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Understanding as the Beginning of Agreement: Linguistic Aspects of Intercultural Family Communication

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The paper discusses the issues connected with the use of language in an intercultural family, which include: 1) the choice of language, 2) bilingualism / polylingualism, 3) code mixing and code switching, 4) the use of an oikolect. Linguistic difficulties, which can lead to communication problems, can occur on the phonological, graphic, lexical or linguocognitive level, as well as the level of communication strategies. The paper brings together the theoretical frameworks of communication studies, linguistics and semiotics in order to identify the key problems, which arise in intercultural marriages, and suggest possible solutions. Methods employed in the research include observation, questionnaires and interviews, narrative, biographic, and semiotic analysis. The study is done from the Russian perspective and is aimed at overcoming the difficulties intercultural families face both in Russia and abroad. The results of the study may lead to their practical application in family counselling, cross-cultural education and training, as well as in real-life situations.

Keywords: intercultural family communication, bilingualism, polylingualism, code mixing, code switching, oikolect, linguistic difficulties, communication strategies.

A family containing representatives of different cultures is almost an ideal model of intercultural communication, which allows research into its different aspects and characteristics. This miniature model – a microcosm of sorts – embodies both the opportunity for combining and integrating different cultural traditions and the problems, which invariably result from the clash of languages, mentalities, values, and behavioural patterns.

Achieving harmony in intercultural family communication in today's multicultural world is

a significant problem, which can be studied at the intersection of different disciplines. The paper brings together the theoretical frameworks of communication studies, linguistics and semiotics in order to identify the key problems, which arise in intercultural marriages, and suggest possible solutions. The study is done from the Russian perspective and is aimed at overcoming the difficulties intercultural families face both in Russia and abroad.

The approach taken in the study, which was carried out by two scholars – the author of this article and Y. Bondarenko – can be described as

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a mixed method research design. We employed observation, questionnaires and interviews, narrative, biographic, and semiotic analysis. The questionnaires addressed to 193 intercultural family members generated detailed accounts of their family life, indicating its positive and negative features, reasons for conflict and the ways cultural identity of family members is expressed in everyday interactions. The follow-up was face-to-face interviewing of married couples living in Russia, which enabled us to clarify and expand the data about intercultural families and ask more personal questions. The employment of narrative analysis provided an opportunity to explore first-hand information given by people who were willing to share their thoughts and feelings with others. Biographic analysis dealt with materials about famous intercultural marriages: the British Queen Victoria and the German Prince Albert; the King of Morocco and the U.S. actress Grace Kelly; the U.S. dancer Isadora Duncan and the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin; the Spanish artist Salvador Dali and his Russian wife Gala, etc. Through the prism of semiotic analysis intercultural family communication was viewed as a complex system of signs (language, food, artefacts, religious signs, etc.).

Y. Bondarenko distinguishes the following constituent features of intercultural family communication:

1) combination of interpersonal and group interactions, manifested in different cultures in the form of such variables as family structure; age and sex of people getting married; number of spouses and children; relationship between family members, etc.;

2) socialization, which is understood as the interdependence of an individual family and society and presupposes the knowledge of the host country's language and culture;

3) territoriality represented by communicative distance, eye contact, density and stratification of

communicative space, construction of inner and outer communication boundaries;

4) continuity in time expressed both diachronically (family history, name-giving traditions, family narratives) and synchronically (conceptualization of time, tempo and rhythm of communication, expression of time in language, etc.);

5) degree of (in)formality displayed in verbal and nonverbal behaviour in different cultures (ratio of improvisation and ritual, intergenerational communication, subordination, taboos, attitude to physical contact, etc.);

6) cultural variability defined by the system of individual, parental, family, culturally specific and universal values, which can be transferred to the level of family communication and cause interpersonal barriers;

7) marginalization, which can be overcome when the foreign spouse becomes assimilated in the host culture (Bondarenko, 2010).

Using Yuri Lotman's term "semiosphere," Y. Bondarenko views family communication as a continuum filled with semiotic formations of different types, which constitute the nucleus and the periphery of the communicative space (Ibid.).

The use of verbal signs in intercultural family communication is defined by a number of **peculiarities** differentiating it from monocultural communication.

