

Some Aspects of Russian Business Communication

Kiselev Evgeny

Abstract

Rapid changes in Russian environment make foreigners regard Russian people as unpredictable and hard to deal with. In this article, we would like to show some aspects of Russian communication. Language is one of the most frustrating issues for foreigners. But problems in communicating with Russians aren't restricted to language only. Russians address and refer to one another in a way that is markedly different from other people. Some other features of Russian communication style include quality of Russian conversation, compulsive undercommunication, or role of a smile. Even without knowing a single word in Russian language, foreigners who understand such characteristics of Russian communication can use them to their advantage to develop and maintain appropriate relationships with Russians.

Introduction

To communicate with a person from another culture, a common language is necessary. English language is considered the lingua-franca of international business. However, when it comes for Russians two major difficulties occur. First, many Russians have studied English but have no practice in speaking it (Wilson&Donaldson, 1996, pp.146-147). Soviet educational system emphasized reading and writing in English, but not speaking English. Generally there is a strong need for an interpreter when dealing with Russians. Second, the end of communism marked a new linguistic beginning in that a) the language that described Soviet economic practices and procedures became instantly redundant and b) there followed massive borrowing from the West of business

and management terminology (Holden et al., 2008, p.114). In other words, what is considered to be Russian business language is actually a mix of English and Russian languages, which is undergoing rapid changes in order to fulfill the social, economic and linguistic demands in modern Russia.

Other factors which make atmosphere of intercultural communication in Russia even more complicated can be divided into two groups: linguistic issues and cultural issues. In this article we will focus on some of them. Regarding linguistic issues we will discuss Russia's system of names, and regarding cultural factors in communication we will cover Russian undercommunication and use of smile in Russian culture.

To uninformed outsider, the Russian language imposes two immediate barriers to cultural and psychological closeness. The first is the Cyrillic alphabet. The letters that make up the Cyrillic script come from the Latin, Greek and Hebrew alphabets; in addition there were invented some new letters for Slavonic sounds that had no counterpart in those languages. Anyone who has learnt Russian is acutely aware of the problem of transliterating words written in Cyrillic into phonetically equivalent forms in the Latin alphabet. The absence of agreed conventions means that there exist different Latin variations of the same Cyrillic word. For example, the name of the composer Tchaikovsky (which is the conventional spelling) can also be written as Chaikovskii or Chaykovskiy, but no-one would recognize these (Holden et al., 1998). This problem brings us to the second barrier which concerns Russian names, or rather the Russian system of naming and the associated conventions of address. From foreigner's point of view, the confusion seems to be connected with the endless array of names for one person (Gerhart, 1974). To understand why such confusion does occur, let us give a better insight into Russian naming system and modes of address.

Russian “tripartite” system of naming and modes of address

Everyone who has studied Russian learns the naming system in order to address Russians properly. Those who have not studied Russian but are professionally involved with Russians must understand how the system works,

because it forms a central pillar of all social interaction. From the foreign businessperson's point of view ignorance of the system is unlikely to cause a problem with Russians, but it can perpetuate social distance, and social distance is something Russians do not like (Holden et al., 1998).

Personal names are usually the first feature attracting foreign readers of Russian novels as peculiarly Russian. Every Russian has three names, but with full forms, short forms, special usages associated with each name such as nicknames, there are in theory twelve possible ways of addressing every Russian (Comrie&Stone, 1978). First comes a first name, which is sometimes anachronistically called "Christian", then a patronymic, consisting of the father's first name with an attached suffix (usually -ovich/-evich for men, -ovna/-evna for women); and finally a surname. Hence such triple combinations as "*Dmitry Pavlovich Karamazov*", "*Anna Arkadyevna Karenina*", or "*Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov*", But there are many *Mitenkas*, *Annushkas*, and *Vanyas*, all of which refer to the same people. The difficulty is not in understanding the system, but in retaining in their head the identity of characters and in distinguishing in each case the numerous and various names under which they are known (Hingley, 1977). To understand the importance of this issue let us apply it to a business environment. For example, a business counterpart introduced himself as "*Sergei Ivanov*", but his colleagues keep calling him "*Seriozha*" or "*Mikhalych*" during conversation. It might be challenging even with one person, but in case of group negotiations things can become hard to deal with. The best solution for such situation is to have a good interpreter as well as a good memory.

