

ON UNDERSTATEMENT AS TYPICAL ENGLISH TRAIT OF SPEECH ETIQUET FROM SOCIOCULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC POINT OF VIEW

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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.

For example, G. Mikes 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"[1, p. 24].

V. Ovchinnikov [2] attributes the widespread use of understatements by the English to a tendency to suppress their emotions. He considers understatements to be the part of the very make-up of an Englishman and his desire to avoid private matters in the conversation.

For A. Hübler 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 [3, p. 6]".

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

In modern linguistics, these ideas have been developed and polished in H.P. Grice's conversational maxims.

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. Some

linguistic interpretations of the term understatement lie within the sphere of traditional stylistics (I.V. Arnold [4, pp.229-31], I.R. Galperin [5, pp.233-5]) and are linked to the stylistic device aposiopesis, which is used to convey to the reader a very strong upsurge of emotions or is caused "by euphemistic considerations".

A. Hubler, on the contrary, considers that an understatement is not a stylistic strategy but strategy pertaining to the content since it operates within and on the sentence proposition. To language means used to form understatements he refers grammatical devices of detensification of predicates like: word-negation of predicates and grading of predicates by using adverbs.

The *topicality* of the problem under investigation lies in the fact that due to the expansion of the boundaries of international cooperation and the increasing role of intercultural communication, there is a great need to know and follow speech strategies and structures leading to successful communication process.

Before proceeding to our present main concern, we shall at least briefly consider the notional make-up of the understatement. The definition given in COED is the following: "A statement which falls below the truth of fact" [6]. LONGMAN gives the following definition: "A statement which is not strong enough" [7]. COLLINS COBUILD "Essential English Dictionary" defines understatement as the practice of suggesting that things have less of a particular quality than they really have. E.g. "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" [8].

So, 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 notional definition of understatements, i.e. to say less than is meant.

In search for the specific interpretation of understatement which goes further than the basic definition we have taken *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 [9, p.73].

Second, due to 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.

Out of the body of stop-short utterances with versatile motives of incompleteness collected we have taken only those which are incomplete due to the influence of speech etiquette norm. The meaning of such stop-short utterances incorporates a specific claim by the speaker in what he says to the hearer.

- a) *All I was trying to say that perhaps if we tried to sharpen our wits and think of a likely place...* [10, p. 240]
- b) *They came to the pavement outside the house in Willow Road, and stood facing each other. "Well". – "Thank you for the cup of tea". Tie 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" [11, p. 97].*

The claim corresponds to an expectation on the part of the speaker of agreement in the first utterance, and of fulfillment in the second utterance. In both utterances, hypothetical by nature and based on logical procedure of implication if → then, interpersonal arguments interfere and entail a change in what the utterance is to convey literally. Here the speaker tries to respect the hearer's negative face, his need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others.

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.

That being, as I say, in low water financially, you met this rich old lady and cultivated her acquaintance assiduously. How 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... [10, p. 105]

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. The unmanipulated content of this utterance can be *"I consider you visited this rich old lady with some sordid motives."*

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. Barter with determination. – "Certainly not. I mean it, Charles. On that night of nights I should much rather be alone." [10, p. 108].

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 there 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 B and appears to be more determinate than Sentence B.

However the use of stop-short utterances as markers of understatement implies some structural and pragmatic restrictions. Mostly communicatively incomplete utterances, and those, based on the logical procedure of implication if → then where the second part is omitted can't serve as the marker of understatement.

The mark that the utterance is not finished lets the hearer understand that the speaker is leaving something unsaid and he lets the reasons for his doing so be understood and he wants the hearer to understand what it is he is leaving unsaid.

As far as pragmatic restrictions are concerned, stop-short utterances as makers of understatement, mainly occur in two types of speech acts: in. representatives, containing self-praise or criticism of others, or assertions and in directives.

a) *"Oh - said the inspector, - "you've been bitten with all this psychoanalysis stuff? Now, I'm a plain man ..."* [10, p109]

b) *"We must place him at once. What applications have we? If you will hand me the file ..."* [11, p.99]

To sum it all up, the linguistic conditions for formation of understatements lie in indirect nomination of the signified by the speaker caused by his desire to minimize the threat to the face. Where face means public self-image of a person and refers to that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. So, the understatement as a sentence strategy of saying less than one means 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.

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