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**THE MODALITY OF SPEECH ACT AS MANIFESTATION OF  
COMMUNICATION ETHNOSTYLE**

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***Abstract***

Considered from the aspect of its instrumental function, language can be defined as an instrument of communication formed within a certain culture and reflecting the specificity of the culture. The national style of communication which presents the totality of numerous speech acts reflects the specificity of ethnic consciousness and cultural values of a linguocultural community. The cultural specificity of the national communication style is constituted by means of various language means: phonetic, lexical and grammatical peculiarities of speech act, emotive richness, the proportion of explicit and implicit ways of expressing meaning, and patterns of discourse. A significant role is played by the modality as one of the most anthropocentric categories. Epistemic modality is especially important for the national style of communication, as it reflects most fully the national-specific concepts and the cultural values. The purpose of this paper is to reveal the contribution of modality to the specificity of the national style of communication. As the author shows, the rich repertoire of modal means and the high frequency of their use in speech acts give every ground to regard the modality of speech acts as one of the major markers of national style of communication. The formation of ability to skillfully use modal means requires a lot of attention and effort in teaching English, as their authentic use largely determines the success of communication across cultures and helps to overcome linguocultural communicative interference.

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## 1. Introduction

The twenty first century will be marked in the history of mankind as an epoch of the tumultuous development of new technologies that had a tremendous effect on all spheres of life and caused cardinal changes in art, science, education, politics, business, and management. All these changes became possible due to the only instrument, or means – language which realizes its instrumental function – *instrumentum linguae*. Out of the numerous functions of human language the instrumental function first mentioned by Aristotle and later described in detail by the famous Russian scholar L. Vigotsky has come into the focus of linguistic attention of late. The American scholar D.H. Everett writes in the preface to his book *“Language. The cultural tool”*: “...language is an artifact, a cultural tool. An instrument created by hominids to satisfy their social need for meaning and communication”. Further on, explaining the meaning of the term ‘a cultural tool’ he presents his conception of language by means of a formula and comments on the meaning of the formula: “*The formula that summarizes my own concept of language is: Cognition + Culture + Communication. This means that each normal human being has a brain, belongs to a community with values, and needs to communicate, and the confluence of these states results in a language*” (Everett, 2012, 35). Supporting his opinion, we have every reason to suppose that language emerged on the crossroads of culture, cognition and communication and its cultural specificity is imprinted both in its systemic features and in the verbal behavior of its speakers. Behind every word in any language there are certain cognitive contexts, whose content is largely determined by socio-cultural and national-cultural specificity (Boldirev, 2017, 6)

The conception of language offered by D.L. Everett fits perfectly the modern linguistic paradigm which is defined as cognitive-communicative. According to E.S. Kubryakova, any language phenomenon can be given a complete and thorough characterization only if we define its role in the presentation of knowledge and its role in communication (Kubryakova, 2004, 16).

The development of cognitive-communicative approach to the study of language contributed a lot to the theory of speech acts. This contribution manifested itself in the fact that, initiated by A. Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka, 2006) the scholars’ attention shifted from the immediate contents of speech acts to the mental processes (cognitive scripts in A. Wierzbicka’s terminology) which are being formed in the minds of speech act participants during communication. And, as cognition is culturally conditioned it is logical to suppose that a speech act as a quantum of communication invariably manifests specific features of the culture and cultural values of the society that speaks this or that language.

## 2. Problem Statement

As it is pointed out by N.N. Boldirev, the analysis of language facts and the processes of communication enable to conclude that the main problems of conceptual interaction underlying communication include the following points: 1) the structural correspondence of participants’ conceptual systems; 2) the contents correspondence of these systems; 3) the adequacy of the interlocutor’s conceptual system; 4) the degree of mastering collective knowledge and language experience, including sociocultural and national specificity; 5) the correspondence principles, mechanisms and cognitive contexts of forming and comprehending meaning used by participants of communication (Boldirev, 2017, 7). Out of these five closely interrelated problems the fourth one presents the greatest interest for our

study as it accentuates the significance of knowledge about sociocultural and national specificity of a language for communication across cultures.

