РАЗДЕЛ 2. ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ

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British Political Discourse: Strategies and Tactics of Mitigation in Debates

ABSTRACT. *The article analyzes the communicative category of mitigation in the British political discourse. The urgency of the research can be attributed to the growing politicization of society, the rapid growth of the scholarly interest in the study of the triad "language – culture – society", and communication on the whole and the category of mitigation in particular. This study aims to identify the means of realization of the mitigation strategies and tactics in the British political discourse and to single out the key principles of mitigation in the political language of Great Britain. The practical research material encompasses texts of the Parliamentary debates of 19.12.2023 devoted to the topic of data confidentiality, in which 21 politicians took part. The material contains 190,000 characters published on the official websites of the British Parliament. The analysis discovers 66 mitigation tactics within 5 mitigation strategies. The article presents an original authorial classification based on the general principles of functioning of the discovered strategies and tactics of mitigation in speech. The identified principles of the communicative category of mitigation in the political debates of the British Parliament allow to make conclusions about the specific features typical of the British political communication: indirectness, implicitness, ambiguity, politeness, friendliness, and cooperative-conformal style of communication. The research results can be used for further comparative analysis of linguocultures of different countries.*

KEYWORDS: *communicative category of mitigation, mitigation tactics, mitigation strategies, political discourse, political debates, English language, parliamentarism.*

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Британский политический дискурс: митигативные стратегии и тактики в дебатах

АННОТАЦИЯ. *Статья посвящена анализу коммуникативной категории смягчения (митигации) на материале британского политического дискурса. Актуальность работы обусловлена неустанно нарастающей политизацией общества, стремительным ростом научного интереса к исследованиям в триаде «язык — культура — общество», коммуникации в целом и категории митигации в частности. Цель настоящего исследования — установить способы реализации митигативных стратегий и тактик в политическом дискурсе Великобритании, выявить ключевые принципы митигации в британском политическом языке. Языковым материалом для анализа послужили посвященные теме конфиденциальности данных дебаты представителей парламента Великобритании от 19.12.2023 г., в которых принял активное участие 21 политик. Материал представлен общим объемом порядка 190 000 печатных знаков, опубликованных на официальном сайте парламента. В ходе анализа языкового материала были выявлены 66 митигативных тактик в рамках 5 митигативных стратегий. В работе представлена авторская классификация, основанная на общих принципах функционирования в речи выявленных стратегий и тактик смягчения. Выявленные закономерности в употреблении коммуникативной категории смягчения в политических дебатах парламента Великобритании позволяют сделать вывод об отличительных чертах, характерных для политической коммуникации британцев: косвенность, завуалированность, неоднозначность, некатегоричность, вежливость и приветливость, кооперативно-конформный стиль общения. Результаты, полученные в ходе данной работы, использованы для дальнейшего сравнительно-сопоставительного анализа лингвокультур.*

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: *коммуникативное смягчение, митигативные тактики, митигативные стратегии, политический дискурс, политические дебаты, английский язык, парламентаризм.*

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INTRODUCTION

The present article proceeds with the research on the topic of communicative categories, namely, mitigation in its connection to its ethnocultural origin on the basis of political discourse. The discourse has been under the research for many decades, e.g., Fairclough 1992, 2003, Karasik 2002, van Dijk 2006, 2009, 2011, Kibrik 2009, etc. It has become particularly more relevant in the recent years [Bilá, Ivanova 2020]. There are many understanding of the term discourse, but its correlation to the context is generally agreed on. It includes not only linguistic but also non-linguistic (or extra-linguistic) characteristics as well, e.g., culture.

It is indemonstrable that communication of the representatives of certain nations deeply depends on their cultural background. It is displayed both consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, when studying the communicative categories, communicative style or communication in general, it is worth noting the corresponding attributes of the culture, to which the actor of communication belongs to. There the communicative style is understood as typical means of communication, marked by a system of dynamic discourse units [Mkrtychjan 2010]. In light of the foregoing, the pragmatics plays a pivotal role, especially in the much relevant political discourse, which has been a focus of study of many scholars, e.g., Fairclough 1989, van Dijk 2006, Sheigal 2004, Solopova & Chudinov 2018.

