**Lecture 7.**

**VERBAL COMMUNICATION STYLE**

**The aim:** to present the concept of verbal communication style; to analyze what makes you a better communicator in intercultural exchanges, what knowledge, abilities and skills are needed to make yourself understood and to better understand others, especially when they come from the cultural background different from yours.

**Plan**

1. Language and society.

2. Identification of different speech communities.

3. Types of verbal communication.

**Keywords:** speech communities, verbal communication, cultural reality, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, linguistic determinism, linguistic relativity, conversational speech,expository writing.

1. **Language and society.**

The brief description of intercultural communication and its importance leads to the reflection on a special relationship between culture, language and thought. Language is a tool of verbal communication. Using language is more than just choosing a particular group of words to convey an idea. Each language has its own unique style that distinguishes it from others. And when a communicator tries to use the verbal style from one culture in a different one, problems are likely to arise. Considering language as a tool of communication we firstly refer to verbal communication, the definitions below:

**Verbal communication** is the communication that is expressed through words.

**Non-verbal communication** is the communication through sending wordless (mostly visual) messages.

A special relationship exists between culture, language, and thought – an almost inseparable bond. Claire Kramsch (1998) highlights three ways in which language and culture are bound together:

· First, “**language expresses cultural reality**” in that the words a person uses for a

common experience are shared by others and reflect the beliefs, attitudes, and worldview of the speaker.

· Second, “**language embodies cultural reality**” in that the choice of the spoken, written, or visual form generates meanings that are understood by a person’s cultural group.

· Third, “**language symbolizes cultural reality**” in that language reflects a person’s social identity. The ways we perceive, believe, evaluate, and act are a reflection of our culture.

Patrick Moran (2001) claims that language not only symbolizes the products, practices, perspectives, communities, and people of a culture but that language itself is also a product of culture. For Moran “the words of the language, its expressions, structures, sounds and scripts reflect the culture, just as the cultural products and practices reflect the language. Language, therefore, is a window to the culture”. Moran regards language and culture as two sides of the same coin, each side mirroring the other. To what degree then is culture shaped by language? The idea that language affects the thought processes of its users is known as **the principle of linguistic relativity** or **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.**

In 1928, the anthropologists and linguist Edward Sapir published a paper in the journal *Language* that changed the face of the study of language and culture. In the paper he wrote, that language is a guide to “social reality”. Speakers of different languages perceive or express the world around them differently because of the ways in which language influences a person’s thinking and behavior. One of his students, Benjamin Whorf, was persuaded by Sapir’s writings and further developed this line of thought: “the background linguistic system (in other words grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas… We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages” (Whorf).

Since languages differ in grammatical structures, in linguistic categories, and in other ways, Sapir and Whorf concluded that the speakers of different languages have different ways of viewing the world. Language serves as a filter of its speakers perceptions and influences the way that a cultural group categorizes experience. As Samovar and Porter (2004) put it, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis argues that “language is not simply a means of reporting experience but, more important, it is a way of defining experience”.

After his studies, B. Whorf set forth a double principle: “the principle of **linguistic determinism**, namely, that way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks, and the principle of **linguistic relativity**, that differences among languages must therefore be reflected in the differences in the worldviews of their speakers” (Salzmann). According to the linguistic determinist view, language structure controls thought and cultural norms. Each of us lives not in the midst of the whole world but only in that part of the world that our language permits us to know. Thus, our knowledge of the world to a large extent is predetermined by the language of our culture. The differences between languages represent basic differences in the

worldview of diverse cultures.

Correspondingly, the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis holds that language determines thought. It suggests that we are prisoners of our language and that the way we think is determined by language. Damen (1985) describes the strong version as one in which “languages structure perception and experience, and literally create and define the realities people perceive”. On the other hand, the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests that a relationship exists between language and culture, however, language influences but does not *determine* thought. The weaker version is more readily accepted today (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004).

The resources of each language allow for different representations of the world; language is viewed as a marker to identify certain socio-cultural phenomena relevant in a particular communicative situation. Such categories as professional affiliation or social status, gender and age do not only position us in society but also determine the language variation we use. The study of the linguistic features that have social relevance for participants in social communities is called *sociolinguistics.* This term is used generally for the study of the relationship between language and society.