The acknowledgement of the role of cultural values in shaping the main principles of communication initiated a number of fundamental studies devoted to the problem of national, or ethnic styles of communication (Larina, 2009; Kulikova, 2009, 2015; Liu, 2016; Martin & Nakayama, 2013 etc.). There are lots of definitions of communication styles (see an overview in (Chlopicki, 2017, 9 – 13). W. Chlopicki defines communication style as “a cluster of discursive elements, both formal or technical, such as turn taking patterns, overlap or backchanneling, and those based on pragmatic usage, such as emotionally loaded language, politeness patterns, gender differences, metaphors, neologisms” (Chlopicki, 2017, 9). Following the definition given by T.V. Larina, we understand the communication ethnostyle as a culture-conditioned and history-determined type of communicative behavior which manifests itself in the preference of certain verbal and nonverbal means used in the process of interpersonal interaction (Larina, 2009, 33).

The national-cultural specificity of speech acts which constitute the ethnostyle of communication finds manifestation in many components of a speech act including the topic of discussion, the length of a speech act, the prosodic, lexical and grammatical means used by the speakers, its emotive charge and the non-verbal components including gestures, facial expression, distance between the speakers, eye-contact, etc. Lack of sufficient knowledge of all these components invariably results in communicative failures. These failures are the consequence of the linguocultural interference, i.e. the transference of communicative norms and rules formed within the native culture and language into the communicative space of a new culture. Let's have an example of such linguocultural interference: “*You have a husband?*” “*Pardon?*” says Rennie. *The question has caught her by surprise: nobody she knows asks it any more (M. Atwood. Bodily Harm).* This dialogue is taking place on board a plane bound for one of the islands in the Caribbean and the interlocutors are a resident of the island and a Canadian journalist. This fragment illustrates a communicative failure caused by the topic of the conversation: in modern Western culture, mostly due to feminist ideas, women are not supposed to be asked questions about their marital status.

The length of a speech act, i.e. the standard number of remarks also varies in different communicative ethnostyles. E.g., a typical *thank-you* formula for a gift in USA culture is usually not limited to just one remark of gratitude, but is followed by one or two additional remarks like: “*How gorgeous! How did you know it's just the thing I wanted?*” The second utterance, grammatically constructed as a question is not a question in fact as it does not require an answer. Its illocutionary force is a compliment to the gift giver about his/her ability to foresee the receiver's wish to get just this kind of gift and it is aimed at achieving a higher degree of intimacy. The illocutionary force of such *thank-you* formulae is traditionally described as *Expressing intimacy. Mind reading*. Another typical cliché of expressing gratitude in USA culture is a delayed indirect gratitude, i.e. mentioning the gift some time after it was given, e.g. “*The flower you gave me last week is still blossoming*”.

The forms of reaction to the speech act of gratitude also vary considerably across cultures. A typical feature of Eastern cultures (Chinese, Korean, and Japanese) is the tactics of self-humiliation, diminishing what has been done, which is considered in these cultures as an expression of politeness. This

ethnocultural peculiarity often baffles Europeans when, in response to their gratitude for the reception they hear apologies and a promise to give a much better reception next time from the hosts.

There is a considerable difference in the ideology of speech act of self-presentation. In the USA culture in complete accordance with the individualistic character of American culture and the importance of SELFNESS concept speakers are usually recommended to follow the principle “*Put your best foot forward*”. Following this principle, a typical American will first of all speak about his/her own personal achievements rather than about the success of company they represent. In other, mainly collectivistic cultures, such manner of self-presentation is usually frowned upon and considered as bragging or self-admiration because there is a general belief that it’s up to other people but not to yourself to evaluate your success. This ethnocultural difference in the ideology of self-presentation acquires special significance in cross-cultural communication, especially in writing a resume or in a job interview.

The review of numerous studies devoted to ethnostyles of communication shows that the scholars’ attention is most often focused on such aspects of speech acts as the strategy and tactics of speech acts, politeness and turn taking patterns, the emotive loadness, gender and social differences, etc. whereas the grammatical aspect of speech acts is usually given less attention. The subject matter of my analysis is the modality of speech acts as one of the most important markers of communication ethnostyle.