With that in mind, the actor of communication has to effectively realize certain tactics and strategies for the communication to be successful in terms of pragmatics, e.g., mitigation. It is reasonable to presume that the language used in the political discourse of different cultures has some specific ethnic contexts as well [Kovaleva 2007]. Those culture-specific differences are systematic and form the communicative ethno-style [Larina 2015: 197]. The indicated correlation between culture, ethnicity, language and cognition is relevant for the linguacultural research [Voeikova et al. 2024: 285]. While communicating people not only discuss a specific subject, but also «say things culturally», i.e., there are always the hubs of the cultural meaning present in the communication [Carbaugh 2007: 174]. These hubs might be seen as the communicative habits that are reflected in each separate culture individually [Smakman 2019: 10].

In our research [Akhmetzyanova, Takhtarova 2024] we have previously reviewed the distinctive features of the British and German cultures altogether and those manifested in political discourse in particular (Wierzbicka 1996, 2001; Vasilenko 2006, Larina 2005, Kulikova 2004, 2006). Overall, the English communicative style is characterized by: softer imperative mood, less directness, or directness expressed in the embedded questions (Wierzbicka 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011), distance; non-impositivity; indirect expression of intentions; cooperative and conformal style of communication; orientation on the individual rather than his/her status; democracy; politeness and friendliness; orderliness; expressiveness; implicitness (Larina 2005), indirectness, implication, ambiguity, non-categoricity (Sternin, Larina, Sternina 2003). Meanwhile, in politics, such ethno-cultural characteristics as: distance, impeccable politeness, conservatism, adherence to rituals and stable traditions, firm position and defending one's interests, scrupulousness in details (Vasilenko 2006), a combination of individualism and collectivism, control by the authorities over society, opportunistic approach, and non-acceptance of unexpected and unplanned situations are actively manifested [Akhmetzyanova & Takhtarova 2024: 3].

This paper is devoted to the topic of mitigation, one of the communicative categories, which act as a regulator of a communicative behavior and determine the use of strategies and means of communication in a given context. Mitigation in its function is close to the communicative category of politeness. They both are universal in their communicative purpose, but understood differently in each culture, thus resulting in diversity of realization and substantially affecting the styles of communication [Takhtarova 2015; Chłopicki, Laineste 2019; Larina, Kameh Khosh 2021].

The communicative categories can reflect lexis, grammar or modality. The latter provide different interpretation of the content and therefore allow to form new notions thereon. The communicative categories represent the bond between the language and the actor of communication. There the problem of languaging of the communicative categories arises, as they are not present in the definition of what the actor of communication says, but are manifested in discourse markers expressed. To study the content characteristics of communicative catego-

ries, the methods of communicative analysis is rather preferable than the conceptual analysis [Takhtarova 2017: 193]. Communicative categories are predetermined by situational and cultural contexts its interaction [Eslami, Larina, Pashmforoosh 2023: 8].

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research is being conducted with the use of the following methods: semantic and pragmatic analysis, communicative analysis, content analysis, contextual analysis, conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis. The two latter are focused on the goal-oriented conversational behaviour of the actor of communication [Chłopicki, Laineste 2019: 2].

The research is based on the full transcript of the debates on 'Data Protection and Digital Information Bill' held in the British parliament on December 19, 2023[1]. The material in question has been chosen due to its amplitude, i.e., 190.000 digits, and a variety of mitigation tactics found in it; and represents a part of the complex ethnocultural research on the differences and similarities between the ways British and German mitigate their communication in politics. Twenty-one members of the House of Lords of the British Parliament took active part in the debates. It should be noted, that according to K. Fox, we may assume that the characteristics of the communicative means present in speech of a certain representative of the culture are to be present among all other representatives [Fox 2004: 21]. That is why it is important to conduct a research based not on the number of actors of communication but rather on the volume (length, number of digits) of speech under study; and we may presume that the tactics and strategies chosen by the participants of the debates under study represent the overall tendencies among the nation.

