

## TEACHING STRATEGIES TO FORM ORAL SPEECH COMPETENCIES IN ENGLISH

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### Abstract

The article deals with the actual problem of improving language skills in English at the level of speech norm. Like other aspects of the language, oral speech has a number of features that reflect the mentality of a given country, therefore, to build an utterance, it is not enough just to translate sentences from one language to another. The statement must comply with the rules of construction adopted in society. This article is devoted to two features of English colloquial speech, which fundamentally distinguishes English speech from Russian speech, namely, the use of vague language and the preferential use of nominative structures. These features are considered within the framework of various scientific concepts, the main of which are the categorical structure of parts, the theory of politeness, the categorical structure of the picture of the world, and others. The concept of Vague language is based on lexical and grammatical lexis, which make speech less direct and categorical, which is generally consistent with the maxims of British politeness. As for the predominantly nominative way of expression, this feature is explained from the standpoint of paradigmatic asymmetry, which is based on part-of-speech transformations that are optimal for use in a given specific speech situation. The paper also provides some methodological recommendations for the formation of students' speech skills. The relevance of the work is due to the fact that errors in the use of parts of speech at the level of the norm of speech, as a rule, do not lead to a distortion of meaning, but create an accent and lead to the formation of an unfavorable image of the speaker.

**Keywords:** vague language, nominalization, paradigmatic asymmetry, theory of politeness

### 1 INTRODUCTION

At different times, when teaching foreign languages, different tasks come to the fore. If in previous decades the emphasis was placed on the prescriptive direction of linguistics, then at present, with the advent of the anthropocentric approach, the consideration of phenomena is increasingly taking place from the standpoint of prescriptive linguistics. The emergence of anthropocentrism is a manifestation of a change in the scientific paradigm, in which various aspects of human activity are considered not as separate systems, but as a reflection of internal cognitive processes that determine the features of human cognition of reality. Consideration of linguistic phenomena from the standpoint of anthropocentrism will make it possible to determine their national and cultural specificity, to identify those areas where it is possible to predict discrepancies between the linguistic cultures of the world of the native and studied languages. Such a change in the general scientific paradigm poses new challenges for foreign language teachers, namely, the

consideration of phenomena that have not yet been reflected in grammar books and appear in the speech of native speakers. In this article, we will consider two phenomena that most illustratively reflect the peculiarities of the thinking of representatives of the Anglo-Saxonian culture, namely, vague language and nominative verbal constructions.

## **2 THE CONCEPT OF VAGUE LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL STRATEGY**

This feature of English speech has recently been emphasized by various communication coaches who establish the influence of language means on the business behavior of partners. So, Bob Dobs highlights the following language means of indirectness:

- Modal verbs
- Use of negative opposites of adjective
- Use of hedging and caution in language
- Questions forms
- Avoidance of direct “no”
- Hypothetical speaking if required to an individual or group (Dobbs)

As part of the cultural strategy of indirectness, VL occupies a special place in this category.

The concept of VL has several different interpretations, covering a whole range of different connotations. Back in 1737, the use of VL was associated with the inability of a person to clearly and clearly express an idea, which clearly indicated its negative connotative characteristic (Mac Gee Peter, 2018). However, over time, the attitude towards the phenomenon changed - the use of VL began to be considered a consequence of the manifestation of the creative process of the next generation. The definition of VL given in the Mac Millan Dictionary “language that is not precise and therefore allows speakers not to commit themselves or not to sound too definite” (Mac Millan) can be considered acceptable.

This feature is an integral part of the English discourse, since communication is based on the maxims of English politeness, which can be reduced to the following: 1) Don't impose. 2) Give options. 3) Make the hearer feel good - be friendly (Brown, Levinson, 1978). These features manifest the category of indirectness, which is a distinctive feature of English speech. (Kozlova, 2005, 106)

Following Lakoff (Lakoff, 1975) and Tannen (Tannen, 1991), we can distinguish two benefits of indirectness: defensiveness and rapport. Defensiveness is observed when, in the process of communication, the speaker does not speak directly about his thoughts to be able to get away from the conversation if it is for some reason unpleasant for the interlocutor. “The rapport benefit of indirectness results from the pleasant experience of getting one’s way not because one demanded it (power) but because the other person wanted the same thing (solidarity)” (Tannen, 1991, p. 28)

Zhu Wenzhong and Li Jingyi consider the function of VL on the example of advertising discourse (Wenzhong and Jinyi, 2013, p. 106) In business communication, these tools perform several functions, one of which is the flexibility of communication by manifesting politeness. This function is especially pronounced in advertising discourse, where excessive straightforwardness can scare off a potential client, and the use of VL creates an atmosphere of trust where the client does not feel pressure exerted on him. This is indirectly related to the second function of VL, which makes the conversation natural and the advertisement more approachable, thereby reducing the distance between communicators. According to Schaff (Schaff, 1976), VL adds expressiveness to speech, creating certain gaps in the conversations, which are filled in as the dialogue proceeds. This allows you to keep conversation going. Without such gaps, any communication is difficult.