**2. Identification of different speech communities.**

Each of us belongs to different social groups and units. These groups may be formed by family ties, by our work occupation, or by common interests such as hobbies, music, or sports. Each group **forms its own speech community**. A speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding

the use of language. In a speech group or community, we develop a certain way of speaking that is common to the group. We may use common expressions or vocabulary terms that make it clear that we are members of a group. For instance, a group of teachers at a conference use the term of “RP” or “phoneme”. These terms are not familiar to those who are not part of the language teachers’ community. Each culture uses its own language to communicate among its members.

A language is acquired as a child grows up and becomes socialised into the culture. Aspects of a culture reflect ideas and values of that culture and its subgroups. To describe the interconnected nature of language and culture, Agar (1994) proposed the term languaculture. Each language consists of certain elements that are universal to all languages and other elements that are specific only to that particular language. All languages have rules that govern their sound and grammar systems and semantic and pragmatic rules that regulate the language that speech communities use. D. Hymes identifies (1974) these speech communities as groups of people who use similar rules as guideposts for how they use language and how they understand others’ use of language. He describes categories for analysing and describing speaking patterns in given speech communities and provides a framework for the specific context involving for the development of sociolinguistic rules. He uses the term speech event to refer to a specific context involving speech, such as a classroom lecture, a private conversation, or a talk given in a church.

A speech event usually consists of one or more speech acts that are not identified by the grammar used but by how they are interpreted. Speech acts are culturally defined: a native speaker can distinguish between a complaint and a compliment, a refusal or an apology. As language users we belong to different social groups – families, professions, clubs, and organisations – whose **view of the world is framed through their interaction with other members** of the same group. This worldview is apparent in - the language that we use; - the linguistic code that governs it (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011).

In other words, **what** is said, what is discussed, **how** it is said, and **what interaction style** is used all help to distinguish members of different groups. For example, teachers, politicians, doctors, lawyers, and scientists are professional groups who form their own speech communities as a result of their specialised vocabulary. For example “unlike my opponent who lives in a fantasy world, I view the issues from a realistic perspective” illustrates the language used by politicians. If we refer to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, language provides the conceptual categories that influence how its speakers’ perceptions are encoded and stored. The same concept is true for subgroups but on the level of vocabulary. Specialised vocabulary identifies a subgroup and established the group’s boundaries. From Fred Jandt’s point of view the specialised vocabulary of subgroups, “**argot”**, has been variously called *jargon, cant, and slang.*

**Jargon** is the vocabulary that communicates the distinctions and specific meanings professionals need to reference. Jargonis also used to refer to the technical language of a professional subgroup, such as doctors and lawyers.

**Cant** is the specialised vocabulary of any nonprofessional subgroup, such as truck drivers.

**Slang** is a variation of language peculiar to a particular group of people. Slang is used to refer to the specialised vocabulary of “stigmatised” subgroups, such as gangs, drug dealers, and prostitutes.

As **argot** is becoming the more commonly recognised term, it has been used to refer to the specialised vocabulary of subgroups regardless of how these subgroups are thought of by the dominant culture.

**Language and Gender.** Different types of speech occur within different speech communities but there are also differences in the way that men and women communicate. On the surface, men and women use the same vocabulary words and sentence structure. However,

- men are more likely to view interactions in a hierarchical way where one person is superior to the other;

- women are more likely to want to be connected and feel a sense of closeness through empathy and therefore see interactions form a non-hierarchical viewpoint (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011).

Understanding these differences can help learners acknowledge that men and women use language differently and help them to interpret interactions with the other gender appropriately. Researchers are interested in differences in language used by men and women – especially when they are speaking. How does their use of language differ? Tannen (1990) suggests that “for most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships <… > for most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order” (Tannen, 1990)

**Language and Age.** Age as an important social and cultural category is reflected in any natural language; it is most evident if you recall the way people speak to the extreme opposite age groups, e.g. children, the elderly. According to Peccei (2004) Child Directed Language (CDL) is characterised by calling the child by name or a “pet” name, using shorter, grammatically simpler sentences, more repetitions and questions/question tags. Besides, this language variation has some specific prosodic features, for example, an exaggerated intonation, more distinct pronunciation, a slower speed. Several studies (Coupland, N.,Coupland, J. Jiles, H.1991) have focused on the similarities between CDL and the language used with the elderly. Peccei (2004) concludes that the use of similar language variations could be “…connected to cultural expectations and stereotypes about people in these groups. The language style reflects the status of specific groups in different cultures which is determined by the amount of social and economic power these groups possess in society.

