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Anna E. Vorobyova<sup>1</sup> | Implementation of electronic business interaction  
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**Abstract.** The present study is aimed at revealing different approaches to discourse styles and rhetoric conventions of intercultural business communication that are inherent in mentality of representatives of different linguistic and cultural communities. For this purpose, the so called “Hamburger model” was extrapolated. Suggested by the management theories and practices of top American schools and businesses this model is often employed in western corporations when giving constructive feedback. It is becoming extremely important in terms of cross-cultural business narrative since understanding how criticism is delivered in certain cultures helps to interpret it correctly. This work also contains reference to the question of creating a “third space”, i.e. an adapted universal culture that would fit all interlocutors involved.

**Keywords:** “Hamburger approach”; mentality; constructive feedback; cross-cultural business interaction; a “third space”

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**Introduction**

Recently, due to the active integration of participants of international economic processes, the number of external economic, scientific and technical relations with foreign partners has significantly increased. The form

of any business cooperation involves a mandatory and continuous exchange of information. As a rule, intercultural business relations are determined by the need to conduct business interaction at a certain geographical distance, that is why in order to avoid extra

expenses (primarily to save time), distant forms of communication are mainly used (i.e. telephone conversations, facsimile communications, e-mail, various quick messaging services, video communications, video conferencing, etc.).

English is by right considered to be a universally recognized means of communication at the international level: some authoritative sources emphasize that every fourth inhabitant of our planet uses it in one of three capacities, namely: as a first language, a second language or a foreign language. In our opinion, it also seems possible to speak of English as a world language, since it is recognized as an official one in sixty countries, and also has the status of the most popular foreign language in the world. Some experts, paying particular attention to the unique status of the English language and its difference from other languages of interethnic communication, regard it as a global *lingua franca*. That is why English at the present stage of development of the international community has an undeniable priority.

However, it is worth noting that representatives of certain linguistic cultures retain the signs of cultural self-identification, thereby introducing specific features into the functioning of the English language as an international language. Business people are “influenced by communication codes, which are culturally based orientations to producing and interpreting interactions” (Ellis and Maoz, 2003). Consequently, the problems of the linguistic persona, the use of language as an appropriate way to express mental activity and an effective means of communication are naturally becoming the focus of the scientific paradigm.

#### **Purpose**

The goal of this research is to reveal and analyze the implementation of “Hamburger approach” in business emails, depending on affiliation of the addressers with a particular linguistic and cultural community. The subject matter is specifically marked elements of business English e-mails that help to interpret illocutionary force in terms of criticism.

#### **Materials and Methods**

The study material is presented by actually existing authentic business emails. The letters may contain commercial information that is not subject to disclosure, therefore names and some other data have been changed.

Survey methods include general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, cognitive analysis, content-analysis, cross-cultural analysis.

Under business communication, following I.V. Drabkina, we understand the interpersonal intercultural zone of professional communication, which involves perceptual, communicative, and interactive levels of behavior, and is determined by pragmalinguistic (informative, regulative, implicit, expressive) and pragmopsychological (interest, conflict, mutual understanding and understanding) communication characteristics (Drabkina, 2000: 36-37). However, it seems relevant to us to extend the proposed definition by adding ethnopsycholinguistic characteristics that determine the cultural features of the community to which the communicant's personality belongs.

The problem of interrelation of language, culture and mentality has been one of the central in linguistics since the time of V. Humboldt. Human culture, social behavior and intellection, as we know, are not able to exist without language and outside of language. Being a means of human communication and therefore social and national in nature, “the language cannot but bear the imprints of the characteristics of the worldview, ethical and cultural values, as well as the norms of behavior typical for this language community” (Derbisheva).