### 3. Research Questions

Modality is one of the categories that most clearly manifests the anthropocentric essence of language, if only because the definition of this category includes the speaker: modality is defined as a conceptual category which expresses the attitude of the speaker to the contents of the utterance and the relation of the utterance contents to reality established by the speaker (Ahmanova, 1969, 237). In spite of the fact that it is the most complicated and controversial category, most scholars are unanimous in the opinion that modality is heterogeneous in its content and functions and includes two layers. The primary, or objective modality expresses the relation of the utterance content to reality as it is established by the speaker who might present the action as real, unreal or hypothetical. It is expressed by the grammatical forms of the Mood and therefore it is a component of predicativity. The secondary, or subjective modality is also heterogeneous and embraces deontic and epistemic types. Deontic modality expresses the relations between the action and its subject and presents the action as possible, impossible, desirable, undesirable, or obligatory. These meanings are actualized by the modal verbs in their primary meanings ability, permissibility, obligation, necessity and by the adjective-forming suffix *-able/ible* which is highly productive, e.g. *The slope was perfectly climbable* (F. Forsyth). “*Why should you always try to confuse me?*” “*You are so adorably confusable*” (I. Murdoch). As this type of modality is ‘inserted’ in the predicate it is defined as *action*, or *root modality*.

The other type of secondary, or subjective modality is *epistemic*, or *belief modality* and it expresses various degrees of the speaker’s certainty of the truth of information presented in the utterance and thus it presents the speaker’s projection on the contents of the utterance (Jacobs, 1995, 225 – 226). As epistemic modality is the most anthropocentric in its character, it intensively studied today in the cognitive-communicative aspect on the material of different languages and different types of discourse (Shmakova, 2016; Vukovic, 2014; Xu, 2015 etc.). It is this type of modality that presents the greatest

interest for ethnolinguistic studies because the cultural values and culture-specific concepts are most clearly imprinted in it.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

My article is aimed at analyzing the contribution of epistemic modality to the formation of ethnostyle of communication. I will try to analyze the means of expressing epistemic modality, to show the dynamic character of this category, to reveal the historic and cultural factors that predetermined the emergence and significance of epistemic modality means in the English language and, finally, to explain the importance of this category in mastering English as a means of communication across cultures.

#### **5. Research Methods**

The research methods are conditioned by the subject matter of the article and its purpose and include observation of language facts, their content-context analysis, and elements of comparative and quantitative methods

#### **6. Findings**

The comparative analysis of epistemic modality means in different languages shows that this type of modality finds the most detailed representation in English both on the systemic and the functional levels which proves the cultural significance of the concepts that find actualization in these means. If Russian is often characterized as ‘a particle language’ due to the abundance and frequent use of particles, English has every right to be described as ‘a modality language’.

Epistemic modality is expressed by units of all language levels which include lexical, morphological, syntactic and prosodic means. There is a special class of speech – modal words which specialize in expressing different degrees of certainty. According to the data given by A. Wierzbicka, there are 18 modal words (epistemic adverbs in Wierzbicka’s terminology), and their number exceeds the number of modal words in other European languages: 8 in German, 5 in French and 9 in Dutch (Wierzbicka, 2006, 248). In Russian their number is almost the same as in English (14), but their frequency is lower than in English. What is more important is that Russians use modal words expressing certainty and assurance more often than words expressing doubt which very often makes Russian speech sound more assertive to the English ear.

We must also take into consideration the fact that the class of modal words is open and it may be enriched by modal adverbs such as *hopefully*, which has a high frequency in all types of discourse. E.g. *Hopefully I will be able to visit Russia and see you next summer (personal correspondence)*.

The number of performative verbs and epistemic verbal phrases *I think, I suppose, I believe, I presume, I guess, I suspect, I trust, I perceive, I gather, I am afraid* and their frequency in English also exceeds their use in other European languages. According to corpus data given by K. Aijmer (Aijmer, 1997, 6) the frequency of *I think* in English oral discourse is much higher than that of their equivalents in Dutch and Swedish as we can see from the table below.

**Table 01.** The frequency of *I think* and its equivalents in Dutch and Swedish per 10 000 words

<i>I think</i> (English)	<i>ik denk</i> (Dutch)	<i>jag tror</i> (Swedish)
51	9	2,6

The high frequency of such performative phrases as I know, especially in AE, has led to their desemantization and their use as conversational hedges, or hesitation fillers.

The modal verbs *can, may, must, will, should, ought* used in their epistemic meanings which emerged on the basis of their primary deontic meanings of possibility, permissibility and obligation are also very frequently used to express various degrees of certainty. The emergence of their epistemic meanings followed one and the same scheme: *You may go – You are permitted to go → He may be sick – Evidence permits me to think that he is sick* (Jacobs, 1995, 234 - 236).

