

**SYMBOLISM OF THE COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOR  
OF THE AMERICANS AND RUSSIANS IN THE ACT OF GIVING**

*Grazhdan Elena N., Candidate of Philological Sciences, Astrakhan State University, 414056, Russia, Astrakhan, 20a Tatishchev st., e-mail: cherkasovaludmila@yandex.ru.*

The article deals with the communicative behavior of the Americans and Russians during the act of giving. The aim of the research is to broaden the meaning of the concept "gift" in Russian and American linguistic consciousness, to investigate the specific symbolic features of giving a gift in America and Russia. This information is to help people of different countries to communicate and understand Russians and Americans better. On the basis of the undertaken research the author comes to the conclusion that the social symbolism peculiarities of the Americans' and Russians' communicative behavior during the act of giving are connected with the specific features of their mentalities, which have been formed for many years. In communicative behavior of the American lingvocultural representatives their democratism and practicality are reflected. Russian superstition is broadly reflected in the communicative behavior of the Russians.

**Keywords:** symbolism, communicative behavior, concept gift, American and Russian lingvocultures

**СИМВОЛИЗМ КОММУНИКАТИВНОГО ПОВЕДЕНИЯ  
АМЕРИКАНЦЕВ И РУССКИХ В АКТЕ ДАРЕНИЯ**

*Граждан Елена Николаевна, кандидат филологических наук, Астраханский государственный университет, 414056, Россия, Астрахань, ул. Татищева, 20а, e-mail: cherkasovaludmila@yandex.ru.*

В статье рассматривается коммуникативное поведение американцев и русских во время акта дарения. Цель исследования – расширить понимание концепта «подарок» в русском и американском языковом сознании, изучить конкретные символические черты дарения подарка в Америке и России. Эта информация поможет людям разных стран лучше общаться и понимать русских и американцев. В результате проведенных исследований автор приходит к выводу, что особенности социального символизма коммуникативного поведения американцев и русских во время акта дарения связаны с особенностями их менталитетов, которые сформировались на протяжении многих лет. В коммуникативном поведении представителей американской лингвокультуры отражаются их демократизм и практичность. Суеверие широко отражено в коммуникативном поведении русских.

**Ключевые слова:** символизм, коммуникативное поведение, концепт «подарок», американская и русская лингвокультуры

It is well known that not only the knowledge of a foreign language is necessary for successful communication between the representatives of different cultures. Sometimes the differences in the specific features of the communicative behavior of people of different countries are so important that it may come not only to misunderstanding but also to insults. "The speech etiquette of different nations differs appreciably. The meeting, greeting and parting role of the smile, handshake, embrace and kisses is different in different countries" [11, p. 6]. To our opinion, the

knowledge of the Russians' and Americans' communicative behavior will optimize communication and strengthen the cultural ties of the nations.

It is necessary to mention, that in our research by the communicative behavior we mean after I.A. Sternin "the aggregate of the communication rules and traditions of the definite group of people" [17, p. 4]. The concept of the social symbolism is also important for this article. "The social symbolism is the reflection of the semiotic function in people's consciousness. A definite action, fact, event, deed, one or another element of the object world get this semiotic function in one or another culture. All these phenomena get in people's consciousness a definite symbolic sense, that is typical for the whole society or for some definite social group" [15, p. 5].

The object under consideration is specific features of the communicative behavior of the Russian and American lingvocultural community during the act of giving. The subject of the analysis is the social symbolism in the act of giving of Russians and Americans.

The following material of the investigation was used: the travellers' notes, cross-cultural and lingvocultural publications, remarks of the Russian friends who have been living and working in the USA, the results of a quizzes. The method of conceptual and interpretative analysis, synthesis, comparison and questioning were used in the research.

We consider that within the bounds of the article it is impossible to describe all manifestations of the symbolism of the Russians' and Americans' communicative behavior that's why we will touch on only some aspects of them.

From our point of view the most interesting are peculiarities connected with the symbols of the nonverbal communicative behavior during the act of giving. One of such symbols is an object of giving – a gift, the main characteristic of which is symbolism.

