containing “meaning shadows” and different degree of emphases as complete equivalents. Utterances with logical stress possibilities turned out to be less difficult for the Russian students’ comprehension. The research allows coming to the conclusion about the necessity of further research of the problem of comprehension of variants of communicative centre placement in English on a larger quantity of experimental material in both written and spoken speech.

The data received can also serve as a basis for conducting several series of experiments, including the translation of the English sentences with different communicative centre position into Russian and comparative analyses of such translation in the aspect of the means involved in communicative structure realization in the Russian language.

The analysis of the examples containing intensifiers proves the necessity to investigate this type of utterances in more detail. Their experimental study can contribute to clarifying the problem of expression and perception of emotional meaning by linguistic means, which attracts attention of many linguists and is under debate in modern literature (Alba-Juez&Larina, 2018).

The further study of utterances’ communicative organization and classification of the Russian learners’ mistakes in interpretation the difference between possible variants of nucleus position can also improve English teaching methodology. Teaching to understand the difference between variants of this type develops learners’ communicative competence, which is necessary for the achievement of the primary objective in learning a foreign language - to understand your partner’s intentions and to be understood.

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