As we have already seen, this system of names permits Russians to address one another in a variety of forms. Among admissible variations, that consisting of first name and patronymic is perhaps the most significant. As a rule, and except in the family circle and with close friends, Russians (except minors) tend to use this combination as a universal form of address. To address someone in this way, for example as "*Ivan Ivanovich*", is to achieve an intermediate point of cordiality between the familiar "*Ivan*" with its still more familiar derivatives "*Vanya*", "*Vanichka*", and so on and, the relatively curt of formal "*Ivanov*", "*Mr Ivanov*" or becoming abandoned "*Comrad Ivanov*"

and the like.

Russians on intimate terms would use first names, and often accepted shortened forms of their names. For instance, *Zhenya* is a common short form of *Evgeny*, *Seriozha* is the corresponding form of *Sergei*. But there are other variants on their names too, each with specific emotional loading (Holden et al., 1998). For example, there are around 10 different forms of name *Evgeny* to express several degrees of endearment, but a common female name *Anna* with about 20 forms is a leader here.

Use of the forename by itself is largely restricted to the family and among intimates, such as close friends and schoolchildren. In such cases, a shortened rather than a full form of the name will be used. It should be noted that these shortened forms are, strictly speaking, not the equivalent of nicknames, which are less common in Russian than in American or British society (Holden et al., 1998). Nevertheless your Russian business counterpart can easily suggest during business dinner your using forename only, which is a good sign in building up successful communication with Russians.

Much of the interest of Russian name usage lies in such atmospheric nuance, but no less in the sheer frequency and persistence with which -even when no third party is present and there can be no question of mistaken identity- two Russians will incessantly address each other as "*Nikolay Gavrilovich*", "*Marfa Timofeyevna*", "*Antosha*", or "*Lizochka*". It is as though each speaker had contracted to confirm the fact of the other's existence in return for a similar courtesy. This habit of repeating an interlocutor's name in dialogue is often considered characteristic American usage; not least in conversation between comparative strangers, who are apt to address each other repeatedly as "Mr Smith", "Dr Jones", "Tom" or "Mary" in contexts where neither speaker seems in danger of forgetting his identity.

Russians and Americans are akin in this usage, then, but the Russian variation places more strain on the memory. To observe decent etiquette with even the most casual Russian acquaintance two names must be retained as well as the surname, since to call a *Timofey Matveyevich* "*Matvey Timofeyevich*" is a grave solecism. It is not enough to know that the same man is surnamed "*Kuznetsov*" or "*Sidorov*" whereas a Smith, a Jones, a Robinson might work

in an English-speaking office all his life without any of his colleagues learning what his father's first name is. Although Russian usage places a strain on anyone with an extensive acquaintance, the national mind is conditioned to such special efforts from birth; and necessarily so, since it may be unacceptable for a Russian to write to another Russian unless he knows his addressee's name and patronymic. He may therefore need to send another letter first, to a common acquaintance with a known name and patronymic, in order to obtain the necessary particulars (Hingley, 1977).

As some researchers noticed (Holden et al., 1998) "the neat thing about the Russian mode of address, using forename plus patronymic, is that it allows both intimacy and distance at the same time". In other words, it provides necessary level of respect and proximity to differentiate friends from colleagues or acquaintances from strangers. An official letter, which starts with "*Ivan Ivanovich*", still remains formal, but leaves better impression than a definitely cold "*Ivanov*".

Another aspect of Russian addressing formula is that Russians do not use words for Mr or Mrs. When Putin meets people throughout Russia, he is greeted by citizens as *Vladimir Vladimirovich*: not Mr Putin, not Mr President. Holden (Holden et al., 1998) summed this observation that the combination of first name plus patronymic is the equivalent of Mr (or Mrs) plus surname in Western terms.

Emotional flexibility is enhanced by the existence of two forms for "you" when reference is to only one person. *Ty*, "thou", is used when addressing intimates, small children, animals, drunks and God; *vy*, "you", is the more formal mode of address, which foreigners are recommended to employ unless they are sure of their ground. When you are on first name terms with your partner, you might use *ty*; and when using first name plus patronymic, *vy* is appropriate. Although there are many cases in which *vy* might be used with first names only, the use of *ty* in conjunction with first name and patronymic is idiosyncratic.

