POSITIVE COMMUNICATION:
DEFINITION AND CONSTITUENT FEATURES

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Abstract. Whereas positive communication is generally seen as an appealing phenomenon of interaction, it remains under-researched from the theoretical point of view. The topic warrants special attention because in today's Russian world negativity prevails, which is due to opposing political views, incompatible values in public discourse. The paper aims at the study of the constituent characteristics, structural components and basic mechanisms of positive communication. The analysis of the dictionary definitions of the term *positive* and its combinability in the National Corpus of the Russian Language, the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English allows to describe positive communication as an interaction based on positive attitude, aimed at mutual understanding and satisfying for all the parties involved. Positive communication is constructive, effective, supportive and coloured with good emotions; these characteristics can be regarded as its constituent features. The universal components of positive communication include: positive intentionality, initiative, adaptation to the interlocutor, empathic listening and social support. On the other hand, assertiveness is culturally specific: it is regarded as part and parcel of positive communication in the US, but is not seen as desirable in Russia and a number of other countries. The research will be continued in order to further identify the characteristics of positive communication, trace and test the validity of the theoretical claims and predictions on the basis of real-life situations.

Key words: positive communication, intentionality, initiative, adaptation to the interlocutor, social support.

You've got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive
Elim-my-nate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister In-Between.

(Johnny Mercer. Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive, popular song)

Introduction

Whereas it is generally accepted that positive communication is an appealing phenomenon, it is not easy to give it a distinct definition. Is this communication that is effective in getting the meaning across to the interlocutor? Constructive as opposed to destructive? "Supporting, affirming and respectful" [14, p. 117]? Or, as scholars and psychologist often put it, "communication leading to happiness"?

The topic warrants special attention because, sad as it might be, in today's Russian world negativity prevails, which is due to opposing political views, incompatible values, and growing financial differentiation. This is especially obvious in public discourse and is easy to encounter on social

networks like Facebook. People holding different opinions tend to use derogatory language and curse-words against each other, display intolerance towards their counterparts' views and are passionately looking for negative facts to defame their opponents instead of offering positive alternatives. The communication is predominantly hostile, destructive rather than constructive, demoralizing and ineffective. Recent developments in society show that people are overwhelmed with this negativity and are desperately looking for something positive to lean on.

The content analysis of the term *positive communication* on English and Russian Internet sites has produced a rather striking result: the search for the English term generated 267,000,000 results, whereas the Russian term – only 1,250,000 results. What is implicit in this observation is that, surprisingly, very little attention is being paid to this topic in Russia.

One of the reasons is that optimism and positive thinking have always been important for Western, especially American, cultures, and this accounts for the fact that, as Meriam-Webster's dictionary indicates, the use of the word "positive" is on the grow and has reached its peak by 2010. Russians, on the other hand, have a tendency for what is sometimes referred to as "communicative pessimism" [13, p. 232] – they are apt to complain and self-deprecate. As Chekhov once said: "It's a wonderful day today – shall I go have a cup of tea or hang myself?"

The understanding of what makes communication positive and what prevents it from being so can shed light on the dynamics and quality of human interaction.

Previous research

In spite of the existence of voluminous literature devoted to different aspects of communication in Russia and abroad, positive communication remains very under-researched from the theoretical point of view. Most of the works devoted to positive communication are textbooks and guidelines for students, teachers, spouses or parents containing practical advice about how to establish and maintain good relationships, such as: "Talk to me: how to create positive loving communication" [8]; "Soul Talk: Powerful, Positive Communication for a Loving

Partnership" [1]; "Stop the Screaming: How to Turn Angry Conflict With Your Child into Positive Communication" [10], etc. The most recent book "The Art of Positive Communication: Theory and Practice" by J.C. Mirivel [9] covers the following issues: "Positive Communication Creates Contact – Positive Communication Discovers the Unknown – Positive Communication Affects the Self – Positive Communication Deepens Relationship – Positive Communication Gives Support – Positive Communication Transcends Separateness – Positive Communication Influences Others." An important publication is the book "The Positive Side of Interpersonal Communication (Language as Social Action)" [11], where the authors discuss such topics as the conceptual foundation for positive interpersonal communication, affection and intimacy, humor as personal relationship enhancer, supportive communication, etc.

However, there still remains the need for the research of the constituent features, structural components and basic mechanisms of positive communication. The present paper can be viewed as the starting point of this discussion.