The object of giving instead of words expresses the giver's wishes and aspirations to keep up good, kind, friendly relations with the recipient. The object reflects some information about the giver of the gift and his attitude to the recipient of it. Consequently, "each gift is symbolic, it is a transmitter of cultural symbols and is used by people as means of communication" [1]. Giving a gift a person transmits some information, he automatically characterizes the relationship with the receiver of the gift, reveals his (as a giver) real or desired belonging (for example, a gift-hint) and the receiver's belonging to this or that "social net". After V.I. Ilin, we consider that the social net is "the channels that connect individual positions (a personality, a group of people, a firm) not only inside of one social field but also in different fields" [9].

In the nation's culture the definite symbolic meaning of this or that object of giving may be generally accepted, but it isn't necessary to be the same with other lingvoculture. A gift or a good addition to a gift is a bunch of flowers. However, Americans as well as Europeans consider acceptable to present both even and odd numbers of flowers, while for Russians the even number of flowers symbolizes grief, death. The representatives of the Russian lingvoculture usually bring the even number of flowers to graves. There are several versions of appearance of such attitude to the even and odd numbers. According to one of them in pre-Christian Russia people believed that the even symbolized evil and death [8]. There is such a proverb in Russia "Misfortunes never come alone / It never rains but it pours". That's why this tradition appeared now in Russia the odd number of flowers is acceptable to present. The colour and the sort of a flower have their special meaning. For example, some Russians consider lilies to be the flowers of sorrow, and carnations symbolize misfortune in love [14]. It is significant that in the Russian lingvoculture the presentation of many things has some concealed symbolism, what is coming, to our opinion, from superstitiousness of Russian people. So, for instance, the symbol of peace and happiness at home is the stature of the

goblin or the sculpture imitating a fireplace. Giving knives, forks, spoons as a gift symbolizes quarrels and offences at home.

Both in Russia and America some symbols are connected with holidays, it manifests through the object of giving and circumstances, the atmosphere of giving. Best of all it can be demonstrated if we turn to the traditions of celebrating nuptials in the investigating lingvocultures. In Russia there is a tradition to present different gifts on different wedding-days especially when people celebrate anniversaries. The first year after the wedding-day is called the chintz (gauze, cotton) wedding in Russia. This day the couple give each other different gifts made of chintz, cotton, for example, chintz kerchiefs. In America the first year is the paper wedding. For the 5-th year wedding anniversary (the wooden anniversary) wooden things such as caskets and candlesticks are traditionally presented. For the silver wedding (25 years) according to traditions the things made of silver are presented at all times, for the 30-yh year wedding anniversary (the pearl wedding in Russia and the ivory one in America) – pearls or things made of ivory, for the golden wedding – things made of gold [6, p. 123; 7, p. 50]. We should notice that the value characteristics of the gift is rising with rising the number of years which the married couple has lived together. This fact symbolizes the strengthening of the conjugal unit and the coupledom of people [10, p. 215]. Some years ago the representatives of the Russian lingvoculture usually celebrated wedding anniversaries one time in 5–10 years and the tradition to celebrate wedding anniversaries every year has recently appeared under the influence of the American and European culture. It is necessary to underline that the representatives of the American lingvoculture celebrate wedding anniversaries often tet-a-tet: go together to a restaurant or arrange so-called the second honeymoon, for example, a husband and his wife go to the other city, put up at a hotel in a bridal suite. The silver and golden weddings are celebrated solemnly in the presence of guests.

Of course in the Russian and American lingvocultures there are different specific holidays and their own traditions of celebrating one and the same holiday, special holiday symbols. For instance, in America the day of the veteran is symbolized by a red poppy in commemoration of the bloody battle on the Flanders Field, in Belgium. In Russia the St. George Ribbon is the symbol of the Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War.

There is some symbolism in the ritual of presenting a gift. It is well known, that both in Russia and in the USA gifts are generally given in the presence of all participants of the celebration. However, according to the decency the Americans should immediately unfold a gift with thanks and compliment on it irrespective of whether they like it or not. The reaction to gratitude from the addressee is also obligatory. So all this demonstrates us that “symbolic meaning may directly take part in the communicative act, provoking a speech reaction, a question, an emotional retort and so on” [3, p. 47].

