Effective Communicative Strategies and Tactics in Verbal Aggression Situations

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Abstract: Verbal aggression, due to its common use in speech communication, became an object of attention with linguists at the end of the 20th century. The essence of aggression from the psychological standpoint, its causes and manifestations have been studied by Russian and foreign psychologists from as early as the second half of the 20th century. From the communicative standpoint, verbal aggression is deemed to be synonymous with destructive, disharmonic communication, i.e. those interpersonal communicative contacts which have a hurtful, destructive effect on one’s counterpart’s personality and can complicate the relations. The communicative-pragmatic approach allows us to determine the language indicators of verbal aggression in the speech behavior of a communicator, interpret it and work out new strategies and tactics for counteracting it. This article examines a common scenario for verbal aggression, which we can nominally entitle “who are you…”. This scenario will let us take a closer look at the lexical and syntactic indicators of verbal aggression and suggest a speech tactics for getting out of such communicative situations with no severe moral and psychological damage for the communicator.

Key words: Verbal aggression • Communicative-pragmatic approach • Speech strategy • Speech tactics • Communicative situation • Speech act • Intentional side • Communicator

INTRODUCTION

The study of verbal aggression as a scientific object was first begun by psychologists, who evinced an interest in the nature of this phenomenon and attempted to determine its essence and origins. Psychologist A.A. Rean analyzed the definitions of aggression from foreign psychology and came up with two approaches on aggression: ethical-humanistic and evolutional-genetic. The first approach considers aggression as inflicting harm, behavior that is adverse to the positive essence of humans. In the second approach, aggression is viewed as a biologically expedient form of a person’s behavior, which makes for survival and adaptation [1]. J. Dollard’s theory of frustration, which relies upon S. Freud’s views, interprets aggressive behavior not as an evolutional process but a situational one, which is a result of the effect of frustration (see the works of J. Dollard, L. Doob, N. Miller, et al. [2], A. Buss [3], L. Berkowitz [4], etc.). R. Crutchfield and N. Livson closely associate aggression with the process of a person’s socialization [5]. A majority of researchers define aggression as purposeful destructive behavior which contradicts the nature of human existence and inflicts physical and psychological damage to the object of an attack.

Linguists’ growing theoretical interest towards the language side of verbal aggression was particularly evident in the last decades of the 20th century. The most promising approach to dealing with verbal aggression one could possibly apply is to interpret it as a specific communicative-pragmatic phenomenon [6; 7], since this particular approach enables us to determine its place in interpersonal interaction and work out effective strategies and tactics for counteracting verbal aggression in everyday communication.

In classifying any given statement from the standpoint of whether there is any verbal aggression present in it, we need to establish in every specific case a link between the statement and real-life communication conditions, consider the statement not in an isolated form but in the context of a speech situation, i.e. in conjunction with the time, place, aims and character of communication, the cast of its participants, their emotional state. Such approach has to do with the fact that verbal aggression can be manifested in a variety of ways: depending on the emotional-psychological background of communication, the same language means can be interpreted by the communicator as pejorative or ameliorative.
Verbal aggression can be subsumed under the category of destructive interpersonal communication [8, p.398]. This category accommodates those forms and attributes of interpersonal communicative contacts which have a hurtful, destructive effect on one’s counterpart’s personality and can complicate the relations. A person’s motives for verbal aggression could be one’s personal material gain, realized or non-realized self-actualization desires, malevolence, vengeance, or rivalry.

The essence of verbal aggression as a communicative phenomenon is the attacking of one of the communicators using such “weapons” as words, speech by the other, who acts as an aggressor. The use of speech as a weapon of aggression in interpersonal communication is a well-known phenomenon observed in various cultures since the earliest times. American psychologist P. Evans defines verbal aggression as “a means of controlling and overwhelming another person” [9, p.12]. This communicative strategy contradicts the fundamental principle of communication depicted in G. Leech’s *Principles of Pragmatics*-the principle of cooperation founded on cooperation and a mutual aspiration to build a relationship [10].