Foreign researchers (Holden et al., 1998, p.181) suggest some implications for foreigners dealing with Russian businessmen:

"The first thing is that you need to know all the names of the Russians

you deal with. You may know that you are having a discussion with Mr Ivanov, but other Russians will refer to him in our presence by his first name and patronymic. To make things slightly complicated, the English version of Russian names on business cards frequently indicate the patronymic by its first letter, e.g. Ivan S. Ivanov. The full patronymic will always be given on the Russian side of the card. Therefore, if you do not know Russian or cannot read the Cyrillic alphabet well enough, ask for the patronymic.

When it comes to addressing Russians, it is acceptable for foreigners to use Mr or Mrs plus their surname, but often Russians like to be on first-name terms with people they like or hope will like them. In such cases a Russian will say: “Call me Ivan”.

We can also mention that even though Holden’s implications are very practical, they are missing another mode of address which has tendency to become widespread nowadays. Although Russians do not use Russian equivalents for words Mr and Mrs, there is old term “*gospodin*” (*gospozha* for female), which was abandoned during Soviet period, but is fighting back its positions on Russian semantic map. Soon *gospodin* Smith might become the closest equivalent for English “Mr Smith”, since *gospodin* plus surname is getting more and more popular form of address in mass media.

In pre-Revolutionary Russia there existed a well-developed system of terms of address. The titles *gospodin/gospozha*, like Mr and Mrs in English had an honorific function, and were used in various formal situations. However, after the Revolution, these words when used with vocative function, acquired a negative connotation and soon disappeared from the speech of Russian people. For over seventy years the use of the vocative *gospodin* was confined to formal situations in which one was addressing not Soviet citizen but foreigners. For example, one could say *gospodin posol* (Mr. Ambassador), *gospodin Braun* (Mr. Brown), *dami i gospoda* (Ladies and gentlemen). In other formal situations, when addressing Soviet citizens, one would of course generally use the word *tovarishch* (comrade) (Minaeva, 1998).

Foreign businesspersons may occasionally find themselves addressing several Russians (for example, at a banquet). In English the word “you” does

not sound cold, but its equivalent in Russian (вы) does. To get round this, one should talk either in term of “we” and “us”; or address the assembled as “dear colleagues” or “dear friends”. “Dear” in this instance will normally be translated into Russian as “respected”. Foreigners are usually advised not to use the word “comrades” in English or Russian, unless speaker wants to sound facetious.

Russian communication and undercommunication

Although Russians tend to ask for much information during negotiations, they seem loath to supply any and are often described as secretive. Valchoutsikos (1986) traces the Russian penchant for secrecy to historical and cultural origins. Moreover, the secretiveness of Soviet negotiators could rise from a general xenophobia. It may also be related to the planning system, “in which information is power and is jealously guarded” (Sloss & Davis, 1987, p.149). Von Czege (1983) hypothesizes that Russian secretiveness is a strategic tool designed to control information flows in bureaucratic systems.

Ever since Muscovy first became accessible to the intruding foreigner, there has been a tendency for information about the country to be kept a closely guarded secret, access to which must be denied to foreigners and citizens alike (Hingley, 1977).

Hingley brilliantly characterizes Russians as compulsive undercommunicators. This arresting phrase is presented as the opposite of a pronounced Russian tendency to expose themselves “either excessively or misleadingly”. Hingley is referring to preference of Russians for using language for:

- conveying emotional nuance: for example, by modifying words, including people’s names to convey affection, humor, disdain;
- displaying feelings: displaying them, not merely revealing them;
- fantasy mongering: the capacity to project a grand scheme - communism being an excellent example - which exists more in the mind than in reality;
- evading and deceiving, but not necessarily to trick anyone deliberately, to avoid admitting weakness or fault (think of how many times Russians say “No problem”, the multipurpose codeword for impending cockup).

Undercommunication is the opposite to these tendencies: it refers to the centuries-long tradition of keeping one's lips sealed, of not saying more than one knows, of not saying anything that it might be incriminating or unwittingly advantageous to an interlocutor, of not admitting to knowing anything it might be dangerous to know, of passing information stealthily. Hingley speaks of this tendency in terms of an obsession with secrecy. In this sense Russians reveal themselves as compulsive undercommunicators, obsessed with information based on rumor, innuendo and the grapevine (Steele, 1994), as if information not obtained by non-clandestine means automatically has value.

Some researchers noticed that undercommunication is a deep-rooted system of preserving information. But since modern Russian business culture is exposed to foreign business practices, we might expect changes in attitudes towards distribution of information in near future. This process should attract more interest of researchers and described in more detail.