The **goal** of the paper is to provide a further insight into the mitigation of the British political discourse: 1) to identify and establish typical mitigative tactics and startegies, and 2) to define the key ethnocultural principles of the mitigation in the British political language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The debates analysed have been found to contain 66 mitigative units (MU further), which were systemised into 5 mitigative strategies and 15 mitigative tactics, respectively (Table 1). Let us provide reasonable details on the most prominent examples of mitigation found in materials under study.

STRATEGY OF MITIGATING SELF-PRESENTATION

The most common tactics within the Strategy of Mitigating Self-presentation is the Self-debasement Tactics. It provides an opportunity for the actor of communication to lessen his or her achievements or features so that the recipients of the speech have a better attitude for the actor. Some of the examples of this tactics are:

1) My Lords, even less than the noble Lord, Lord Knight, can I claim that this is my primary brief, so I want to make a short Back-Bench contribution to the subject, bringing some of my

STRATEGIES		TACTICS		
	Mitigating Self-presentation (7)	Accentuating Personal Commitment (1)		
		Propositional Approval (1)		
		Self-debasement (5)		
	Mitigating Attentional Bias Through Euphemism (19)	Use of Idioms and Metaphors (16)		
		Use of Political Correctness (3)		
	Directiveness Mitigation (5)	Implicit Accusation (3)		
		Split of Liability (1)		
		Implicit Ultimatum (1)		
	Disagreement Mitigation (13)	Evasion (2)		
		Complimenting (5)		
		Demonstration of Uncertainty (6)		
	(Dis)Approval Mitigation (22)	Referential Uncertainty (2)		
		Expressing Subjectivity (4)		
		Predication Uncertainty (5)		
		Modality Mitigation (11)		

Table 1. Mitigative strategies and tactics in British political debates with numbers of respective units in brackets

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[1] The transcript of the debates can be found at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2023-12-19/debates/2960AC9B-D86E-4EA1-8E4E-F3198BEE702F/DataProtectionAndDigitalInformationBill

experience from former interests. (Lord Allan of Hallam)

2) My noble friend Lady Kidron has, as always, covered this w i t h m u c h g r e a t e r e l o q u e n c e t h a n I c o u l d . (Lord Vaux of Harrowden)

3) The Bill is t o o l o n g — p r o b a b l y l i k e m y s p e e c h . (Lord Knight of Weymouth)

The Strategy of Mitigating Self-presentation in its origin corresponds with the indirectness, implicitness and ambiguity of the British people mentioned above.

STRATEGY OF MITIGATING ATTENTIONAL BIAS THROUGH EUPHEMISM

The Strategy of Mitigating Attentional Bias Through Euphemism has one of the most quantitively large representations in the debates, and in particular, the Tactics of Use of Idioms and Metaphors with 16 MU found. This is one of the most evident instances of mitigation, while idioms and metaphors by virtue of their nature comprise the hidden meaning; their meaning cannot be deciphered by the definition of separate words. The most prominent examples here are:

1) There is also, <…> huge potential for data to revitalise the public services, which are, <…>, o n t h e i r k n e e s . (Lord Knight of Weymouth)

2) In my experience, all too often, Governments plural, not just the current Government, establish w a t c h d o g s , then act surprised when they bark, and go and buy a m u z z l e . (Baroness Young of Old Scone)

3) R i d i n g t h o s e t w o h o r s e s a t o n c e is now the task before us. (Lord McNally)

There are two idioms in the examples above: to bring someone or something to their knees means to destroy or defeat someone or something[1] and to ride two horses at once or at the same time means to try to follow two ideas at the same time[2]. Watchdogs in the second example above, that bark and need a muzzle, is a vivid metaphor. It represents the regulatory agency, which is one meaning of the word, but also supposedly acts as a real living dog with barking and muzzles. The use of idioms and metaphors is a simple way to mitigate the negative meaning that the actors of communication have in mind.

