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**Communicative Fiasco as a Cross-cultural Phenomenon
(on the material of the novel «Twelve Stories of Russia: a Novel, I guess»
by A.J. Perry)**

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Abstract. The proposed article introduces the problem of communicative fiasco that occurs in the process of cross-cultural communication, makes insight into the issue. In the research the author makes an attempt to reveal the reasons of verbal communicative breakdowns with the consideration of non-verbal factors. The analysis allows to single out such “areas” in which failures and conflicts are most likely to emerge in the process of cross-cultural interaction. The following work has both a theoretical and practical value for teachers of English as a foreign language and for all those who are interested in the problems of intercultural communication.

Keywords: communicative fiasco; intercultural communication; cultural stereotypes; communicative competence; communicative errors; ethnocentrism; culture shock; acculturation.

*To master a language you
must understand the people
that created it, the culture
that provoked it. To
understand a people and its
culture you must master the
language that shapes them
both*

At the dawn of this third millennium with the greatest changes and opportunities at all levels, and particularly in the arena of communication between peoples, the situations of cross-cultural interaction are attracting an increasing interest of the wide range of specialists, including experts on linguistic and cultural study. Apart from theoretical, methodological aspects of intercultural communication the scientists point out numerous difficulties which hinder verbal interaction process. When considering any potentially unstable communicative situation one may reveal communicative errors which provoke intercultural tension, lack of mutual understanding and sometimes lead to an absolute communicative fiasco. One should keep in mind that intercultural transaction is such type of communication that is carried out under circumstances of culturally conditioned differences in interlocutors' communicative competence. The effectiveness of communication is greatly influenced by this kind of differences. When contacting another culture the following question inevitably emerges: what makes one ethnos differ from another one? As a rule, linguistic differences are mentioned, distinctions in material and spiritual culture, and as well culturally determined specific patterns of behavior, attributes of conduct which occur in the sphere of communication.

It was interesting to reveal from linguistic and cultural point of view (on the material of novel «*Twelve Stories of Russia: a Novel, I guess*» by A.J. Perry – an American who came to Russia to teach English), what sort of differences are characteristic for the representatives of Russian and American culture. In the upshot, the results of similar research will give us an access, to a certain degree, to the way of thinking of an ethnos. According to V.A. Maslova's right observation, the linguistic and cultural analysis is a way "through which we get to <...> to the nation's mentality" [1 : 3]. The following extract illustrates the partners' different awareness of precedent phenomena, what can stimulate misunderstanding between the participants of the dialogue. This situation represents a conversation between an American and a Russian. They don't understand each other? Why is it so?

Communicative situation № 1

«**Man** (calmly): Did you know Pushkin was one-quarter African?

Me (wet): Who?

Man: Our great poet Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin.

Me: I'm sorry. I don't read poetry.

Man: You don't! Why not?

Me: In America nobody reads poetry.

<...>

Man (chewing): Did you know that Daniil Kharms died in a mental hospital?

Me: I'm sorry... Daniil Who?

Man: Daniil Kharms, the popular children's author.

Me: Hmm... That's a strange name. Is he Russian?

Man: Yes.

Me: Well, that would explain it.

Man: What?

Me: Americans aren't real big on foreign literature.

Man: You're not?

Me: No, unfortunately they're not.

Man: Even *Russian* literature?

Me: *Even* Russian literature.

(There is another pause as the man takes a sip of lukewarm coffee);

Man: You have heard of Lev Tolstoy, haven't you?

Me: Of course. But I've never actually read anything by him. In America...

Man: Excuse me for asking but what *do* you read... I mean in America, that is?

Me: I'm sorry?

Man: Do you read Theodore Dreiser?

Me: No.

Man: What about Jack London?

Me: No.

Man: O. Henry?!

Me: Never heard of him.

Man: !!!

Me: You see, the thing is that in America nobody reads...

Man: ... American literature?

Me: Right.

(The man takes out a filtered cigarette but does not light it. He seems lost in an important thought):

Man: Still, it's a damn shame...

Me: What is? About American literature?

Man: About the blacks. You really shouldn't have made them slaves» [2: 19-20].

This communicative failure is caused by different perception of what is a minimum of general knowledge for two representatives of different nations. Distinctive feature of a Russian is being well-read. It is universally known that Russian people are the most reading nation in the world. There's a proverb in the Russian language: "Learning is the eye of the mind". Not to have read such famous writers and poets as Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Chekhov means not to know anything. An American showing his incompetence in literary matters sinks in the eyes of his interlocutor. And it is not surprising at all because for a Russian person to be educated, to know the world great literature is one of the main priorities.

In other terms, the matter concerns different conceptosphere's structure of the two nations. If a certain set of precedent names are widely known in one language and culture community, it may remain totally obscure in another one. This fact blocks the understanding and permits to consider the foreigners as "communicative strangers".