Research based on the study of advertising discourse shows that the use of VL can ensure the accuracy of the transmitted information (Wenzhong and Jinyi, 2013, p.106). Business companies try to form a positive image of the company, an honest and reliable partner who can be trusted. On the one hand, the concepts of Information Accuracy and VL may seem opposite, but in fact these concepts have certain similarity. One can agree with the authors who claim that accuracy is a category for determining truth and falseness, i.e. correlates with numerical or other categories that form the concepts of accuracy. In business communication, this feature is used to ensure the accuracy of the transmitted information, installing confidence in the client.

Along with the positive features of using VL in business communication, there are several points that relate to the disadvantages. Among the main ones are inappropriate or redundant use, the use of VL in cases where precision information is required.

It is possible to identify the main language situations where the use of VL is necessary.

The first group includes language units that make people sound less factual and direct. This group includes such media as *about, kind of, sort of, things, stuff etc.*

When teaching this cultural strategy, it is necessary to consider differences in mentality. It is believed that Russian-speaking people use VL when they are unable to express an idea clearly and concisely, and its use, as a rule, indicates a low intellectual background of the speaker. Let us illustrate the use of VL in the British variant of the English language.

*"My sister and I had a little vegetable patch in the back of **some** border **somewhere**," he said. "We had great fun trying to grow tomatoes rather unsuccessfully, and **things like that**." (Independent)*

*"This is another reason why I always feel it is so important to find ways of encouraging children to grow vegetables and **things** at school." (Independent)*

*"Charlotte, particularly, is running around the kitchen in her dresses and ballet stuff and everything. She goes completely crazy with [Prince] Louis following her around trying to do the same thing." (Hellomagazine)*

Analysis of sentences from the standpoint of the language, where the use of direct and categorical structures is preferable, leads us to the conclusion that the speaker is a teenager who has difficulty formulating his thoughts. In fact, the quote belongs to Prince Charles and Prince William, who can hardly be considered people with an insufficient level of education. The Russian language, on the contrary, is distinguished by a sufficient degree of categoricalness, and the use of VL, on the contrary, is considered a characteristic of reduced colloquial speech.

The second group of means that make up VL are linguistic means that replace the name of an object if a person has forgotten or does not know what the object is called. A.D. Samiggullina unites them under the common name 'placeholders' (Samiggullina, 2020, 15). This group is represented by such means as: *what do you call it, stuff, thing etc.* In her opinion, these funds are also used for the purposes of political correctness, to avoid using taboo vocabulary, or not saying a word when you're not sure of the pronunciation.

Looking at the areas of VL, researchers argue that VL expressions are regularly used before numbers, quantities and times also to make them less factuate. In this regard, many linguists consider various approximators to be a part of VL: *around, at least, nearly, about; vague quantifiers: some, more, lot, most etc.* (Chanell, 1994, p.135).

This category also includes means of exaggeration, which, in addition to indirect figures, reflect a subjective attitude to the phenomenon under consideration. Such means include the words: *hundreds of, thousands of, millions of etc.*

In addition to the lexical means of expressing indirectness, one can also note morphological means, such as the suffix *-ish*. So the use of the derivative *four-ish* in the sentence *"I am meeting my friends at four-ish"* makes it less direct than *"I am meeting my friends at four"*.

Similar morphological formations can be found in the field of color adjectives: *bluish, greenish*. As it is known, affixes, as well as independent lexical units, reveal connotative aspects of meaning. Thus, the suffix *-ish* has a negative connotative meaning, so analyzing the '*bluish*' derivative, we come to the conclusion about the lack of a color feature, which also correlates with the quantity category. It is interesting to note that this affix has already started an independent path as an adverb formed by conversion from affixes.

- Are you hungry yet?
- Ish. I could eat, if you're hungry (bbc.Co.uk)

Morphological markers of indirectness also include suffix *- odd* and something which are used to express approximant numerical information.