Definition of positive communication

Our first step towards defining the meaning of *positive communication* was to analyse the definitions of the term *positive* (with the exception of those referring to medicine, photography and science) in Collins English Dictionary, Collins Thesaurus of the English Language, the American Heritage Dictionary and Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary. The analysis allowed to group the definitions and synonyms of the notion in the following way:

first, *expressing or implying certainty, acceptance, affirmation, agreement, or permission; decisive, convinced, confident, sure, certain, satisfied, assured, definite, approving;*

second, (*having a good effect, laudable, favourable, advantageous, beneficial, worthwhile, pleasing, heartening*;

third, *supportive, encouraging, enthusiastic, reassuring, upbeat, buoyant, sanguine, helpful, corroborative;*

fourth, *showing progress or improvement, tending to promote development, moving*

forward or in a beneficial direction, promising, forward-looking, hopeful, optimistic;

fifth, *effective, useful, practical, productive, pragmatic, efficacious, constructive, concerned with practical rather than theoretical matters.*

The combinability of the term *positive* used in contexts connected with communication from the British National Corpus, the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the National Corpus of the Russian Language can be classified into the following semantic groups:

attitude: *positive thinking, frame of mind, perception, impression, approach, mood, outlook*;

result: *positive experience, contribution, effect*;

dynamics or potential: *positive factor, energy, impulse, charge, forecast, development, influence;*

person: *positive man, woman, guy, girl*;

form of communication: *positive tone, answer, response, reaction, evaluation, criticism*;

genre of communication; positive report, text, film.

The application of the definitions of the term *positive* to the nouns listed above characterizes *positive communication* as: 1) accepting and affirmative; 2) favourable, having a good effect; 3) supportive, encouraging and helpful; 4) optimistic and tending to promote development; 5) effective and constructive.

We will further be able to make use of these results in order to identify the constituent features of positive communication and formulate its definition.

Constituent features of positive communication

The fact that positive communication is seen as an *art* indicates that it requires a conscious effort and is therefore not a natural mode of human behaviour. This is further confirmed by numerous findings in linguistics showing that words and phraseological units with derogatory meaning by far outnumber positive ones. In human interaction positive communication is regarded as a desirable skill that has to be developed, and it is critically important to understand what in particular makes it positive.

1. Does positive communication have to be **informative**?

According to the famous quote by the journalist Sydney J. Harris, "the two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things: information is giving out; communication is getting through." **(**Positive communication can provide information, but not necessarily. E. g. phatic communion can establish a connection and show good attitude without giving new knowledge about facts and phenomena. We conclude that being informative does not belong to the constituent features of positive communication.

2. Does positive communication have to be **constructive**?

If destructive communication is harmful for the addressee and can have a devastating effect on a relationship, constructive communication, as the name suggests, has to 'construct,' create something and entail a positive result – be it action, idea, mood or feeling.

The attitude of a *naysayer* – a "person who often offers criticism of ideas, or always provides reasons why something won't work, <...> rarely offers suggestions or alternatives, but is very good at picking holes in the ideas of others" [2] – is destructive, whereas a positive communicator is characterized by *acceptance, affirmation, agreement, or permission*, as was shown by the dictionary definitions. The latter also describe it as *showing progress or improvement, tending to promote development, moving forward or in a beneficial direction, promising, forward-looking, hopeful,* etc. So being constructive and showing potential can be viewed as the basic features of positive communication.

3. Whereas US authors often define good, positive communication as **assertive**, meaning "able to pursue one's own best interests without denying a partner's rights" [3, p. 402], we believe it cannot be seen as its constituent feature because it turns out to be culturally specific.

Assertiveness is not part of Russian culture and is not seen as very desirable. In the Russian language there is even no word, which would describe this characteristic. Assertiveness is more typical of individualistic cultures that value competition, individual success and independence [6, p. 88]. Research has shown that US students

tend to be much more assertive than students from Korea and Japan [15].

But in Western cultures, too, the attitude towards assertiveness is not the same. According to G. Hofstede's observations of job interviews, "American applicants, to Dutch eyes, oversell themselves. Their curricula vitae are worded in superlatives, mentioning every degree, grade, award, and membership to demonstrate their outstanding qualities. During the interview they behave assertively, promising things they are very unlikely to realize – such as learning the local language in a few months. Dutch applicants, in American eyes, undersell themselves. They write modest and usually short CVs, counting on the interviewer to find out how good they really are by asking. They expect an interest in their social and extracurricular activities during their studies. They are careful not to be seen as braggarts and not to make promises they are not absolutely sure they can fulfil" [7, p. 136].

4. Positive communication is usually described as **effective** in achieving its aim. It is necessary to point out though that success in communication can be seen in two ways: *first*, as getting the message through to the addressee and *second*, as achieving satisfaction by all the parties involved. The first understanding means that the message need not necessarily be positive – sometimes a person does not want to hear negative information (as during a row) but cannot avoid it – the sender manages to get the message through and make the point. It is like a game of chess when the players are trying to achieve their strategic goals: they either win, lose or tie the score. The *second* variant means a victory for all the parties involved – rewarding interaction is what we mean by positive communication.