People who find themselves in a foreign country and different linguistic environment for the first time very often experience a state of mind known as "culture shock". Culture shock is the result of cross-cultural interaction; its essence is a conflict between old and new cultural norms and orientations. The old norms belong to the individual as a representative of the society, which he has left, and the new ones belong to the society, into which he arrived. Culture shock is a conflict between two cultures at the level of individual consciousness. How quickly it can be overcome, by which means, and how quickly one can adapt to life in new circumstances at the level of cultural exchange and interaction depends on several factors: whether or not a person understands the other language, mutual goodwill and openness, the building up and development of good relations with the host country, and success in the realization of the tasks (in the spheres of education, research, work etc.).

The main character of the novel sees Russian passengers in the electric trains reading "Anna Karenina" by Leo Tolstoy or "Eugene Onegin" by Alexander Pushkin. At first, it seems rather shocking to him, but after a long and painful process of acculturation he becomes keen on reading in public transport himself. Indeed reading is like a national hobby in Russia. It is a way to escape from daily routine, and to get extra knowledge. It's normal for a Russian to read permanently.

The next communicative situation to be analyzed touches upon the level of non-verbal organization of cross-cultural dialogue.

Communicative situation № 2

«The man turned to me:

Can I ask you something? he said.

Sure.

Do you mind if we ask you a question? he said.

Of course not, I answered and smiled unsurely at the question (***underlined by us V.O.M.***). If you don't want us to ask you the question, Tanya said, just say so.

No really – no problem... Fire away.

The couple looked at each other cautiously and then back at me. I continued to smile as if to encourage their question (***underlined by us V.O.M.***). It was the redhead who expressed the words that they, apparently, were both aghast to scrape off their chests. As he spoke his eyes sparkled tenderly, but the force of his words knocked the smile (***underlined by us V.O.M.***) from my face:

Why is it that you smile so much? he said.

What? Me? That's your question?!

The redhead continued:

I think we've known you long enough to be honest with you, he said.

Why I smile? I don't smile all the time!

Actually you do.

No I don't!

Yes you do... you're smiling right now!

I am?

You are.

That's right. You see it's just that sometimes when you smile it makes us feel a bit uncomfortable because we can't understand why you're smiling. It seems false to us.

False? <...>

Yes, as if you don't really mean it. As if that's just the natural condition of your face – a smile. We've been wanting to ask you for some time. Now, don't take this personally, we're just trying to understand your position. You see, if you smile all the time then how is it possible to express true happiness, that is if there's already a smile plastered on your face? How can you express your true emotions through that smile if it never goes away?

I had surprised myself with my own outburst and this made me even more awkward» [2: 58-61].

The fact is that any communicative situation takes place in the framework of a certain social and cultural context in which verbal and paraverbal actions of communicators are the manifestation of the peculiarities of their native culture. Everybody knows that each language employs gestures and body movements which convey different meanings. Gestures and mimics are not necessarily the same for all languages. It has already been discussed so many times by theorists of cross-cultural interaction. One has to keep in mind that Russians and Americans play the game by different rules and it is normal. Russian people smile when they want, not when they have to. Such is Russian mentality which is beyond understanding for foreigners. The immutable rule of American communicative behaviour "KEEP SMILING" simply doesn't work on the Russian soil. We don't give fake smiles like some people don't wear fake jewelry. The most precious thing about a smile is sincere and true emotion unlike western smile which is just a part of etiquette. Foreigners have to realize that and put up with it in order to avoid potential communicative fiasco. Those who learn English may need in their turn to be taught to identify such non-verbal signs and how not to confuse them with local patterns of behaviour.

The communicative situation N 3, exposed to intercultural study, represents intermediate linguistic constituent.

Communicative situation № 3

«You know, says Vadim. Russian is the best language in the world.

It is? I say.

That's right, he says, it is.

<...>

I would have argued that English is the richest language in the world. And do you know why? No? Well, I'll tell you why: synonyms. That's right – synonyms. Pick any English word and I'll show you at least ten synonyms: let's take for example words that mean to "walk without purpose". In English we have: *wander, saunter, roam, meander, stroll, stray, rove, amble, ramble...*

Vadim stops to count on his fingers... Then his eyes light up:

That's only nine! he says.

...drift!

He stops for a second then speaks up:

Big deal! He says, big deal...the reason you have so many synonyms in English it because all your words are made of compound words. For example in Russian we have the word *kamin*, right? It's good word. And what is it in English? *Fireplace*. See? *Place for the fire* – two words. You need two words to express what Russian can say in one... I can give you a million examples like this: In Russian *kiosk*, in English *bookstand*, or Russian

prodavets compared to English *salesperson*; not to mention *oboi* and *wallpaper*, *nevestka* and *daughter-in-law*, *kovboi* and *cowboy*...