*"I'd say Mark is about 30-odd – maybe 35."*

*"He's added 20-odd kilos"*

*"Rose is twenty-something"*

The use of multi-level: morphological and lexical means of expressing the meaning of indirectness allows us to consider it in terms of a functional-semantic category and further consider the entire range of means that allow us to express the shades of the meaning of this category.

### 3 LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF USING HEDGES

Another way to avoid indirectness, along with using VL, is to use hedges. This concept was first introduced into circulation by G. Lakoff, where hedges are defined as “words whose meaning implies fuzziness (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471). In his work, Lakoff clarifies that hedges, in general, do not carry an independent semantic load, but perform only a pragmatic task - to avoid straightforwardness. Since then, the concept has undergone numerous modifications. So, B. Frazer speaks about hedged performatives, which are formed from modal verbs (Frazer, 2010)

We can agree with this point of view, taking into account the nature of the functioning of this category in the English language. Following the general distinction between primary and secondary modality, hedges are based mainly on the means of expressing secondary modality, which can be divided into two classes. The first reflects the relationship between subject and action. This type of modality is based on the presentation by the speaker of an action as desirable, possible, necessary, etc. This type of actional type of modality is represented mainly by modal verbs and constitutes the

The second type of secondary modality expresses the attitude of the speaker in the statement, his presentation of the action as real, unreal, possible, etc. The means of expressing this epistemic modality range from modal verbs to modal particles: *maybe, probably, certainly, of course, perhaps, sure, evidently, supposedly, allegedly*; by modalized verbs *seem, to appear, happen, chance* by the so called performative verbs and phrases which name speech and mental acts: *think, suppose, presume, guess, doubt, be certain, be sure etc.* (e.g. *I think he is quite shy ; I am afraid I can't agree with you*); by special syntactic structures like 'tag questions' (Kozlova, 2005, 107).

Thus, it is possible to correlate the means of expressing modality with the hedges, and the study of this category can greatly contribute to the creation of a nomenclature of hedging means in the English language.

Consideration of the category of modality as the basis of the category of indirectness poses new challenges for the English teacher. To form the skills of authentic oral speech, it is necessary to identify those areas where interlingual differences can be predicted. The Russian language, unlike English, has a greater degree of categoricalness and straightforwardness; as a result, the means of expressing modality are used much less frequently. This is the reason for numerous errors in the construction of statements and translation from Russian into English. Errors at this level do not lead to a distortion of the meaning, but they lead to a distortion of the nature of the statement when translating a Russian into English and from English into Russian.

So, a suggestion to start any conversation. Today is a great day! When translated directly, “Today is a nice day” sounds rather categorical and does not encourage further communication. If we transform this sentence using the above modality means: Nice day today, isn't it I think the weather looks good for a while, etc., the sentence will be much less categorical.

We would like to note one more point when using modality, which is also associated with differences in the national and cultural specifics of the English and Russian languages. This difference is due to the use of negation in hedged designs. Let's try to illustrate the translation of a Russian sentence using hedged constructions

*He is lazy. When directly translated “he is lazy”, the sentence sounds extremely straightforward, which is not consistent with the rules of English courtesy 1) Don't impose. 2) Give options. 3) Make the hearer feel good - be friendly.*

In this case, let us try to add the hedging “*I think he is lazy*. Let's try to remove the negative adjective I think he is not very hard working. Thus, negation appears in the sentence, and here it should be noted that in the Russian and English traditions there are different traditions of placing negation: in the Russian sentence, negation is placed in the mode of utterance, which is expressed by a hedged construction, and in English, in accordance with the rules of the British politeness, negation tends to be expressed in the dictum. *Therefore, in the end, we get an offer, I don't think he is a very hard-working boy.*

This technique can be used when translating a sentence with a negative connotative meaning. So, about an ugly girl, you can say, “*I think she is nice personality*”, and about a lazy person, “*I don't think this is the example of the most hardworking person*”.

Thus, the use of hedged constructions, based on the use of means of expressing modality, is a means of expressing irony, which is a hallmark of English speech behavior.

Another characteristic feature of the English speech discourse is the extensive use of tag-questions, which, in our opinion, is caused by the combination of polar properties in one sentence, which allows us to provide the

listener with two options for the development of events without insisting on any of them. G. Tottie and S. Hoffman refer to the tag question also imperatives "*Please do not forget about the train, will you?*", noting that these questions are used differently in American and British English. In the British variant, tags are commonly added to the positive statements, while in the American version, on the contrary, the sentence is built from negative to positive (Tottie and Hoffman, 2006, p. 289.). The authors also note a significant quantitative superiority in the use of constructions in British English.