I find of special interest the fact that in modern English we come across examples in which the verb *have* is used in its epistemic function to express the highest degree of certainty, based on the facts that cause the speaker to think so, e.g. *‘There was no car, though,’ Daidra pointed out. ‘Not in the car-park. So he had to have gone into the water at Buck’s Haven’ (E. George); He saw the outline of a tower against the evening sky. Then he recognized it as a steeple. They don’t have churches like that in Hungary. It had to be Austria (E. Segal).*

Though such cases are not yet registered in English Grammar textbooks, they are of great interest because they serve as good evidence to the fact that modality has a dynamic character and may draw into its sphere other language units.

Other means of expressing epistemic modality include modalized verbs *seem, appear*, etc., approximation adverbs sort of, kind of, confirmative questions of the *‘He is not very competent, is he?’* type. All these means participate in expressing different degrees of speakers’ certainty of the truth of their utterance.

The specificity of the English discourse lies in the great density of epistemic modality means which may express a wide variety of modal meanings ranging from doubt to absolute assurance. Very often an utterance may contain a cluster of modal markers, as in the following example: *“I don’t wish to seem spiteful but I am afraid she can’t have been a very nice woman.” – “Oh, she was a very nice woman” (S. Maugham. *Cakes and Ale*).*

As we can see from this fragment of conversation, a combination of epistemic modality markers create the effect of understatement, which is a characteristic feature of English ethnostyle and is aimed at assuaging the negative characteristic given to a person. In contrast, the responding remark that contains a positive characteristic of the same person sounds laconic and even assertive.

Thus, the great variety and the frequent use of epistemic modality means give ground to conclude that ‘epistemic commitment’ is clearly a characteristic feature of the English speaking societies. All these means are used to express the gradual transition from an opinion to fact, the necessity to differentiate between them and therefore to decrease the assertiveness of the utterance presenting it as a personal opinion and leaving space for a different point of view. In other words, epistemic modality means manifest great significance of such concepts as PRIVACY, PERSONAL SPACE and FREEDOM OF OPINION which are characteristic of the English speaking societies. Their significance in the English

language and culture may be compared to the significance of the honorifics in Japanese (Wierzbicka, 2006, 251).

Acknowledging the fact that epistemic modality is one of the markers of communication ethnostyle, it is logical to turn our attention to the historic and cultural factors which lie at the basis of this epistemic commitment and which finally led to this unique modal scene in the English language. The roots of the idea that human knowledge is limited and that is why a different opinion is important can be traced back to the works of John Locke which had a tremendous influence on not only the British, but all other English speaking societies and the English language. John Locke wrote in 1690: *“Our knowledge, as has been shown, being very narrow and we not happy enough to find certain truth in everything that we have an occasion to consider; most of the propositions we think, reason, discourse – nay, act upon, are such as we cannot have undoubted knowledge of their truth. . . . But there being degrees herein, from the very neighbourhood of certainty and demonstration, quite down to improbability and unlikeliness, even to the confines of impossibility; and also degrees of assent from full assurance and confidence, quite down to conjecture, doubt and distrust”* (Quoted from Wierzbicka, 2006, 35).

Another, no less important idea, expressed by John Locke stresses the necessity to be tentative in our judgments and not to impose our opinions on others. He writes: *“It is unavoidable to the greatest part of men, if not all, to have several opinions, without certain and indubitable proof of their truth”* (Quoted from Wierzbicka, 2006, 39). The POLITENESS concept is actually traceable to these words which were written more than 300 years ago but have not lost their significance. They sound quite topical today and are manifested in the epistemic commitment of the English speaking discourse in general and the great importance they attach to the phenomenon of politeness in particular. The Anglo-Saxon commitment to politeness is expressed most precisely by one of the characters from Ian McEwan’s novel “Atonement” who characterized Britain as ‘a society where politeness is all’.

On the other hand, the position of Great Britain as an empire ‘where the sun never sets’ and the status of English as the language of international policy and diplomacy contributed greatly to the elaboration of language means necessary for creating ambiguity, avoidance of direct answers, understatement and implicature which are used not only in diplomatic discourse but in other types of discourse as well.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of the problem undertaken in the paper enables us to draw the following conclusions:

- 1) epistemic modality presents one of the most significant markers of communication ethnostyle;
- 2) one of the most characteristic features of English ethnostyle is the so-called epistemic commitment which finds manifestation in the great number and frequent use of various means of expressing epistemic modal meanings;
- 3) the awareness of this unique modal scene of the English ethnostyle and the ability to skillfully use modal means will contribute to a successful communication whereas the lack of such knowledge and skills might lead to failures in communication across cultures.

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