5. Does positive communication have to be **emotional**?

Research shows that it does not always have to be accompanied by the display of strong emotions. On the other hand, it is necessary to note that practically all the dictionary definitions of *positive* given above are coloured by good emotions, e. g. *laudable, advantageous, beneficial, worthwhile, pleasing, heartening,* etc.

6. Positive communication is typically described as **supportive**, which agrees with the above definitions, such as *encouraging, enthusiastic, reassuring, helpful,* etc. Authors writing about positive communication associate it with comforting messages, empathic listening, nurturing communication, negotiation and the use of humour as its intrinsic qualities.

Mechanisms and components of positive communication

The starting point of positive communication is a **positive intention**. It does not mean, however, that if a person means well, the interaction will necessarily be positive – it is well known that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Sometimes people wish to mend a conflict and end up making things even worse. Nevertheless, for positive communication a good intention is critically important.

Another relevant component is **initiative** – a positive communicator is expected to be actively involved in the interaction. According to O. V. Chernichkina, initiative in communication is activity-based, intentional, dynamic, generated by the situation, interlocutor-oriented, linear, monothematic, and transferrable [5]. It demonstrates the willingness to make and sustain contact, thus contributing to positive communication, but has to be evenly distributed to provide for a smooth interaction. The latter means that activism and initiative are not always positive and constructive. It depends on whether initiative is given up voluntarily or taken by force, whether the communicator monopolizes the communication or on the contrary keeps silent making the situation awkward or hostile.

In the course of positive communication the interlocutors are expected to adapt to each other. **Communicative adaptation** is the adjustment to the addressees determined by their age, gender, social status and cultural identity, as well as the situation and the addresser's individual characteristics. Adaptation improves the quality of communication, unless it is insufficient, excessive, or inappropriate [12].

An important part of positive communication is **empathic listening** "that fosters intimate interaction by enhancing feelings of being understood, a vital component of interpersonal need fulfilment" [4].

Social support is part and parcel of positive communication. It can be provided on the emotional, informative, material and instrumental

levels and is realized in such genres as the expression of sympathy, consolation, reassurance, condolences, praise, compliment, encouragement, etc. Their adequate form and relevance for the situation can make a very positive impact on communication, whereas pseudo social support can have a destructive effect.

The components described above are only part of those, which constitute the realm of positive communication and have yet to be researched.

Conclusion

The analysis brings us to the conclusion that positive communication is a complex set of multiple variables, which, combined in a situation of live interaction, produce a new quality. It can be defined as an interaction based on positive emotions, aimed at mutual understanding and satisfying for all the parties involved.

Positive communication is constructive, effective, supportive and coloured with good emotions. These characteristics can be regarded as its constituent features. The components of positive communication include: positive intentionality, initiative, adaptation to the interlocutor, empathic listening and social support.

The research will be continued in order to further identify the constituents of positive communication, trace and test the validity of the theoretical claims and predictions on the basis of real-life situations.

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ПОЗИТИВНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ:
ДЕФИНИЦИЯ И КОНСТИТУТИВНЫЕ ПРИЗНАКИ

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Аннотация. Несмотря на значимость позитивной коммуникации и ее важную роль в интеракции между людьми, данное понятие недостаточно исследовано с теоретической точки зрения. В настоящее время актуальность проблемы возрастает в связи с преобладанием деструктивных форм коммуникации в современном российском обществе, особенно в сфере политики и публичного дискурса. Цель исследования – выявление конститутивных признаков, структурных компонентов и базовых механизмов позитивной коммуникации. Анализ словарных дефиниций слова "позитивный" и его сочетаемости в Национальном корпусе русского языка, Британском национальном корпусе, Корпусе современного американского английского языка позволяет сформулировать определение позитивной коммуникации как взаимодействия, основанного на положительных эмоциях, направленного на достижение взаимопонимания и приносящего удовлетворение всем ее участникам. К ее универсальным составляющим относятся: положительная интенциональность, инициатива, адаптация к собеседнику, эмпатическое слушание и социальная поддержка. Ассертивность, в свою очередь, является культурно-специфичной: в США она воспринимается как неотъемлемая характеристика позитивной коммуникации, в то время как в России и ряде других стран считается нежелательной. В перспективе предполагается продолжить рассмотрение признаков позитивной коммуникации, средств ее выражения и закономерностей их реализации в дискурсе.

Ключевые слова: позитивная коммуникация, интенциональность, инициатива, адаптация к собеседнику, социальная поддержка.