This issue does not lose its relevance to the present day, at least due to the fact that the scientific community lacks a common understanding of mentality and national character. Thus, Western European scientific schools determine the concept of “mentality” rather heterogeneously: there are such definitions as “the quality of the mind that characterizes a unique individual or a class of

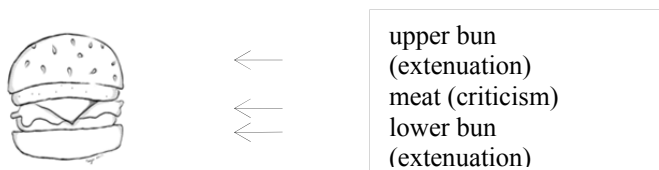
individuals”; “The sum of mental abilities or opportunities”; “Attitudes, mood, content of the mind” (Dubov, 1993). In domestic science two main trends in understanding the essence of mentality are revealed. On the one hand, mentality is so widely interpreted that it includes lifestyle, especially folk realities, rituals, behavior, moral covenants of the people, self-identification of a person in the social world. On the other hand, mentality is understood only as self-identification of an ethnic group (Ospanova, 2011). Taking into account the main scientific points of view of Russian scientists in the field of mentality, national consciousness and national character (O.G. Pocheptsov, Yu.A. Sorokin, V.A. Pishchalnikova, V.I. Shakhovskiy, V.V. Kolesov, A. V. Petrovskiy and others), we come to the conclusion that mentality is a combination of

conceptual codes and mental styles that crystallize in a language. It is the language as “a universal means of storing, forming and presenting knowledge of different levels” (Pishchalnikova, 2007: 32) that represents the mentality and helps to describe its features.

### Results and Discussion

Let us consider some verbalized representations that reflect the business sphere of the national mentality of the figures of different linguistic and cultural communities from the point of view of the so-called “Hamburger Approach”. This model, extrapolated from the field of psychology, represents the tactics of expressing criticism or delivering bad news and is widely used in business context. Schematically, this can be illustrated as follows.

#### Pattern 1. *Hamburger approach to expressing criticism*



The “upper bun” essentially represents mitigating information that precedes criticism and is aimed at extenuation of information with negative modality.

The “meat” is precisely that “fly in the ointment” with the evaluation operator “bad”.

The “lower bun” eliminates the possible consequences of expressing criticism and is aimed at further motivation of the recipient.

When offering “critical” advice to people it is preferable to sandwich the constructive criticism between two constructive compliments (Just, 2008). But depending on cultural peculiarities and appropriate negotiating style of business people some parts of “hamburger model” may be omitted.

Let us conduct some empirical research on the basis of the authentic business emails.

Example 1 (email from an American company).

*Dear Mr. X*

*We wanted to thank you for the hospitality you and your team offered during our visit. You have significantly upgraded your production line.*

*While in general we were pleased with what we saw, we did note some opportunities for potential improvement. As we pointed out, the surface of your finished cloth is quite rough for fine grit applications where finish quality or a platen is used. A rough backing will wear out graphite quickly which may lead to unhappy customers. The addition of calendaring capability in cloth finishing would help greatly in this regard and it would also be beneficial for your materials. If you agree, we can aid with its redesign. Please find enclosed the plan we have laid out. If you need explanations, they will be sent shortly.*

*We continue to trust you. We are sure you will be able to take remedial actions and we look forward to working with you in future.*

*Best regards,*

*Jim & Leo*

As we can see from the example, in the American practice of business interaction, the structure of “hamburger model” is fully implemented. The message is characterized by mixed modality, i.e. its main topic is negative comments on the quality of products manufactured by business partners: «... *we did note some opportunities for potential improvement. As we pointed out, the surface of your finished cloth is quite rough for fine grit applications where finish quality or a platen is used*». In the “hamburger model”, this part corresponds to the “meat”. But due to their cultural and linguistic specifics, American business representatives use the double amortization tactic of supplying negative information: the “upper bun” and the “lower bun”: «*We wanted to thank you for the hospitality you and your team offered during our visit. You have significantly upgraded your production line. While in general we were pleased with what we saw...*»; «*We continue to trust you. We are sure you will be able to rectify the defect and we look forward to working with you in future*». This is done for those reasons so as not to offend the partner with their comments and not to harm the established cooperation, thereby depriving the company of potential revenue, because, as we know, Americans are more oriented to profit taking than other nations. Moreover, based on an assessment of the general situation, American representatives are modeling the possibility of a positive change in the situation, when offering their company services: «*If you agree, we can aid with its redesign. Please find enclosed the plan we have laid out. If you need explanations, they will be sent shortly*». It is noteworthy that in the presented business letter American political correctness is manifested in its entirety: in addition to the abundant use of positively charged vocabulary (*hospitality; upgraded; pleased; opportunities;*

*improvement; beneficial*), the addresser, expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of the products, tactfully replaces the negative assessment with a more neutral one or even with a tendency to a positive tone (“*While in general we were pleased with what we saw, we did note some opportunities for potential improvement*”), while deliberately avoiding words with a negative connotation (*opportunities for potential improvement* instead of *drawbacks*, *tactful quite rough* instead of the possible *bad* or *unsuitable; take remedial actions* instead of *rectify the defects*). All these strategies are used to make the evaluation of the addresser less categorical in order not to lead to missed business opportunities.