I.A. Sternin writes that in the USA congratulations are traditional in the following situations: weddings, engagements, getting a new job or career promotion, births of babies, leaving school/ graduating from the University. For different festivities the word “greetings” is used, the lexeme “congratulations” is used in the cases that “are considered to be achievements (career promotion, leaving school). Birthdays and holidays are not considered to be achievements” [16]. In the research work “American communicative behavior” in the course of the questioning I.A. Sternin came across the following cases for the Americans to congratulate an unknown person: the victory in a sports meeting, becoming a citizen, getting a job at the same organization where you work, graduating from/ leaving educational institution. 60 % of the American respondents consider that it is possible to congratulate unknown people on such holidays as Christmas, Thanksgiving Day, New Year. 40 % of the American respondents consider that it is out of place to congratulate unknown people. To find out the Russians’ attitude to congratulations of

unknown people we questioned 100 Russian informants at the age of 18–75, living in Russia (Astrakhan). We got the following results. 91 % of the respondents are pleased to get congratulations from unknown people and they may congratulate unknown people themselves, 5 % – are indifferent to the congratulations of unknown people, 4 % – don't like to be congratulated by unknown people. Among the occasions on which it is possible to congratulate unknown people the following ones were named: New Year, March 8 (International Women's Day), February 23 (Defender's Day), Birthdays, Christmas, Easter and some others. We should underline that the tradition to congratulate unknown people on holidays has recently got wide distribution due to the project "Pozdraphon". For instance, a lot of people phoned the free number of the service on New Year's Eve (2013), were connected to each other in random order and got an opportunity to congratulate their interlocutors on the New Year. As this project had been a success it began to work on the other holidays.

As the act of giving a gift usually happens in the solemn atmosphere in Russia there is a tradition to put on smart clothes regardless of the fact whether the birthday person invites guests to a cafe or a restaurant or receives them at home. In such a way pretty and smart clothes for the Russians symbolize holidays, festivities and fun. The Americans themselves note that the Russians dress up more often than they. "Even preparing for a usual walk the Russian women put on their high-heeled shoes and fancy dresses. Visiting a restaurant is also considered to be an event where a person shouldn't come wearing jeans and a T-shirt regardless how informal you consider to be the establishment" [2]. In America expensive clothes and suits are the symbols of prestige. At home the clothes should be tidy, but they can be old. The formal clothes are a dress code. The informal clothes are jeans, T-shirts, shorts [4, p. 52]. Usually paying a visit Americans wear the informal clothes, of course if it isn't a ceremonial solemn event: a wedding, a municipal official reception and et cetera.

I.A. Sternin considers that the social symbolism isn't often noticed by the members of the society, in spite of the fact that Americans keep the symbolism up, use and interpret it in interpersonal relationships. "Symbolic sense of this or that event may not be understood by the representatives of the other culture or it may get the other unexpected interpretation" [18, p. 54]. So, for example, a representative of the Russian lingvoculture may not understand the label with price left on an American's gift. The fact is that Americans usually leave labels as it gives the receiver of the gift an opportunity to exchange it in the shop or give back if he doesn't like it.

This isn't possible and correct according to the Russian etiquette. We should mention that Americans think about giving gifts a little bit pragmatically. For instance, in wedding invitation cards they often write the name of the shop where they have left their gift list. Having bought a gift the guests note it in the list. So, the other guests coming later know what gifts have already been bought.

We should underline that the symbols in the communicative behavior are often understood by the communicants implicitly, instinctively. "The participants of the communication take into account and interpret this or that actions of the conversation partner, his behavior, his "language" of the social symbols, they notice objective activity of each other. The communicants note this information, interpret these symbols as the information component of the situation" [5, p. 18].

As for greeting-cards they are very important and aren't in the last place in the communication of the lingvocultures in question and can be treated as social symbolism. However, one should notice here that the functions of the postcards / greeting-cards in the American lingvocultures are wider than in the Russian one. So, for example, greeting-cards are given and posted not only on holidays, but are also sent to invite guests, to thank a distant relative for a gift or congratulations (Thank you cards) [12, p. 178], to thank for an opportunity to have a bed (bread-and butter

letter). In the present time if a person isn't the holiday card sending type, it is also possible to give a call with Skype and other free calling methods [13] and to thank people.

Thus, having examined the social symbolism of the Russians' and Americans' communicative behavior during the act of giving we come to the conclusion that each investigated lingvocultural community has its specific features.

It is clear from these observations that the singled out specific features are connected with historically formed and developed peculiarities of the investigated nations' set of mind. In the Americans' communicative behavior their democratism and practicality are reflected. Russian superstition is reflected in the communicative behavior of the Russians.

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