The role of smile in Russian communication

The thing is that an everyday “unsmilingness” is another characteristic of Russian communicative behavior; it is one of the most obvious and ethnically-distinct characteristics of Russian communication. Sternin (2000) in his analysis of role of smile in Russian communication claims that we can distinguish at least 14 ethnic characteristics of the Russian smile:

1. The smile is not a sign of politeness in Russian communication.
2. In Russian communication smiling at strangers is not the norm.
3. Among Russians responding to a smile with a smile is not the norm.
4. In Russian communication it is not the norm to smile at a person if your eyes accidentally meet.
5. Among Russians it is not the norm to smile when looking at small children or pets.
6. Among Russians the smile is a sign of one's personal fondness for an individual.
7. Among Russians it is not the norm to smile when carrying out work

responsibilities or when dealing with any serious business.

8. A Russian smile is supposed to be sincere. It is seen as a sincere expression of good mood or of fondness towards the person it is directed to.

9. A Russian's smile must have a weighty reason behind it that is clear to those nearby; only then does a person have a "right" to it in the eyes of those present. If the reason behind someone's smile isn't obvious to a Russian, that might cause him serious distress.

10. The current material well-being of person who smiles is acknowledged in Russian society as a worthy reason (and practically the only reason) for a smile.

11. In Russian communication it is not the norm to smile in order to cheer someone else up or to cheer yourself up.

12. In the Russian consciousness a smile, as it were, requires a certain amount of time to come into being. It is viewed as a kind of independent communicative act, which as such in the majority of instances is unnecessary.

13. A smile must be appropriate from the point of view the people nearby; it should match the communicative situation.

14. Among Russians there is not always a clear distinction between smiling at someone and laughing at someone. In practice these things meld together, are hard to distinguish, and look a lot like each other.

In Western communicative behavior, the smile is first and foremost a sign of politeness; therefore it is a requirement in greetings and during polite conversation. Russian writers have often pointed out a difference between Russian and American smiles, characterizing an American smile as strange and artificial for the Russian. In the West a smile while greeting someone first and foremost means that greeting is polite. The more a person smiles during his greeting, and the more friendly he is at that moment, the more politeness his behavior demonstrates to the person he is talking to. The smile in public service in the West (and in the East) also fulfills the function of demonstrating politeness more than anything else. In business "smiling customer service" builds customer loyalty, fosters profits (Hunter, 2007, pp.35-36).

In Russian communicative behavior a smile "for politeness" or "out of

politeness” is simply not the norm. Quite the contrary. A Russian usually reacts defensively or even with hostility to a purely “polite” smile, if it is seen as such. The Russian phrase, “He smiled out of politeness” expresses an unfriendly attitude toward the person who smiled. Among the Russians a constantly polite smile is called a “business smile,” and it is considered a bad sign in a person, a sign of his insincerity, of concealment, of a desire to hide his true feelings (Sterin, 2000).

In Russian communication a smile is directed primarily to people you know. That’s why saleswomen don’t smile at customers: they don’t know them. Saleswomen will smile at customers they know.

A Russian smile demonstrates that a person who smiles has a personal congeniality towards the person to whom the smile is directed. The smile shows a personal fondness. That is why Russians smile only at friends insofar as one doesn’t have personal fondness toward strangers. The reaction to a stranger’s smile may well be, “Do we actually know each other?”

Customs agents, police and other public services don’t smile because they are doing serious work. Sterin(2000) argues that service personnel have never smiled in Russia during the course of their duties. Clerks, salesman, waiters and servants were polite and attentive, but they do not smile. Smiling has to be developed as a professional requirement among Russian service personnel. Russian proverb says “Business before pleasure” to differentiate work from personal activities or emotions, and that is why Russian smile is left behind workspace.

A recent report of *The Financial Times* (March 27, 2009) regarding Russian business culture provides readers with such implication for business negotiation: “There is no need to smile, and jokes, often lost in translation, are out of place.” There are other evidence that smile is still alien element of Russian business communication. After dissolution of Soviet Union *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Sun*, *The Economist* and others discussed the change in Russia’s service and noticed the introduction of American “service with a smile” technique among employees in stores, restaurants and other service oriented companies. It is also known that McDonald’s employee in Russia were taught to smile as far as in early 1990s (Stearns, 2012).