The communicative strategy of dominating and overwhelming can come in overt and covert forms. Accordingly, verbal aggression can also be manifested in the speaker’s overt, direct speech acts or hidden, covert, implicit statements. Overt forms include, first of all, the speech tactics of openly insulting or calling one’s communication partner “names” using a markedly negative, pejorative evaluative vocabulary; second of all, it’s the speech tactics of openly downgrading the partner’s professional, social, national and personality standing. We find the second form to be of greater interest from the pragmatic standpoint. In Russian, you can come across typical interpersonal communication scenarios wherein such tactics is employed. For example:

- *Who are you? Tell me who are you to talk to me like that/ act like that/ treat me like that? I am the boss/director/a PhD/ have been working here for twenty years and you are nothing/ a waste of space/ jerk/ working here for a measly few days?*

- *embarrassed, silent.*

Many have observed this kind of a situation from the sidelines or been an active participant in it as the aggressor’s victim. The rhetorical question right at the beginning of the speech act produces an “instant deafening effect” on the interlocutor: although it seemingly requires no reply, it nevertheless instantly switches the person’s thoughts to itself, makes one think of why such question has been put to him/her, where one has stepped out of line in doing one’s job or failed to fulfill one’s obligations, or transgressed any norms of behavior. Besides, one (the initiator) needs such a question for one to be able to answer it oneself and specify who one’s interlocutor really is. Thus, the question isn’t really rhetorical, since there is an answer given to it, which however comes not from the interlocutor but the inquirer.

A rush of verbal aggression causes an expected reaction on the part of the victim – a confused silence, an embarrassment, then a bit later just some babble in one’s defense, or it can be retaliatory aggression. The victim’s speech behavior is marked with statements having an illocutive justification function, which normally begin with statements like “I just/ only/ simply wanted to…». The victim’s embarrassment can be explained by the fact that one is trying to logically comprehend the speaker’s claims which at first glance seem to be valid: ‘Yes, indeed, he is indeed her boss/ the director/ a PhD/ has been working here for a long time and she is just a subordinate/ an intern/ has just started working here and what he’s accusing her of is, probably, her fault.

Thus, the aggressor has achieved his/her goal: the other person is feeling humiliated and guilty (although can’t tell what of exactly). The aggressor employs the speech tactics of downgrading the partner’s standing to upgrade one’s own standing in a “compensatory” way.

There are some idiomatic expressions in Russian which are descriptive of the verbal aggressor’s communicative behavior: *grind someone into powder, set the dogs loose on someone, give someone a roasting*. These phrases convey a community’s negative attitude towards manifestations of verbal aggression.

The idiom *grind someone into powder* represents a communicative verbal aggression situation wherein a whole object is destroyed completely, as if to the point of being reduced to a handful of powder, i.e. the partner’s personality, his/her self-esteem have been destroyed by means of barbarian methods. The origins of this expression’s figurativeness can, apparently, be traced to those types of activity and crafts where such actions were practiced—paint production, herbal treatment, etc.

The expression *set the dogs loose on someone* is related to the same communicative situation and compares the
aggressor to a hunter who would pursue his victim and employ the most extreme hunter methods at that-he would unleash a pack of dogs on the victim. Idioms give someone a doing; give someone a roasting are descriptive of a communicative verbal aggression situation which typically occurs in workplace-related communication and involves a superior and a subordinate. Here the superior is the aggressor and the subordinate is the victim; the psychological complexity in this case is aggravated by the corporate hierarchy, i.e. the dependence of the subordinate upon the superior.

It should be noted that the verbal aggression situation in all of the above idioms is painted from the standpoint of the active subject-the aggressor, who effectuates a speech act: he grinds (into powder)/ sets the dogs loose/ gives (a doing/a roasting). The object of aggression-the victim-can say the following about oneself: I got it in the neck from my superiors.