**3.Types of Verbal Communication.** The spoken utterance is the original type of verbal communication. The meaning conveyed in spoken language can be specified by the means of voice, volume, intonation or pauses. According to the insights expressed by A. C. Wintergerst and J. McVeigh:

**Spoken language** is relatively informal, repetitive and interactive. Speakers may use long pauses and talk over or interrupt each other.

**Written language** is relatively formal, more concise and less repetitive. C. Kramsch summarizes seven characteristics of conversational speech in English that differentiate it from expository writing:

**CONVERSATIONAL SPEECH**

* Transient, not permanent;
* Additive, items from prior turn-taking talk are attached; participants build on the utterances of others;
* Aggregative; uses formulaic expressions to maintain dealings between speakers;
* Superfluous or wordy; vocabulary and ideas are repeated;
* Grammatically loose;
* Focus is on people; attempts to involve the listener;
* Dependent on context.

**EXPOSITORY WRITING**

* Permanent, can be retrieved;
* Hierarchically ordered and generally linear in nature;
* Avoids formulaic expressions but promotes analysis;
* Avoids redundancy, too much repetitions is not considered appropriate;
* Grammatically tightly structured;
* Focus is on the topic;
* Reduced and away from context.

Brown notes additional features of the spoken language that distinguish it from writing and that can be challenging to students learning English:

· **Clustering**: Fluent speakers group words together rather than uttering each word.

· **Reduced forms**: Speakers use contractions, elisions, and reduced vowels.

· **Performance variables**: the speaker is permitted to pause and hesitate, using filler words and expressions such as “*uh”,”you know”,” like”.*

· **Colloquial language**: informal terms are permitted and common.

· **Rate of delivery**: the speakers control the rate of delivery for the listener; a reader can read at his or her own pace.

· **Stress, rhythm and intonation**: Rhythmic and intonation patterns can be important in conveying meaning in spoken language.

One way in which verbal styles vary is in their *directness.* Anthropologist *Edward Hall* identified two distinct cultural ways of using language. **Low-context cultures** use language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as clearly and logically as possible.To low-context communicators, the meaning of a statement is in the words spoken. By contrast, **high context cultures** value language as a way to maintain social harmony. Rather than upset others by speaking clearly, communicators in these cultures learn to discover meaning from the context in which a message is delivered: the nonverbal behaviors of the speaker, the history of the relationship, and the general social rules that govern interaction between people.

North American culture falls toward the direct, low-context end of the scale.

Residents of the United States and Canada value straight talk and grow impatient

with “beating around the bush” (approaching something in an indirect way). By contrast, most Asian and Middle Eastern cultures fit the high-context pattern. In many Asian cultures, for example, maintaining harmony is important, and so communicators will avoid speaking clearly if that would threaten another person’s face. For this reason, Japanese or Koreans are less likely than Americans to offer a clear “no” to an undesirable request. Instead, they would probably use roundabout expressions like “I agree with you in principle, but . . .” or “I sympathize with you “

Low-context North Americans may miss the subtleties of high-context messages, but people raised to recognize indirect communication have little trouble

decoding them. A look at Japanese child-rearing practices helps explain why. Research shows that Japanese mothers rarely deny the requests of their young children by saying “no.” Instead, they use other strategies: ignoring a child’s requests,

raising distractions, promising to take care of the matter later, or explaining why they can or will not say “yes.” Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen explains how this indirect approach illustrates profound differences between high- and low-context communications:

“. . . *saying no is something associated with children who have not yet learned the norm. If a Japanese mother spoke that way, she would feel she was lowering herself to her child’s level precisely because that way of speaking is associated with Japanese children*”.

Tannen goes on to contrast the Japanese notion of appropriateness with the very different one held by dominant North American society:

*Because American norms for talk are different, it is common, and therefore expected, for American parents to “just say no.” That’s why an American mother feels authoritative when she talks that way: because it fits her image of how an authoritative adult talks to a child.*

The clash between cultural norms of directness and indirectness can aggravate problems in cross-cultural situations such as encounters between straight-talking low-context Israelis, who value speaking clearly, and Arabs, whose high-context culture

stresses smooth interaction. It’s easy to imagine how the clash of cultural styles could lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between Israelis and their Palestinian neighbors. Israelis could view their Arab counterparts as evasive, whereas the Palestinians could perceive the Israelis as insensitive and blunt.