The first peculiarity is the choice of language to be used in an intercultural family. Research shows that the decision is made according to the following three patterns: 1) the domination of one language over the other; 2) their coexistence based on equality; 3) the use of a third language non-native for both spouses functioning as an intermediary (usually the language of the country of residence or an international language, such as English). Sometimes families make individual

decisions about the choice of languages, e.g. by distinguishing the situations where a particular language is spoken or inviting a foreign nanny, as in the following example: *This German / Polish couple living in Germany are raising their twins with “three and a half” languages <...> with Mom speaking Polish, Dad speaking German, and their au pair speaking Spanish with their boys. The “half language” refers to the fact that the children also hear the parents speaking English to each other since it’s the language they’ve used with each other since they met* (Language Systems ...).

The second peculiarity is *bilinguism* (or even *polylinguism*), which acquires its specific features in intercultural family communication. According to our data, the formation of a real bicultural individual is possible only when a person is born in a bilingual family or enters a foreign culture in an early childhood. No matter how talented people are, they never become one hundred per cent bilingual if they start speaking a foreign language when their first language has already been acquired and retains a leading role. F. Dostoyevsky wrote: “<...> there is a secret of nature, its law according to which you can completely master only the language with which you were born, i.e. which is spoken by the community to which you belong” (Tomashevsky, Levin, 1954, p. 542).

Our findings suggest that children from intercultural families naturally develop bilingualism or polylingualism, which is seen as a positive phenomenon by most of the family members and other people. The growing number of intercultural marriages all over the world and, consequently, the number of bilingual people results in the development of a unique generation of cosmopolitans with bicultural identity who are expected to possess a high level of tolerance and communicative competence, a broad outlook, and a lack of conservatism.

The third peculiarity is the use of *code mixing* and *code switching* in communication, i.e. the insertion of foreign words in speech; the creation of linguistic hybrids and internationalisms; switching from one language to another, etc. In this connection it is interesting to quote a Russian woman married to an American:

English has somehow entered me incompletely and sideways. And it doesn’t go any further, no matter how hard I try. <...> It is living inside me, awkward and unwieldy. The Russian language has had to move aside, and it is sitting there hurt, losing words as our orange tree was losing leaves when my husband transplanted it. “Er... what is the Russian for...?” I drawl, inserting an American word in my Russian speech (Sapp, 2006).

The reasons for code mixing and code switching include:

- low level of linguistic competence, such as in the following conversation between Russian immigrants in Brooklyn where they insert English words *welfare*, *garbage*, *share*, *dentist*, *Medicaid* in their Russian speech:

— Сонечка, ну как твои устроились?

— Да что тебе сказать? Сидят пока на *велфаре*. Вся мебель с *гарбиджа*, квартиру *шерят* с молодой парой из Киева. А ты как?

— Да вот хотела зубы вставить у одного *дантиста*, а он *медикейт* не принимает, надо другого искать (Professionals for Cooperation, 1997, p. 327);

- absence of particular notions in another language:

I bought a *venick* for the *banya* at the market...

If you have to choose between eating *holodets* and being run down by a trolley, seriously consider the trolley variant.

I used my medical *spravka* for toilet paper on a train... (Red Tape, 2001).

Besides, a person can switch from one language to another because of the influence of positive or negative emotions; wish to conceal certain information from others; desire of extended family members to form coalitions on the basis of ethnicity, etc.

The fourth peculiarity is the use of an *o i k o l e c t* (language spoken by a household) formed as a combination of signs from two or more linguistic systems. It usually exists in close-knit families with well-established traditions of speech communication. One of the examples is the formation of family nicknames: e.g. a Turk by name of *Pinhas* is called *Pinny* or *Pinkusik* by his Russian wife; an American called *Steve* becomes *Stepan* in a Russian family; a *Kyrgyz* woman *Yulia* gets a nickname *Shrimp* from her *Libyan* husband.

The use of two or more languages in a family can result in a variety of **linguistic difficulties**, which can lead to communication problems.

The phonological level includes:

- inability to distinguish or correctly pronounce sounds in a foreign language;
- wrong division of the word chain;
- inability to correctly reproduce or interpret the prosodic characteristics of the interlocutor's speech, etc.

Paralinguistic means are widely used by family members to express meaning, modality, and emotions, but can cause misunderstandings in intercultural family communication due to the differences in intonation, loudness, tempo and rhythm of speech, e.g.:

(Russian-Chinese family): *The Chinese often say "ah" at the end of a sentence. We, Russians, usually see it as an urge or an incentive (Let's go for a walk, ah?), and for them it just signifies the completeness of a phrase <...> they pronounce this "ah" with different intonation, sometimes interrogative, and sometimes affirmative. But*

I always think they are asking or suggesting something.