The psychological destructive power of verbal aggression acts is so great that it overwhelms not only those it is specifically aimed at but those who are just happenstance witnesses of these acts. The latter experience psychological discomfort, emotional shock, their reactions being something like: “we felt so small”, “wanted to hide somewhere”, “wanted to plug our ears”, “felt ashamed for him/her (the aggressor)», “it’s such a pity this happened to him/her (the victim)».

How does an aggression victim choose the right strategies or tactics for one’s communicative behavior in such situations? First, one should try not to apply the logic of common sense to manifestations of speech aggression, for the latter do not lend themselves to logical analysis; second, try not to unambiguously interpret them as an aggression towards oneself (not as a psychotic meltdown of a “poor”, work-exhausted boss having too much on his/her mind) and, third, try not to offer excuses or explanations but just cut the other person’s aggressive lunge short using such phrases as: Please stop these groundless accusations! Enough of these groundless accusations!, etc.

The speech tactics of firmly, resolutely, uncompromisingly cutting a verbal aggression act short by means of the phrases Enough/Stop it/Cut it out is really efficient. These expressions are oftentimes imbued with an evaluative qualification of, first, the intentional side of verbal aggression: Enough of these ungrounded accusations!; second, the very essence of aggression as an attack: Enough of your groundless bashing of me! Such an unambiguous definition of the aggressor’s speech behavior (ungrounded accusations, groundless bashing, hysterics) lets him/her know that his/her communicative strategy has been exposed and he/she won’t be able to disguise it under “a concern for the interests of the undertaking or the other person” or “meaning well”.

It should be noted that the tactics of resolutely interrupting a verbal aggression act doesn’t have to be accompanied by an assessment of the emotional-psychological side of the aggressor’s behavior (for example, Stop screaming/ yelling at me! Stop the hysterics! Stop freaking out! Are you crazy?) or by a negation of the aggressor’s communicative standing and authority (You have no right to talk to me like that! Who gave you the right to yell at me?, etc.), since such a reaction will be interpreted as retaliatory aggression. In the end, this will further escalate the conflict, build up more aggression and lead to an effective severing of interpersonal relations, which is especially undesirable when it comes to workplace-related relations.

Nor will the tactics of evading the conversation do any good in a verbal aggression situation, when actually the victim, to be able to somehow recollect oneself and recover one’s poise, can trying putting the conversation off until another time: Let’s talk another time/ later/ when you calm down/ when you recover yourself. But the aggressor realizes that in that case one of his/her advantages-the unexpectedness of an attack-will be lost.

As we can see, the verbal aggression scenario we’re examining actively employs speech acts of accusation. Note that the illocutive aim of accusation is by itself, by its intentional nature directed at the person-the one being accused; yet, if it’s part of a communicative verbal aggression strategy, it can become a virtually “deadly” assailing weapon.

In this case, the accusation is characterized by categoricity, dictatorialness on the part of the accuser, while it is unambiguously interpreted by the receiver as unsubstantiated, groundless, for the latter doesn’t consider it to be motivated by any forcible reason: even if the latter did something, it doesn’t mean that such aggression should be an appropriate reaction to it.

In interpreting verbal aggression, the receiver, or observers, oftentimes stresses the emotional-psychological characteristics of the aggressor’s behavior, his/her speech, which we’ve talked about above. Thus, in describing a verbal aggression act, they say that “he/she went off into hysterics”, “lost his/her temper”, “went berserk”, “was yelling”, etc., for verbal aggression is often accompanied by an emotional arousal in the aggressor, which is manifested by intense gesturing, changes in the strength and tone of the voice resulting in yelling.
In this article, we’ve looked into just one of the most common verbal aggression scenarios and effective strategies and tactics of counteracting it, which everyone should know so as to be able to defend one’s self-esteem and maintain one’s psychological comfort in everyday communication.

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REFERENCES