Example 2 (email from a Chinese company).

*Dear Mr. S,*

*Thank you for the opportunity to see your production line and test your products. Following our meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> September on your ground, we have prepared some samples for you to consider. We will send them by express-mail next week.*

*Our factory has the unique techniques. For you it means better products with the same materials. You can check it after receiving the samples. VELLON-J A and VELLON-H A are all A - grade. We have many customers in Italy and Germany. The customer in Slovenia is our biggest one. We also provide fiber backings to Luga in Russia.*

*Be sure in quality.*

*We appreciate you and your performance and hope for fruitful collaboration. You are welcome to ask any questions about our products.*

*Best regards,*

*Kathleen Xie*

The main goal of Asian business representatives is to save “face” in case of difficulties in the implementation of intercultural business interaction. They avoid expressing critical comments regarding their addressee, but implicitly give him the opportunity to independently assess the



situation and identify possible shortcomings in order to subsequently eliminate them. Undermining the authority of a partner is considered unacceptable in Asian business practice. From the “hamburger approach” perspective, we get only the “upper bun” and the “lower bun”, without “meat”. According to the text of the submitted letter, it becomes clear that after the introduction of the production line of their business counterparts, the Asian reps remained unsatisfied with the quality of the products. And here the national peculiarity of the Chinese to operate with indirect, veiled statements is clearly revealed. The addresser does not write about this openly, but implicitly makes it clear that there is still a room for improvement: (...we have prepared some samples for you to consider... For you it means better products with the same materials). Translator words “For you it means ...” render key ideas into a language that the recipient can easily understand. It is noteworthy that the text lacks negative vocabulary, and only a modest use of the comparative degree of the adjective “better products” suggests that the products are far from being ideal. Thus, the method of rephrasing by changing modal operators represents another tactics of “saving the face” of the recipient. It is used here so as not to discredit the business partner, but, on the contrary, to inspire him to achieve better results. However, we note that in this example, beside excessive loyalty, there is also a pragmatic factor: the addresser successfully manipulates the situation and uses the mistakes of the opposite side in the interests of his company and tries to promote his product (*VELLON-J A and VELLON-H A are all A-grade; You can check it after receiving the samples; We have many customers; Be sure in quality; hope for fruitful collaboration*). This goal is facilitated by such strategies as the usage of positively charged vocabulary, which forms a picture of success in the recipient’s mind, as well as indicating key information (*Be sure in quality*) in a separate line on the main background so as to catch the addressee’s attention. The exemplified text of the e-mail

proves that the Chinese cultural and historical phenomenon of “face ethics” is a deep awareness of self-esteem and dignity of others and is implemented in order to maintain good relations with representatives of other nationalities, especially in matters of diplomacy and business.

Example 3 (email from a German company).

*Dear Sirs,*

*We much regret having to call your attention to the account we sent to you on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Having written to you on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2017, in case the original statement had been mislaid, we can only conclude that our requests are being willfully ignored.*

*Payment is now long overdue, and we have to ask that you settle outstanding debt of J178.64 by return of post.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*Rolf H.*

*3 M Accounts Manager*

The text of the letter represents the scenario of the “hamburger approach”, where the addressee receives only direct criticism, without parenthetical remarks. This style of negotiation is inherent in German business culture and reflects their national desire to come straight to the point. Direct tactics of submitting negative information (in this case, a claim for late payment), in which the addresser does not seek to mitigate his forceful language, can be perceived as a personal offense. Due to this quantum of culture many Germans seem unfriendly. However, the Germans explain this peculiarity of their mentality as the intention to avoid the ambiguity of their statements, so as not to provoke an incorrect interpretation on the part of the recipient.