(Russian-Japanese family): *What fascinates me in the Japanese is their manner of expressing surprise. They accompany it with "ehhhh", so sharp and sonorous, as an unexpected roar of a beast. At first it used to scare me. Now I try to surprise them more often!*

Interesting situations occur in British-American marriages, where allegedly there should not be any language barriers between the spouses. However, the phonetic differences between the two variants of the English language are quite significant, like in the following story told by the American journalist S. Lyall about the first meeting with her future English husband:

I could barely understand half of what he said, but I was hooked by his charismatic arrogance, glinting brown eyes and an expert way with the English language (Lyall, 2008, p. 4).

The Britons also had trouble understanding her:

Sometimes it seemed as if nobody believed I was even speaking English, so hard was it to make them comprehend what I was trying to say (Ibid., p. 5).

She remembers how her husband Robert was trying to hire a car during their trip to the US:

'Hello,' he said, sounding like Hugh Grant in "Four Weddings and a Funeral". 'I'd like to high-ah a cah.'

'Hah?' said the Avis operator.

'I'd like to high-ah a cah.'

'What?' she repeated. Robert immediately adopted a Prince Philip-addressing-the-peasants approach, which meant that he enunciated with exaggerated slowness and increasing volume, as if the operator were feeble or deaf, rather than just American.

Eventually he got her to understand that he had said 'hire', and that 'hire' did not mean 'employ', but 'rent', and we got our car. But

multiply this little exchange by a million, imagine me as the ignorant peasant surrounded by people like my husband, and you will have an idea of what my early days in London were like (Ibid., p. 3-4).

Misunderstandings on the graphic level can seriously complicate the life of an intercultural family. Possible problems may include the use of exotic alphabets, abbreviations, differences in document structure, correspondence peculiarities, etc.

The difference in alphabets can cause problems already at the stage of acquiring a visa and getting married. One of the possible difficulties is the transliteration of a name and surname between Russian and English, e.g.: *Екатерина – Ekaterina or Yekaterina? Noir – Нуар, Ноэр or Ноёр? Kersey – Керси or Кёрси? Muskett – Маскетт or Мускетт?* Correct and consistent transliteration of proper names is very important because it deals with documents. We know of situations in which partners had serious problems because in the first visa and all the other documents the names were spelt one way and in the second visa differently, which made all the other documents invalid. One can expect that the situation will be even more complicated with the use of the Arabic or Chinese characters.

Intercultural problems also occur in connection with the way numbers are written. One of the examples is the graphic representations of dates: 11.01.12 for Europeans denotes January 11, 2012 and for Americans – November 1, 2012. No need to explain, such differences can disorient communication partners and produce dubious situations.

Difficulties occurring on the lexical level include: the discrepancy between the semantic structures of words in different languages; existence of intralinguistic and interlinguistic homonyms and paronyms, polysemantic words, euphemisms, words which

have no equivalents in another language; differences in connotations, etc.

Everyday lexicon. Family communication unfolds on a day-to-day level; however, everyday lexicon is seldom part of the vocabulary learned in foreign language classes. It is often difficult to immediately remember how to word in a foreign language such simple notions as *grater, buckwheat, enema, put a wash through, or pull out the weeds*. Intercultural family members seldom walk around their home with a dictionary in their hands, and situations creating this kind of difficulties cause the feelings of annoyance and frustration.

Absence of equivalents between the native languages of the spouses is explained by the existence of nationally specific objects and phenomena in one culture but not in the other, such as Russian *квас, каша, щи, солянка, кефир, рубль, интеллигенция, повесть*; English *muffin, privacy, efficiency, mainstream, backsight, etc.* This leads to code mixing mentioned above, as well as the need to create family nominations for such notions; e.g. Larisa (Russian) and David (English) often use the following phrases: *We've run out of smetana. Shall we go and get tvorog? I'll have some kompot.* Another example from our survey (Russian-American family): *My wife occasionally makes traditional Russian food (pirozhki, salad Olivie, vinegrette)...*

Intralinguistic paronymy can create communication problems because the phonetic similarity between words often leads to their confusion in speech, especially by non-native speakers of a language:

inflammable (instead of *inflatable*) *mattress*;
the bone of contentment (instead of *contention*);
too much water had flown (instead of *flowed*)
under the bridge;

у меня тоже есть такая вониючка (instead of *внучка*);

вам *удуом* (instead of *удем* – intended as a compliment).

