

The concept of privacy and adjustment of proxemics in Russian, Spanish and French speaking immigrants

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The concept of privacy is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon cultures. In contrast, in Russian and Latin languages and cultures, this concept doesn't exist. The present study investigates the ability of Russian, French and English speaking immigrants to acquire and to apply this concept in a new environment.

The term "privacy" hasn't been used in the southern, central, or eastern European language area until recently, and even then it represents a calque or a periphrasis of the English concept: "la vie privée", "l'espace vitale", "la privacidad", "el derecho a la intimidad", "сфера личной жизни". American, Spanish and Russian linguists, such as Aneta Pavlenko (2005), Tatiana Larina (Ларина 2009) or Diay Rojo (2002) confirm that Russian and Latin languages do not provide an adequate translation for privacy because this concept is foreign to these cultures.

These differences in interpersonal perception of private space affect the nonverbal behavior of speakers. Thus, the distance between representatives of the Russian community is relatively small: on the street, on public transport, or while queuing accidental contact moments arise very often (Прохоров & Стернин 2006). Furthermore, the invasion of private space is much more common due to the vital gesticulation of interlocutors. On average, gestures made by native speakers of Spanish are larger than gestures used by Germans (Müller 1998). Accordingly, the gestures of Spanish speakers commonly dominate their dialog partners' field of view. Moreover, they are prone to invading the personal space of conversational partners – for instance, L1 speakers of French tend to touch conversational partners frequently to call for attention or endorse their opinions (Jourard 1983).

The present study examines young and adult individuals' ability to adjust proxemic behavior to the nonverbal norm of their interlocutor. This project quantifies and evaluates nonverbal behavior of 60 Russian, Spanish and French speaking immigrants in Germany. The central question is if, and how, individuals fall short of cultural expectations of their German dialog partner, and alter the nonverbal behavior when they are having a conversation in their second language. The subjects are categorized into two groups. The first group is comprised of individuals who learnt German between the ages of four and twelve, while the second group consists of individuals whose age of onset was higher than seventeen.

The findings up to this point indicate that there is a clear correlation between age of onset and the ability of subjects to alter their gestural frequency, but not the proxemic behavior. While young L2 speakers use fewer gestures overall while communicating in German, the size of gesture seems to be influenced by other factors, such as motivation or willingness to integrate.

References

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