The tactics of Use of Political Correctness also provides some instances worth mentioning:

1) I hope the Minister will confirm that it would be a very undesirable outcome, t o u s e p a r l i a m e n t a r y l a n g u a g e , and that we will be taking one step forward but two steps back if that is a consequence of this Bill. (Lord Allan of Hallam)

2) I asked the Treasury for some information and was totally f o b b e d o f f . (Lord Sikka)

In the utterance made by Lord Allan of Hallam the indication of use of 'parliamentary language' is clear, and it refers to 'a very undesirable outcome', which the politician presumably would have expressed more vividly, had he not turned to the political correctness. A similar instance might be seen in the second example above. The expression used there is nowadays considered a more decent way to say that you were, to say it mildly, disregarded.

STRATEGY OF DIRECTIVENESS MITIGATION

The Strategy of Directiveness Mitigation is one of the least present in the debates as the British in their nature are essentially not direct and prefer indirect expression of intentions. Nevertheless, 5 examples of this strategy have been found. Let us provide an example of the tactics of Implicit Accusation, which is the most noteworthy here:

1) The Minister must surely know that in this House, you take on the noble Baroness on these issues a t y o u r p e r i l . (Lord Knight of Weymouth)

as well as the example of the tactics of Implicit Ultimatum:

2) I h o p e the Minister w i l l e n g a g e c o n s t r u c t i v e l y with the very genuine concerns that have been raised. (Baroness Young of Old Scone)

STRATEGY OF DISAGREEMENT MITIGATION

The Strategy of Disagreement Mitigation is of particular interest for us. The tactics of Complimenting, for instance, is peculiar due to the fact, that the actor of speech firstly provides some type of quasi agreement with the other parties at the debates or quasi approves an idea or an action, and then proposes something different. It is usual for this tactics to contain some sort of contrasting, e.g., but, or to in any other way refer to the opposite idea or action.

1) We are grateful to the Minister for setting out in his speech his vision, but it feels to

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[1] The meaning is taken from the Cambridge dictionary: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bring-to-knees

[2] The meaning is taken from the Collins dictionary: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ride-two-horses-at-the-same-time

me that one of the Bill's failings is the weakening of the protection from exploitation that would follow if it passes in its current form. (Lord Knight of Weymouth)

2) While we welcome the change <…>, the Bill further weakens the already limited legal safeguards <…> in ways that could lead to discrimination or disadvantage—another lost opportunity. (Lord Knight of Weymouth)

This way the actor of speech does not refrain from the cooperative and conformal style of communication, which is rather typical for the British people, while also firmly but indirectly expressing and defending one's interests.

Tactics of Evasion here is illustrated by two examples of different intensity:

1) I d o n o t w a n t s p e a k t o t h e d e t a i l s o f t h e p r o v i s i o n s i n f r o n t o f u s, and I look forward to hearing some of the arguments, particularly from the noble Baroness <…>. (Lord Allan of Hallam)

2) I a m n o t a t l i b e r t y t o s a y t o d a y, but later this week—perhaps as early as tomorrow—information will emerge that underlines the urgent need for specific consideration of children's safety in relation to generative models. (Baroness Kidron)

Demonstration of Uncertainty tactics within the Strategy of Disagreement Mitigation is used, when an actor of communication tends to show the general uncertainty (not his or her personal attitude) towards an idea or an action. It it typical to use such expressions as: seem to be, deem to be, appear to be, be regarded as, look to be, look like, sound like, give the impression of being, etc. This tactics should be differentiated from the tactics of Expressing Subjectivity, where the actor of communication clearly states his or her personal opinion on the matter (cf. 'T h e r e s e e m s t o b e some disconnect between what the EU Commission and the EU Parliament have begun to enunciate as a view <…>.' — tactics of Demonstration of Uncertainty; and 'This Bill s e e m s t o m e to have been drafted <…>.' — tactics of Expressing Subjectivity). The examples of the Demonstration of Uncertainty tactics are:

1) The first is where the core legal regime for data protection in the UK i s d e e m e d t o b e too weak to protect the interests of EU data subjects

2) The second is where there are aspects of the UK legal regime for security-related surveillance that a r e s e e n a s creating unacceptable risk if EU data is in the hands of UK entities.