By now Vadim has finished pouring the mixture, which sits on the table waiting for us to dare to drink it. Vadim's point has been well-made. But I do not back down; instead, I go straight for the jugular:

Maybe so, I say, but how can you consider Russian a complete language given that it doesn't even have...it doesn't even have any articles!

Articles? Fu! Who needs them? Who needs articles!

You may not realize this Vadim but articles are crucial to a language.

Oh yeah? How! Pushkin didn't need articles... Tolstoy didn't... Even *I've* spoken Russian for thirty years without using a single one and I've managed to live a normal healthy life thank you very much...

Here Vadim stops:

...Hey, pass me one of your cigarettes, would you...?

But I thought you didn't smoke?

I don't, he says and lights the cigarette with my lighter.

I look at him curiously and then continue:

What was I saying... oh yeah I was saying that articles are important because they add shades of meaning to your language. For example how would you translate the phrase 'a cowboy offered a salesman a Marlboro cigarette'?

Vadim translate it reluctantly.

That's right, I say. Now how would you translate '*the* cowboy offered *the* salesman *the* Marlboro cigarette'?

Vadim translates it again, this time even more reluctantly.

See! Don't you see! They're exactly the same. But in English they're different!

Yeah but...

Let me finish...now how would you translate 'cowboy offered salesman Marlboro cigarettes...?'

Vadim doesn't bother to translate.

You see? That's Russian! That's what Russian sounds like...!

<...>

And another thing...Can I see your passport?

My passport? It's been years since anybody asked to see my passport. And now of all possible times!

I hand Vadim my passport.

Right..., he says holding it against the light of the window: Now, what color is it...what color is your passport?

Blue.

Good. Now what color... look through the window over there and tell me what color the sky is?

Blue.

There you go.

Where?

There's your proof that Russian is the richer language.

Why?

Because we have *siniy* and *goluboi* and English doesn't.

Yeah well in English we have *fingers* and *toes*. In Russian you just have *fingers*...*fingers* on your hands...*fingers* on your legs...And that's not all! You know what else you don't have...?

What?

...You Russians don't have *fun*.

I pause triumphantly, but Vadim doesn't acknowledge me:

Another unimportant word, he says.

What do you mean, unimportant?

Fun is a word of course, but it's not...how should I say this... it's not a *serious* word.

Now if you take Russian, then you'll see what serious words are all about.

Like what?

Well, like *mrak* and *uzhas* and *koshmar*...

You already said those! You're repeating yourself.

Fine, then let me say this: you Americans don't have *dusha*.

Dusha?

No...*dusha*.

We do, too! We have it just as much as you do. We have "soul"!

No...I'm afraid you don't...it's not the same. You have a heart

I'll grant you that much – but your heart is no soul, your soul is no Soul, and your Soul is no *dusha*!» [2: 212-219].

This communicative situation represents a heated argument about what language is the best and certainly every native speaker considers his mother-tongue to be perfect. Here we deal with ethnocentrism – a tendency to evaluate one's own values through the focus of one's own language and culture. Since people are accustomed to their birth language and culture, it can be difficult for them to see a different culture from the viewpoint of that culture rather than from their own. Anyone beginning to learn a foreign language knows that it is much easier to learn words than to realize that words can be arranged and directed by totally different rules than those learned in one's mother tongue. The grammatical structure of our own language seems to us like the only unique example. To some extent, this is also true for national peculiarities, such is the "grammar of the life" of one or another ethnic group – and this is what most difficult to learn. In the extract one may clearly see the ethnocentric position of each of the participants of the cross-cultural dialogue. Vadim criticizes the English language for its being unemotional, clinical, too practical if not utilitarian, and rather narrow lexical meaning of the words. This is purely linguistic problem. Each language-culture employs different grammatical elements for describing all parts of physical and mental world. English-speaking people use articles, but this grammatical category doesn't exist in Russian. That is why the existence of articles seems superfluous to Vadim. Actually a number of grammatical categories possess linguistic and cultural characteristics. Therefore such kind of communicative events are culturally marked, which is, though, typical for any situation of intercultural communication.

In other words different linguistic categories which exist in one language and miss in another one constitute a very serious obstacle to the understanding of another culture. In intercultural interaction knowledge about the ethno-psychology of the people is significant. As one may see from the extract there's no equivalent for the Russian «*душа*» in the English language. This word has turned into a national concept known throughout the world. It's an open secret that there's an opinion among Russians that foreigners must be treated with a condescending contempt and arrogance because they are too pragmatic, mercenary, uneducated and dull. Bearing this in mind, some contemporary scholars of cross-cultural communication think that cultural and linguistic conflicts are inevitable.

