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**Прагматичні аспекти  
мовного функціонування  
та методики викладання  
англійської мови**

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## THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTATEMENT IN ENGLISH

The word «understatement» will be used, for the moment, as a metalinguistic term collecting certain verbal expressions into one class concerned with a linguistic pattern of behaviour.

Anyone progressing beyond the rudiments of learning English soon finds that understatements are said to be typically English. Attributing understatements to a predominantly English linguistic pattern of behaviour is documented in many works dealing with the English way of life. Among such books are those aimed specifically at teaching English as a foreign language as well as more general publications on English society, and include many non-British authors.

G. Mikes (1946) regards understatements as one of the most significant features distinguishing native English speakers from foreigners; in his exaggeratedly ironic style he states: «Foreigners have souls; the English haven't ... they have the understatement instead.»

V. Ovchinnikov (1991) attributes the widespread use of understatements by the English to a tendency to suppress their emotions. He considers understatements to be part of the very make-up of an Englishman and his desire to avoid private matters in the conversation.

For A. Hubler (1983) the concept of understatement has been coined in the 18th century. «It had been happening from the beginning of the 18th century in England, as bourgeoisie, who had assumed a new self-assurance, began the process of consolidating ethics and morals. The result of this attempt is an ethical code with the «Art of Conversation» as its core (Hubler, A., 1983, pp. 6-8).

The Art of Conversation theory was based on the model of exchange on a partnership basis, that is, to be pleasing, avoid any offensive conduct, be prudent, show reticence when talking about oneself.

Moralistic periodicals, such as «The Tatler», «The Spectator» and «The Guardian» propagated these ideas. They were continued and given a theoretical foundation in H. Fielding's «Essay on conversation» and in A. Smith's «The theory of moral sentiments».

However, the study of understatement as a sociocultural problem is not the only one in the specific tradition of the studies dealing with this topic. For linguists the problem of the linguistic structure of understatements is more interesting. In other words, how can we produce a verbal pattern that can be determined an understatement. What is crucial in determining, this is to find out notional make-up of the understatement.

The definition given in OED is the following: «A statement which falls below the truth of fact». Longman gives the following definition: «A statement which is not strong enough». Collins Cobuild «Essential English Dictionary» defines understatement as the practice of suggesting that things have much less of a particular quality than they really have. Eg. «That sounds like typical British understatement». Collins Cobuild has a second reference for the noun understatement: «If you say that a statement is an understatement, you mean that it does not fully express the extent to which something is true».

Proceeding from the above-given definitions of the understatement we can conclude that the grammatical categories and classes suitable for forming understatements must, even in their immediate semantic function, somehow be down-toning if they are to be compatible with the basic definition of understatements, i.e. to say less than is meant.

In search for specific interpretation of the understatement, which goes further than the basic definition, let us take stop-short utterances as a model. They draw our attention in many ways. First, there is more to break in the narration than the absence of speech, being silent. Silence can be golden, deathlike, tomblike, solemn, and even pregnant; but it is rarely neutral. That is, when silence is neutral it is rarely talked about or even noticed (Verschueren, J., 1985, p.73).

Second, because of the marginality of a stop-short utterance, it is a reflection of all the major aspects of linguistic action. There is a

meaning to the missing part. It shows contextual links. There are social value judgments attached to it. There is a speaker and hearer involved.

The meaning of stop-short utterances incomplete due to the influence of speech etiquette norm incorporates a specific claim by the speaker in what he says to the hearer. For example:

1. *All I was trying to say that perhaps if we tried to sharpen our wits and think of a likely place...*

(A. Christie)

2. *They came to the pavement outside the house in Willow Road, and food facing each other. «Well». — «Thank you for the cup of tea». He glanced at the ground, reluctantly official. «You have my number. If anything else...» — «Apart from bird-brained fantasy». — «I didn't mean that. It was fun».*

(A. Christie)

The claim corresponds to an expectation on the part of the speaker of agreement in the first utterance, and of fulfilment in the second utterance. In both utterances, hypothetical by nature, interpersonal arguments interfere and entail a change in what the utterance is to convey literally.

Among interpersonal arguments which may determine or help to determine the form of an utterance we are interested in arguments relating to the question of whether the content to be verbalized can harm the hearer. If an utterance formulation is hearer-motivated, and the literal utterance content in some way is influenced by hearer-motivation, then the literal meaning apparent in the formulation is not identical with what is actually meant. This precisely reflects the structure given by the basic definition of the understatement.

*That being, as I say in low water financially, you met this rich old lady and cultivated her acquaintance assiduously. Now if we are in a position to say that you had no idea she was well off, and that you visited her out of pure kindness of heart...*

(A. Christie).

What is meant in this stop-short utterance can be reproduced in a different sentence, or in the continuation of the same one, in which the hearer-motivated restrictions of the original sentence are not considered, and only the adequacy between sentence content and the world is sought. Thus, the understatement can be generally described in terms of a paraphrastic relationship between two utterances: the one that is actually uttered and is hearer-motivated and the one that is meant and is content-motivated. Despite their difference, the two readings can be interpreted as paraphrases since the difference disappears when they are interpreted as originating from the speaker.

One more important point should also be mentioned here. The fewer and the lighter the adequacy conditions made by an utterance, the greater the chance of them being fulfilled. The smaller the liability commitment on the part of the speaker, the less likely it is that the sentence will be negated by the hearer.

*«What are you doing on Friday evening, Charles?» Charles looked a trifle surprised. «As a matter of fact, the Ewings asked me to go in and play bridge, but if you would rather I stayed at home...» — «No,» said Mrs. Harter with determination. «Certainly not. I mean it, Charles. On that night of nights I should much rather be alone.»*

(A. Christie)

The content of this stop-short utterance has been manipulated in such a way that it becomes more acceptable for the hearer than the unmanipulated content would be. It should therefore be possible for a Sentence A which is to be read as an understatement to be paraphrased by a Sentence B (I don't want to stay at home, I plan to play bridge' at my friends') which entails more adequacy conditions than A and thus appears to be more determinate than Sentence A.

To sum it all up, the understatement is a sentence strategy of saying less than one means. It occurs where the general question of the emotional acceptability of the content of an utterance becomes acute. Its aim is to make utterances more acceptable and thus to increase their chance of ratification by the hearer.

## **Literature**

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## **Резюме**

У статті розглядається проблема недомовленості як типово англійської риси мовного етикету з соціокультурної та лінгвістичної точки зору. Проведене дослідження дозволяє зробити такі висновки: граматична структура *тільки* у тому випадку належить до «недомовлення», де питання прийнятності денотативного змісту висловлювання постає особливо гостро; її мета — зробити форму даного висловлювання більш прийнятною і збільшити шанси її ратифікації адресатом.