**Low-and High-Context Communication Style**

**Low Context**

Majority of information carried in explicit verbal messages, with less focus on the situational context.

Self-expression valued. Communicators state opinions and desires directly and strive to persuade others. Clear, eloquent speech considered praiseworthy. Verbal fluency admired.

**High Context**

Important information carried in contextual clues (time, place, relationship, situation). Less reliance on explicit verbal messages. Relational harmony valued and maintained by indirect expression of opinions. Communicators refrain from saying “no” directly. Communicators talk “around” the point, allowing others to fill in the missing pieces. Ambiguity and use of silence admired.

Even within a single country, subcultures can have different notions about the value of direct speech. For example, Puerto Rican language style resembles high-context Japanese or Korean more than low-context English. As a group, Puerto Ricans value social harmony and avoid confrontation, which leads them to systematically speak in an indirect way to avoid giving offense. Asian Americans

are more offended by indirectly racist statements than are African Americans, Hispanics, and Anglo Americans. Researchers Laura Leets and Howard Giles suggest that the traditional Asian tendency to favor high-context messages explains the difference: Adept at recognizing hints and nonverbal cues, high-context communicators are more sensitive to messages that are overlooked by people from cultural groups that rely more heavily on unambiguous, explicit low-context messages. It’s worth noting that even generally straight-talking residents of the United States raised in the low-context Euro-American tradition often rely on context to make their point. When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying “I can’t make it,” it’s likely that both you and the other person know that the choice of attending isn’t really beyond your control. If your goal was to be perfectly clear, you might say, “I don’t want to get together.”

**ELABORATE–SUCCINCT** Another way in which language styles can vary across

cultures is in terms of whether they are *elaborate* or *succinct.* Speakers of Arabic,

for instance, commonly use language that is much more rich and expressive than most communicators who use English. Strong assertions and exaggerations that would sound ridiculous in English are a common feature of Arabic. This contrast in linguistic style can lead to misunderstandings between people from different backgrounds. As one observer put it,

*“. . . [A]n Arab feels compelled to overassert in almost all types of communication because others expect him [or her] to. If an Arab says exactly what he [or she] means*

*without the expected assertion, other Arabs may still think that he [or she] means the*

*opposite. For example, a simple “no”to a host’s requests to eat more or drink more*

*will not suffice.To convey the meaning that he [or she] is actually full, the guest must*

*keep repeating “no”several times, coupling it with an oath such as “By God”or “I*

*swear to God.”*

Succinctness is most extreme in cultures where silence is valued. In many American Indian cultures, for example, the favored way to handle ambiguous social

situations is to remain quiet.68 When you contrast this silent style to the talkativeness

common in mainstream American cultures when people first meet, it’s easy to imagine how the first encounter between an Apache or Navajo and a white person might feel uncomfortable to both people.

**FORMAL–INFORMAL** Along with differences such as directness-indirectness and elaborate-succinct styles, a third way languages differ from one culture to another involves *formality* and *informality.* The informal approach that characterizes relationships in countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia is quite different from the great concern for using proper speech in many parts of Asia and Africa. Formality isn’t so much a matter of using correct grammar as of defining social position. In Korea, for example, the language reflects the Confucian system of relational hierarchies. It has special vocabularies for different sexes, for different levels of social status, for different degrees of intimacy, and for different types of social occasions. For example, there are different degrees of formality for speaking with old friends, nonacquaintances whose background one knows, and complete strangers. One sign of being a learned person in Korea is the ability to use language that recognizes these relational distinctions. When you contrast these sorts of distinctions with the casual friendliness many North Americans use even when talking with complete strangers, it’s easy to see how a Korean might view communicators in the United States as boorish and how an American might view Koreans as stiff and unfriendly.

Language operates on a broad level to shape the consciousness and communication of an entire society. Different languages often shape and reflect the views of a culture. Low-context cultures like that of the United States use language primarily to express feelings and ideas as clearly and unambiguously as possible, whereas high-context cultures avoid specificity to promote social harmony. Some cultures value brevity and the succinct use of language, whereas others value elaborate forms of speech. In some societies formality is important, whereas in others informality is important.