The ending of communicative situation N 3 is very illustrative when intolerant position of interlocutors turn into diplomatic one.

«It is clear to us both that this conversation is as finished as it will get. Now it is time for reconciliation, and so Vadim raises his glass conciliatorily:

Let's drink, he says.

Right, I say though my pride is still wounded:

To *druz'ya*...and to *fun!* he adds
To *girlfriend*...,I say..and to *toska!*
Again we touch glasses:

You know, I'm no diplomat..., Vadim offers diplomatically, but let's drink to English: a language that many consider to be the greatest in the world...!

I pause.

Vadim is holding his alcohol in the air, waiting for me to reciprocate. I am surprised by his diplomacy and touch my glass to his words. But my tongue is still stinging, and unlike Vadim, I am no diplomat:

And let's drink to Russian...! I say, ...a language which is rich enough to be widely regarded as the second greatest!» [2: 212-219]

The ethnocentricity of the American native speaker is quite evident. He qualifies the Russian language "as the second greatest", (***underlined by us V.O.M***) and his Russian interlocutor turns out to be very diplomatic and out of politeness doesn't contradict his foreign guest, but not to contradict doesn't mean to agree in this situation. The extract above illustrates that by studying another language, we can recognize and understand the national culture and peculiarities of other peoples' mentality. Learning another language is important not only for its, so to speak, ethnographic interest but because it leads in the end to mutual understanding and tolerance. As it is generally known, tolerance is the ability of humans, and states, societies to listen to and respect the opinion of others, and to openly welcome opinions that don't correspond to one's own.

The next stratum of communicative situations exposed to intercultural study represents different attitude of interlocutors towards the problem of human rights – a traditionally delicate sphere. According to western standards, Russian people have a very contradictory attitude to the State. On the one hand, Russians show deep respect to the head of the state (a tsar, general secretary of the Communist party, a president), but on the other hand they tend to break state juridical norms, to beat the system. The tendency to anarchy remained a national trait of character of Russian people.

The examples show that in our country people don't trust the police and prefer to solve their problems without its participation. Russian people neglect all kinds of law, rules and official instructions in everyday life and in serious matters. It is like historical tradition. Nothing can be done about it. It's absolutely astonishing and even shocking for a law-abiding American whose Muscovite friend becomes a victim of Russian Mafia, but doesn't want to call the police.

«In our country we don't have laws.

I don't know what they'll do...

Why don't you go to the police?

It's not an option.

Are you sure? I have a student... her father works in the police force. He's a high-ranking officer. Maybe I could talk to him...

It's out of the question.

Why?

Because this is Russia » [2: 222]

And the same evaluation of circumstances is one more illustration how radically the mentality of the two communicators differs:

«*How can he be so calm? Him bride has been kidnapped before she can even become his bride!*

Shouldn't we call the police? I say to him.

For the pile-up?

No, for Olga.

Vadim looks at me with an amused expression:

Sure, he says, that's all we need. Haven't you learned anything from your six and a half years here?

What do you mean?

Have your six and a half years been entirely lost on you?

I hope not.

Well then what police could you possibly be talking about?

Maybe you're right.

Of course I'm right!» [2: 265].

In conclusion it must be noted that successful verbal intercultural communication is at times an unpredictable, but extremely interesting process. Everybody knows that intercultural interaction is a culturally conditioned process, all the constituents of which are closely connected with cultural (national) belonging of speech act participants. Since an interlocutor appreciates his partner subjectively, in the context of his cultural experience, intercultural communication may seriously suffer on account of such phenomena as negative national stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Therefore, to avoid communicative breakdowns between natives of different cultures one has to develop intercultural competence. An effective cross-cultural interaction is impossible without a command of the language. And even the knowledge of language is not enough for an adequate communication, one has also to possess a background knowledge.

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Коммуникативное фиаско как кросс-культурный феномен (на материале романа А.Д. Пери «Twelve Stories of Russia: a Novel, I guess»)

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Аннотация. Предлагаемая статья рассматривает проблему коммуникативного фиаско, происходящего в процессе межкультурного взаимодействия, вскрывает суть явления. Автор делает попытку вскрыть причины речевых коммуникативных сбоев посредством невербальных факторов. Анализ позволяет определить зоны напряженности, где возникновение коммуникативных неудач и провалов наиболее вероятно в ходе кросс-культурного диалога. Работа обладает теоретической и практической значимостью для учителей английского языка как иностранного, а также для лиц, чьи научные интересы находятся в области проблем межкультурной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативное фиаско; межкультурная коммуникация; культурные стереотипы; коммуникативная компетенция; коммуникативные ошибки; этноцентризм; культурный шок; аккультурация.