Cultural Structuring of Academic Discourse within the Framework of International Students Conferences

Academic discourse is a form of verbal communication in a special context of the academic environment which includes such effective means of exchange and dissemination of ideas and innovations as congress activities and conferences. The focus on the communicative function (information interchange) emphasizes the linguistic aspect of the process.

Students’ conferences present a complex type of academic extracurricular activities closely interrelated with the knowledge and competences formed in the course of study of academic curricular disciplines, including the communication competency. As such, they are seen as a means of supporting interdisciplinary ties in the university programs when different fields and methods of research are combined on the basis of foreign language communication competency. The latter is exposed in the ability to take part in the peculiar type of discourse which both bears the features of special professional discourse, and displays the general features of academic rhetoric. Discourse investigation is based upon different factors of social, cultural and psychological nature. Academic rhetoric is a multilateral sphere of interaction especially vulnerable to social, cultural and psychological effects.

From different approaches to the academic discourse analyses (rhetoric peculiarities in different cultures; discourse among foreign language speakers with native speakers; foreign language communication between non-native speakers from different cultures; etc) we have chosen the comparison of academic discourse structuring in different cultures when a foreign language is spoken by all the communicating parties. Hopefully the results of the research will contribute to recommendations how to follow the mutually (or generally) acceptable rules in the
academic debate sphere, so that to stimulate students’ international contacts in research.

Keeping to the general (or at least, mutual) acceptability lines makes the core of the verbal communication process. In this respect the emphasis is put on what a personality, society and culture add to the language functioning as a means of cross-cultural communication.

The upper priority is the context of verbal communication, which is closely connected with the polysemy of linguistic signs. The form used within the relevant context marks some meanings supported by this context, others being cut off (Hymes, 1995).

There are three dimensions of discourse: 1) linguistic (the language proper); 2) epistemological (thinking and information transmission); 3) interactive (situation-dependent verbal communication). From the lingvocultural angle of vision it is relevant to define what culture the subjects of the discourse belong to and correspondingly how the cultural standards and values influence the instantiation of all the discourse components.

There are two vectors of the analysis: from cultural phenomena to their linguistic manifestation, and from actual wording and structuring to the corresponding cultural basis.

Following Grice’s maxima of Cooperation, we emphasize the most important feature of academic speech bound to create the cooperative effect – accuracy, or rather exactness, of terms and precision of structural models. Being informatively condensed, academic discourse follows different patterns in low-context and high-context cultures.

The peculiarities of the Russian linguistic culture include inferences, implicated information (implicatures), multiple deviations from the subject of discussion, abundance of allusions and backoffs - all of which combined to result in comprehensive description, or in-depth argument presentation. English, on the contrary, is perceived as linear, consecutive, enjoying optimal verbal expression of all propositions. (We follow here the data supplied by R.Kaplan in “Cultural
Thought Patterns in Intercultural education // Language Learning. 1966. – No 16. – P. 1-20). As soon as cultures interact the effect on the language of communication becomes obvious.

One of the standard forms of academic discourse is essay writing. We have compared the results of essay writing technique investigation provided by M.Clyne (Anglo-speaking cultures) and G.A.Yelizarova (Russian-speaking cultures). Similar to Grice, the touchstone here is pertinence (i.e. keeping up to the point) a quality essay is characteristic of. Neither repetitions, nor deviations are recommended. All this is compatible with Clyne’s linearity principle. Linguistically it is reflected in the following characteristics:

1) texts are propositionally symmetrical, i.e. individual propositions are logically and sequentially interconnected, as much as they are relevant to the generalizing proposition;

2) the English-language discourse disposes of the organizing markers, referring to the text structuring, the argumentation, all of which makes the text predictable;

3) the terms are supplied with definitions and this is done in advance;

4) all examples, references and statistics are reliable and are introduced into the discourse consecutively.

Compared to the above mentioned, the English-language essays by Russian students are characterized by

1) propositional asymmetry of the texts, with some propositions being separated from the general proposition, as much as disconnected between themselves, abundant in deviations, dilatations, completions; text parts being installed within each other, permeated with speculations on irrelevant subjects;

2) casual character of narration, with the plan missing;

3) lack of definitions of terms, the meaning of the latter are taken as going without saying;
4) references are often missing.
The explanation of the differences is based, following Clyne, on cultural parameters. Of prior concern is content and form juxtaposition. Form is priority by low-context Anglo-lingual culture, with all relevant discourse elements verbalized and unequivocal, connections between them being unambiguous. In anglolingual cultures formal aspects dominate the discourse structuring and evaluation.

Opposite to that, Russian linguaculture is high-context, with all the consequences. Contents orientation results in asserting that information is priority, little attention paid to the reliability of the information source.

This is closely connected with the distribution of responsibility between the addressee and the addressee for the text comprehension and avoidance of disruptions in discourse. Anglolingual cultures are inclined to hold the addressee responsible for any possible failure, committing the addresser to produce addressee-friendly texts, while in Russian culture the addressee is recognized responsible for misunderstanding, and it’s the addressee’s fault or lack of intelligence/competence if the information is missed.

Individualism vs Collectivism parameters find numerous manifestations in academic discourse, one of such being I vs we attribution to investigation descriptions. From the analysis of students’ research works it is evident that “I” dominates the academic discourse in anglolingual cultures, while Russian culture prefers “we”-reference, which is based upon the relations of the research-work author with the epistemological aspect, as well as upon the values of responsibility and independence in different cultures. In this respect it is also possible to refer to the indication of commitment, complicacy, indifference, modesty, self-evaluation, arrogance, etc.

All this is demonstrated both by written texts, and by oral discourse, being often a barrier to adequate communication.

To reach the positive result of the cross-cultural communication process, the interlocutors should overcome certain obstacles on the basis of cultural literacy and reach the level of cultural tolerance and flexibility at which the communication
companion is treated as a partner instead of an alien. Another resource to better communication is cross-cultural literacy in the context-dependent discourse dynamics.

**References:**