*You aren't going to be late today, are you?* (AmE.) – *Nice day today, isn't it?* (Br E)

The authors of the work note that the British are also characterized by the use of positive-positive questions, such as "*it's an accumulative thing is it?*" (ibid.).

This construction makes up the statement tags category. "The statement tag emphasizes or reinforces an affirmative statement. The tag is also affirmative. They typically invite the listener to agree or sympathize in some way, or to offer a parallel comment. (Cambridge Dictionary)

If we consider the functions of tag questions, then we can agree with the opinion of Holmes, who distinguishes 2 types of categories: epistemic modality and affective. As mentioned above, epistemic modality is a category that postulates the speaker's attitude to the statement, so if we consider tag questions within this category, then the questions are pronounced with rising intonation, which emphasizes the need to confirm the information presented in the sentence. Affective tags, on the other hand, are pronounced with falling intonation. In his research, J. Holmes identifies several subtypes of affective tags, the main of which can be reduced to facilitative tags that encourage conversation:

*"So, you have moved to a new apartment recently, haven't you?"*

softening tags that reduce the negative reaction to the sentence:

*"Let's not discuss it now, shall we!"*

challenging tags that encourage a reluctant reply from the interlocutor:

*So, you can't solve this task, can you?*

(Holmes 1995, p.80- 81)

Another feature of English speech discourse is phrases gaining and keeping attention: *you know, I mean etc.* According to Cambridge Dictionary, they may be used as a pause while speaking or while thinking what to say next, at the end of the statement, to make sure the people you are talking to understand; when trying to help someone; to use the same knowledge etc.

#### 4 NOMINATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Let us briefly dwell on one more characteristic feature of English speech discourse, which must also be considered when forming authentic speech competencies. We are talking about part-of-speech substitutions associated with the replacement of the verbal with the nominative form of expression in the description of repetitive actions. This feature is currently covered only in translation manuals, but, in our opinion, it must be considered when teaching a language at an earlier stage.

Consider sentences like, "*He is a big sleeper*". "*He is a big eater*." "*He is an early riser*."

The peculiarity of this structure lies in the fact that in Russian this concept is expressed mainly in the verbal way with the corresponding adverb. The difficulty is to understand the reasons for such differences and to form in students an authentic way of expressing this concept.

This phenomenon is based on the difference in the specifics of combinations of concepts in meaning. It is known that all derivative names have a dual character. While retaining the categorical feature of the producing part of speech, the word acquires the categorical characteristics of a new, receiving part of speech. If we analyze the semantics of *sleeper, eater and riser* in these contexts, we can see that these concepts occupy an intermediate position between nouns and verbs. Indeed, the main categorical semantics of a noun are subject entities, which are characterized by a state of rest. Thus, a nuclear noun is a stable entity. At the same time, the main semantics of the verb is an action that takes place in time. These derivative names, therefore, combine both verbal and nominative semantics, and constitute the category of words of mixed categorical semantics (Vorontsova, 2015, 27). A derivative word indirectly names a feature or object, and the meaning represents a certain hierarchy of semantic categories. The main is represented by the part of speech under which the signified is summed up (in our case, the noun), and the subordinate indicates the part of speech from which this

word (verb) was taken). Such a complex semantic hierarchy is also reflected at the level of syntax, where the derived word performs its nominative function through a certain syntactic position.

Characteristically, the verbal nature of these formations is indicated by their preferred use in the predicative position. These verbal nouns in the indicated meanings can hardly occupy the position of subject or object, which is traditionally considered the sphere of syntactic dominance of nouns. The main function of verbal nouns in the predicative position is the meaning of a single or multiple action, which is confirmed by the possibility of replacing it with a correlative verb.

*He was a lover of music- He loved music.*

In case of such peripheral units each language chooses the preferable form of expressions. For the Russian language verbal forms are more common, while the English prefers nominal.

## 5 FORMING SPEAKING COMPETENCES AT SCHOOL

The question arises at what stage and at what age it is necessary to begin the formation of oral speech competencies. Discussions and the inclusion of VL in language training courses appeared relatively recently, and for a long time students built oral statements according to the rules prescribed in textbooks, as a result of which the monologue and dialogic speech of students sounded unnatural. Moreover, the students did not have in their oral arsenal the means of replacing an unfamiliar word. Moreover, the means of VL of the native language were carefully withdrawn from use by teachers, in accordance with the rules of the Russian literary language. Perhaps that is why students and teachers developed a negative attitude towards VL tools, which were undeservedly removed from the curriculum.