3) The third is where redress mechanisms for EU data subjects, especially in relation to surveillance, a r e r e g a r d e d a s inaccessible or ineffective. (Lord Allan of Hallam)

All of the instances above show that the actor of communication here is not expressing personal opinion on the matter, but rather overall rather negative attitude to the issue by stating the general uncertainty of the foreseeable result. This might find its origin in such ethnocultural characteristic of the British people as non-acceptance of unexpected and unplanned situations and a combination of individualism and collectivism. It is important what others might think on the subject and consider the possible outcomes of the unapproved decisions.

STRATEGY OF (DIS)APPROVAL MITIGATION

The Strategy of (Dis)Approval Mitigation, most widely used strategies of mitigation in the present debates, has been organized around the tactics of Referential Uncertainty — 2 MU, Expressing Subjectivity — 5 MU, Predication Uncertainty — 5 MU, and Modality Mitigation — 11 MU. This strategy has been given its name due to the fact that with the help of the mitigation any disapproval that the actor of communication has starts to be perceived as partial approval or disapproval to lesser extent. That corresponds with the overall politeness and friendliness of the British people, as well as with non-categoricity.

The reason behind the exceeding amount of Modality Mitigaton units is deemed to be connected with its comprehensiveness. This tactics may include modal words in general, subjunctive mood, semantic imposition minimizers, de-intensifiers of appraisal, to name a few. Scholars believe the modal verbs and words to be the main means of mitigating illocution [Yerznkyan 2019]. Some of the most prominent examples of MU found here:

1) Given that catalogue, it is h a r d l y surprising that so many noble Lords have raised the issue of data adequacy. (Lord Clement-Jones)

2) <…>, which would be an extremely subjective test, t o s a y t h e l e a s t, and puts the power <….>. (The Lord Bishop of St Albans)

3) Clauses 138 to 141, on a national underground asset register, are obviously very sensible; that proposal is p r o b a b l y long overdue. (Lord Kamall)

The first MU is represented by its function of semantic negation. H a r d l y induces an implicit and polite negation. T o s a y t h e l e a s t in the second example represents the de-intensifiers of appraisal, the use of this MU helps to reduce a certain feature of an object. P r o b a b l y is the modifier of the reality modality. This MU allow a less intense expression of

dis(approval) by the actor of communication. Use of some lexical units, e.g. probability terms and scaled expressions, may be driven by the intention to express uncertainty and emphasize politeness [Holtgraves, Perdew 2016: 2].

CONCLUSION

The research in general draws the following conclusions regarding the mitigation and mitigative strategies and tactics used by the British politicians. There were found to be two most frequent strategies of mitigation used in the debates on 'Data Protection and Digital Information Bill': Strategy of (Dis)Approval Mitigation with 23 mitigative units and Strategy of Mitigating Attentional Bias Through Euphemism with 19. That frequency is the result of the gravitation of the British people towards the implicitness and indirectness. They use various modifiers, indicate their subjective attitude towards something, or use uncertainty to lessen the intensiveness of their opinion on the matter; tend to cloud the issue with idioms or metaphors that tone down or downgrade the potential negative meaning behind the speech.

Overall, the MU, strategies and tactics mentioned in the paper are proved to be of the ethnocultural origin, they correspond with the findings of the research conducted by scholars. It can be stated that the use of mitigation in British political language and discourse respectively is tied to following characteristics of their communication: indirectness, implicitness and ambiguity, politeness and friendliness, cooperative and conformal style of communication, firm position and defending one's interests.

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