Interlinguistic paronymy can also result in misunderstandings, embarrassing situations and even conflicts. Vera (Russian) remembers how she was hurt when her English husband Nat told her during a family rift: *I don't like it when you scowl*. She associated the word *scowl* with Russian *скалиться* (show one's teeth – often said about animals).

Another source of intercultural communication problems is the *difference in linguistic connotations*. According to V.I. Shakhovsky, the connotative component of word meaning includes a complex set of characterizing semes, due to which it can both express the attitude of the speaker to what is being said and provide information about the speaker's emotional state (Shakhovsky, 2008, p. 334). The word exists in the lexical system of a language, on the crossroads of numerous associations with other linguistic units. In every particular context it acquires new connections and associations, which can be later realized in new contexts.

The Russian language possesses an elaborate affixation system capable of expressing a rich variety of emotions, which cannot be easily rendered by means of other languages. Therefore, it is difficult to explain to a non-Russian speaker the difference between different diminutives from mother: *мама, мамочка, мамуля, мамаша* or from the name Sergey: *Сергей, Сережа, Сереженька, Сereга*. English has a limited number of diminutive suffixes, but if we remember that American presidents are sometimes called *Billy Clinton or Teddy Roosevelt* in mass media or public discussions, it becomes evident that this form of “diminutiveness” is different from what is used in family communication. However, in an intercultural family space permeated with emotions there constantly arise situations when

spouses, parents and children want to express their emotions, and if a non-native language does not allow it, this results in disappointment and frustration. Sometimes in such situations diminutive names and nicknames are produced on the basis of Russian patterns, even if the language of family communication is English: *Jimka* (from *Jim*), *Tomchik* (from *Tom*), *Misha* (from *Mike*).

Linguocognitive level.

Communication problems on this level emerge due to the differences in the worldview, categorisation and conceptualisation of reality.

One of the possible differences is the *divergence of interlinguistic equivalents in the scope and content of meaning*; e.g. the Russian word *палец* means both *finger* and *toe*, hence the misunderstanding in the following situation:

Maria (Russian) was painting her toenails when her Canadian husband called her on the phone and asked what she was doing. “I am painting fingers on my feet,” she replied. Her husband burst out laughing when he imagined what fingers on her feet would look like.

Systematisation of objects can also be different; e.g. a *tomato* is seen as a vegetable in Russia and a fruit in the UK.

Other divergence points can include:

- conceptualisation of time and space;
- quantification;
- conceptualization of gender;
- division of the colour spectrum;
- localisation of emotions (e.g. in the

European worldview emotions are concentrated in the heart, whereas from the Chinese perspective part of the emotions are localised in the liver and the bowels).

Possible problems on the *grammatical level* include incorrect use of articles and pronouns; mistakes in the use of verb forms; interference of grammatical structures of the

native language; wrong use of syntactical constructions, etc.

Level of communication strategies. The relationship in an intercultural family largely depends on the communication strategies as lines of communicative behaviour aimed at achieving one's aims in the course of interaction.

The degree of explicitness can significantly influence the communication process: whereas representatives of low-context cultures are proud of their directness, people from high-context cultures, on the contrary, tend to use hints, imagery, and circumlocution, which can cause misunderstandings in intercultural families, like in the following example from the life of Milee (Vietnamese) and Harry (Australian):

She felt some things were better left unsaid <...>, while he couldn't understand what he couldn't hear (Romano, 2001, p. 140).

Harry didn't understand that she couldn't verbally express to him her inner feelings, that she expected him to be able to intuit them if he loved her; and Milee didn't understand that he was escaping from what he saw as her silent hostility towards him (Ibid., p. 28).

In the UK and the US the notions of explicitness / implicitness have their specific features. Americans tend to be more straightforward and assertive than the English who prefer politeness and compromise. The above-mentioned journalist S. Lyall (British – American marriage) writes:

Things in Britain are so coded, so unstraightforward, so easy to misinterpret (Lyall, 2008, p. 6).

She goes on to describe how her communicative strategies have changed over the ten years of life in the UK:

I cushion my statements with qualifications, disclaimers, apologies, unnecessary modifying

adverbs and back-handed ironic remarks. I am 'quite upset', 'slightly depressed', 'a little unhappy'; I think that Hitler was 'not exactly the nicest person in the world'. When I dislocated my shoulder and lay in a heap at the bottom of a flight of stairs at the hairdresser, with tinting foil all over my hair, feeling pain that was worse than anything I have ever felt before – even when I had the children – my overwhelming emotion was embarrassment. I said 'Sorry' in a meek little voice. Then, 'I think I'm in a bit of pain,' and 'I might possibly at some point need an ambulance' (Ibid., p. 10).