In the Russian communicative consciousness the following imperative exists: a smile must be a sincere reflection of good mood or good attitude. It is not the norm to smile “just because” or to lift someone’s mood or to make nice or to support someone. A Russian smile doesn’t have those functions. To have the right to a smile you actually have to have a good relationship with the person or to actually be in elevated spirits. In Russian there is a proverb: “Laughing without a reason means stupidity is in season.” People with Western thinking often won’t understand the logic of the proverb. One German instructor who had the essence of the proverb explained to him (“If a person laughs without a reason, then there’s something wrong with him upstairs”) just couldn’t understand and kept on asking, “But why should the one imply the other?” (Sterin, 2000, p.55)

We can conclude here that the majority of standard Russian communication scenarios do not sanction smiling. It is not the norm to smile in a tense situation, “It’s no time for smiling.” It is not the norm to smile if there are people nearby who you know are undergoing serious hard times, if someone is sick or confounded by personal problems, and so forth. And as *The Moscow Times* (April 29, 2011) noticed, “while McDonald’s ultimately removed the “smile” choice from its Russian restaurants, smiles are not off the menu.”

Conclusion

The Financial Times (March 27, 2009) called Russian business culture “a mix of the authoritarian and the free-wheeling.” Authoritarian quality of Russian business culture is obviously coming from Soviet experience of command economy, while free-wheeling is a new shape of modern Russian culture. Both characteristics are definitely true. A change in business environment can be observed even by communication means. The way modern Russian language of business is changing also affects Russian modes of address. Even though general naming formula preserves unchanged, new modes of address, which are more relevant to market economy system, are becoming popular. “Comrade” as a part of addressing formula is losing its weight and nowadays is almost restricted to military service.

Some Aspects of Russian Business Communication

Appearance of Western standards of service also brings change into another cultural characteristic of Russian communication style-role of smile. There is lack of research on this topic in Russia, but the fact that Russians are getting more and more accustomed to “service with smile” has no doubt. Also we can expect further change of Russian communication style in business, and even in such deep-rooted traditions such as undercommunication.

(筆者は、関西学院大学大学院商学研究科博士課程後期課程2年)

References

- Comrie, B., Stone, G.(1978). *The Russian Language Since the Revolution*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press.
- The Economist*(1994, March 26). Service with a smile.
- Financial Times*(2009, March 27). Russia: Hot and cold reception awaits Moscow's visitors.
- Gerhard, G.(1974). *The Russian's World: Life and Language*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Hingley, R. (1977). *The Russian Mind*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Holden, N., Kuznetsova, O., & Fink, G.(2008). Russia's long struggle with Western terms of management and the concepts behind them. In S. Tietze (ed.). *International management and language*(pp.114-127). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Holden, N.J., Cooper, C., & Carr, J.(1998). *Dealing with the New Russia: Management Cultures in Collision*. Chichester: John Wiley&Sons, Ltd.
- Hunter, J.(2011). A study of consumer perception of smiling customer service within the airline industry. *Journal of Transportation Security* 4(1): 35-36.
- Minaeva, L.(1998). From Comrades to Consumers: Interpersonal Aspects of the Lexicon. In: Chilton, P., Ilyin, M., & Mey, J.(eds.), *Political Discourse in Transition in Europe 1989-1991*. 1998. xi: 272.
- Molinsky, A.(2005). Language Fluency and the Evaluation of Cultural Faux Pas: Russians Interviewing for Jobs in the United States. *Social Psychology Quarterly*. Vol. 68(2): 103-120.
- The Moscow Times* (2011, April 29). Why Russians Don't Smile.
- Roemer, C., Garb, P., Neu, & J., Graham, J.(1999). A comparison of American and Russian Patterns of Behavior in Buyer-Seller Negotiations Using Observational Measure. *International Negotiation* 4 : 37-61.
- Stearns, P.(2012). The history of happiness. *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 90: 104-109.
- Steele, J.(1995). *Eternal Russia*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Sterin, I.(2000). Smile in Russian communicative behavior(in Russian). *Russian and Finnish communicative behavior*. Voronezh: VGTU: 53-61.

Some Aspects of Russian Business Communication

The Wall Street Journal (1995, August 16). Service With a Smile ... in Russia? ---
Competition Shoves Aside Old Soviet-Style Customer Abuse.

The Sun (1994, Feb 8). Service With a Smile Stuns People in Russia.

Wilson, D., & Donaldson, L. (1996). *Russian etiquette & ethics in business*.
Lincolnwood, Illinois USA: NTC Business Books.