As can be seen from the example, it is common for German businessmen to overtly criticize their business counterparts (... *we can only conclude that our requests are being willfully ignored, Payment is now long overdue*), they rely more on facts than emotions (... *the account we sent to you on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2017; Having written to you on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2017...*). The active use of intensifying

words (*much regret; willfully ignored; long overdue*) reinforces criticism and the general negative modality of the email. But the main motive of this style of negotiation is to find a compromise and develop a rational strategy for further cooperation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The analysis results show that despite the generally accepted norms of business etiquette, the cultural thought pattern has its own specifics of representation in electronic business correspondence, which is due to the peculiarities of national mentality, as well as the communication traditions of a particular linguistic and cultural community. It is fair to say that “spiritual culture as an objective mental formation exerts an impact on people, and to a large extent determines their value-cognitive orientations” (Popper, 1983: 302–303).

Synthesis of data on business conduct and ethics of representatives of different linguistic cultures allows us to draw the following conclusions.

The description of American communicative behavior is fraught with certain difficulties due to territorial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics, but one can still recognize some of its homogeneity with the inherent stereotypical patterns of behavior. In the context of intercultural business communication, American culture is characterized by such features as pragmatism, initiative, straightforwardness, but at the same time, deference and tactfulness, on an equal basis with the relaxed style of communication and paternalistic attitude to business partners (Vorob'yeva, 2012: 125).

Chinese business is primarily relationship-oriented. The main priority in business practice belongs to the ethics of the “face” and the attitude towards the saving of the “face” of a counterpart. By avoiding the conflict with a business partner and saving his “face”, Chinese entrepreneurs get the reason to consider themselves to have a “face”, since they behave loyally and tactfully. As a result, deep concern for the “face” leads to the intention of avoiding conflicts in interpersonal relationships. It should

also be noted that maintaining social harmony appears in the traditional ethical system of the Chinese as very significant independent values (Maslov, 2013 : 99).

In German business culture nothing remains unspoken; they don't mince words, and prefer a direct and open style of communication. When making a deal, the Germans insist on strict implementation of the obligations, since they are serious about business, therefore they always expect the same from their business partners. All this determine the German entrepreneurs' approach to negotiations.

Some researchers believe that due to the fact that culture is a dynamic phenomenon it may become possible to create a “third space” (Kramsch, 1993), or the “target culture” (Chong, 2013), i.e. adapted culture that would fit all interlocutors involved and aimed at achieving mutual understanding. A kind of correlation with the language of Esperanto, an invented language which aims to promote global communication “through a simple, neutral and logical language” (Nielsen, 2014) comes to mind. But it has not become a frequent practice as a tool for world communication, has it? Supporters may oppose on the ground that the main Esperanto website, Lernu, for instance, gets about 180 000 visitors every month, which shows there is a strong interest in Esperanto. The information page about Esperanto Facebook suggests even greater numbers: 350 000 users of Facebook speak Esperanto. We are not arguing the interest in this phenomenon among speakers, but the fact that Esperanto is based on European languages which are spoken almost everywhere except Asia, makes its claim to be a global language pretty much debatable. The same is with an adapted culture. How is it possible to combine Arabic, Chinese, Hindu, Spanish, Russian, German, English, American and African cultures in one match-all pattern? We are inclined to think that it is hardly prospective, even with regard to business sphere, since business groups might only appear to be using this culture on the surface, but in reality they will unconsciously imitate their generalized cultural patterns. Ethnic identity “shapes

people's lives individually and within a society" (Constant, 2014: 3). Inefficiency of a "third space" idea is further supported by religious, mental, moral, and cultural factors. It is difficult to reconcile the balance without hitting the interests of the parties involved. What is more, in view of tense historical relations between some nations, creation of a universal culture may provoke incitement of even greater ethnic hatred. And final argument against is that in the long run adapted culture may lead to the loss of national identity. Without engaging in polemic, we cannot but agree with a cultural theorist Homi Bhabha saying that "such an intervention [of the "third space"] quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture" (Bhabha, 2006: 155–157).

This article describes only the most typical features of the linguistic mentality of representatives of different linguistic cultures, which define the specifics of intercultural electronic business interaction in terms of negative modality. It is assumed that the study could receive a further linguocultural impulse to obtain additional data characterizing the typical thesaurus of the average native speaker of a particular language.

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