The degree of explicitness is closely connected with the use of understatement or overstatement. The following joke illustrates the difference between the English and American communicative strategies:

"I speak four languages," proudly boasted the door man of a hotel in Rome to an American guest. "Yes, four – Italian, French, English, and American."

"But English and American are the same," protested the guest.

"Not at all," replied the man. "If an Englishman should come up now, I should talk like this: 'Oh, I say, what extraordinarily shocking weather we are having! I dare say there'll be a bit of it ahead.' But when you came up I was just getting ready to say: 'For the love o' Mike! Some day, ain't it? Guess this is the second flood, all right.'" (Pocheptsov, 1974).

If Americans tend to exaggerate, understatement is one of the most typical British strategies. Our Russian respondent Larissa says that her English husband who was impressed by the Russian frosts characterised such weather as a bit chilly; his negative attitude is expressed by the word *different*, and *extremely unlikely* is used as a very strong statement.

The success of family communication often depends on the choice of the *style* and

tone of discourse. Irina (Russian) married to an American writes:

At the beginning of our family life I, as it later became evident to me, adopted a very typical Russian style of communicating with a spouse: somewhat casual, without due respect, without the magic words “thank you” and “please”. I wrongly assumed that it was no longer necessary to show off, since everything was already in place. Of course, it hurt my husband’s feelings. I am very grateful to him for pointing it out without humiliating me or making rows. I started noticing that it was the way normal families interacted – with love and respect – and started appreciating my American even more.

The form of self-presentations is a strategy of expressing one’s “self” in discourse, which largely influences the way family members position themselves and build their interactions. It has been noted that Russians display self-deprecation and inferiority complex in intercultural communication; Americans, on the contrary, demonstrate “aggressive self-presentation” strategies. The British, in their turn, are terrified of bragging and try hard to play down their merits and achievements. The famous anthropologist K. Fox remembers that when she first met her boyfriend – a neurosurgeon, she asked him why he had chosen this profession:

‘Well, um,’ he replied, ‘I read PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) at Oxford, but I found it all rather beyond me, so, er, I

thought I’d better do something a bit less difficult. <...> It’s just plumbing, really, plumbing with a microscope – except plumbing is much more accurate’ (Fox, 2004, p. 69).

Communication strategies also include: *modality of discourse; political correctness; degree of involvement in communication; the use of humour and silence, etc.*

The analysis allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1) the linguistic peculiarities of intercultural family communication include: the choice of language(s) to be used as a means of interaction; bilingualism or polylingualism; code mixing and code switching; the use of an oikolect;

2) linguistic difficulties, which can lead to communication problems, can occur on the phonological, graphic, lexical, grammatical, and linguocognitive levels, as well as the level of communication strategies;

3) in spite of the existence of universal characteristics of human interaction, the achievement of harmony in intercultural family communication requires a modification of the patterns of linguistic use on the part of its members.

The results of this study may lead to their practical application in family counselling, cross-cultural education and training, as well as in real-life situations.

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Понимание – начало согласия: проблемы межкультурной семейной коммуникации

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В статье рассматриваются специфические особенности вербальной коммуникации в межкультурных семьях, которые включают: 1) выбор языка семейного общения; 2) билингвизм/полилингвизм; смешение и переключение кодов; 4) использование ойколекта. Лингвистические помехи в межкультурной семейной коммуникации могут возникать на фонологическом, графическом, лексическом, грамматическом и лингвокогнитивном уровнях, а также на уровне использования коммуникативных стратегий. Исследование проводилось в междисциплинарном аспекте, на стыке теории коммуникации, лингвистики и семиотики с целью выявления ключевых проблем, возникающих в межкультурном семейном общении, и разработки путей его оптимизации. Методика исследования включала: наблюдение, письменные и устные опросы, нарративный, биографический и семиотический анализ. В работе сделан вывод о том, что, несмотря на наличие универсальных закономерностей человеческого взаимодействия, достижение гармонии в межкультурной семейной коммуникации требует от ее участников усвоения знаковых систем друг друга, а также существенной модификации паттернов вербального поведения. Результаты исследования могут найти практическое применение в тренингах по межкультурной коммуникации, работе семейных консультационных служб, а также в реальных жизненных ситуациях.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная семейная коммуникация, билингвизм, смешение и переключение кодов, ойколект, коммуникативные помехи, коммуникативные стратегии.