With the development of international contacts, students began to increasingly communicate with representatives of the English-speaking culture and pick up the means of expression that they were not taught at school, but that were widely used by their peers. There was a certain fashion on VL. Perhaps this fact attracted the attention of methodologists and gave rise to many discussions about the need to teach VL in the classroom.

At the same time, sections on teaching VL (New English File, p.11) are already appearing in some training courses. The focus is on using VL to express unfamiliar concepts. The main tasks are aimed at ensuring that students guess the word that is expressed by means of VL. At the next stage, students are invited to make sentences themselves to express concepts that are unknown to them using constructions: *It is somebody who works in a restaurant (chef); It's a person who takes food from the kitchen to the tables (waiter); It's a place where you go when you want to buy something (shop), It's the opposite of fat (thin), It's kind of thin, but it means thin and attractive (slim) and so on.*

We would especially like to dwell on the use of tag questions. Unfortunately, for Russian-speaking students, these questions have always remained dead weight, being forgotten immediately after the analysis of grammatical structures. However, now when attention is paid directly to the formation of authentic speech competencies, issues related not only to education, but also to the use of tag questions are already included in the course program. So, in the textbook Total English Upper Intermediate (Upper Intermediate), based on the above dialogue, students are asked to classify disjunctive questions according to the functions used: checking information; asking for agreement; asking someone to do something; making an offer or suggestion (Total English, 8) These constructions are completely absent in Russian, so the forced use of separating questions becomes especially relevant.

Moreover, many developers of online English courses began to include VL in the program (Linguarama). Within this course, a whole section is devoted to the formation of VL. The author consistently draws a distinction between oral and written language, formulates the rules of English politeness, brings students to the concept of VL. As training tasks, he suggests choosing VL tools from the proposed text and categorizing them: list completers (*and so on, someone like that, stuff like that*), placeholders (*whatshername, whatsit, thingy, thingummy*), quantifiers (*around, odd, or so, a lot of/lots of, a couple of*), generalizers (*sort of, kind of, you know*), suffixes (*-ish*). The author of the course also draws attention to the use of hedges (*I suppose, I think*) specifying the main function - when we moderate what we say and when we are being critical.

Many textbooks provide discussion materials, where phrases such as, *I believe, I consider, I don't think, I am afraid* are given. It seems that it is possible to continue working with these hedged constructions and use them to express negative meanings, observing the rules of British courtesy. For example, you can ask students to express such concepts as: lazy son (dialogue between teacher and mother), ugly girl (dialogue between two colleagues). In this task, it is necessary to consider the situation of communication and the relationship between the communicants so that the dialogue does not come down to the use of slang.

Many experts note that in certain contexts the use of VL is rude and disrespectful (Samigullina, 2020, p.18). This is especially true in cases where the situation requires specific information, and the interlocutor deliberately avoids giving a direct answer. So, in the situation “So what are we going to do today?” – *Whatever*. Under certain conditions, it can mean indifference, disinterest in the interlocutor. The same applies to the use of the words things and stuff when answering a question that implies a specific answer “So, you talked to your mother. What did she say? ‘A vague answer to this question may mean a reluctance to communicate, hiding information.

Despite this, this function of VL does not dictate the exclusion of VL from oral use, since the formation of oral competencies means that the student is ready to communicate in various situations and is able to fully express the entire range of speech behavior.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Teaching a foreign language is based on the comparison of linguistic means and speech behavior in the native and foreign languages. The pictures of the world of the native and foreign languages coincide, as they have a common core. Therefore, on the periphery of these categories, there are areas where divergences can be predicted. These areas are due to purely specific factors in the development of the language, which are based on historical, geographical, cultural and other differences. Such peripheral phenomena include VL, which is based on the peculiarities of the mentality of the British. Such phenomenon requires especially attention, since the failure to take into account these features lead to the formation of a negative image of the interlocutor, regarding him as an ill-mannered, impolite person, and as a result, leads to an unwillingness to maintain further communication. That is why it is necessary to form speech competencies not only based on the native language, but also taking into account the peculiarities of the mentality, cultural behavior and speech characteristics of the English themselves.

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- Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/royal-family/prince-charles-gardener-childhood-b1910391.html>
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