

## ENDURANCE TESTING: COMMUNICATIVE STRESS TACTICS OF INTERVIEWERS IN JOB INTERVIEWS

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**Abstract.** The article presents the results of a study of a new recruiting discourse (a sphere of staff sourcing and selection) based on the verbatim records of real job interviews. The following theoretical and empirical methods were used in the research: analysis, synthesis, generalization of research papers, discourse analysis of institutional communication, methods of data collection and storage. The authors describe a verbal behavior of interviewers who implement their main strategy – the job seeker's diagnostics – during job interviews. The unique stress technologies such as tactics of unexpected questions, alleged misunderstanding, interjection and test for consideration were revealed as components of the recruiters' communicative actions. Recruiters actualize the mentioned tactics by verbal and non-verbal means in order to protect themselves from socially desirable answers of job seekers. The results of the study will help prospective specialists and potential employees to forecast successful communication.

**Keywords:** recruiting discourse, job interview, recruiter, job seeker, communicative stress-tactics

### 1 Introduction

Recruiting (sourcing and assessment of the personnel) appeared as a new business sphere in Russian communication in the end of the last century. As a consequence, a new type of communication – *recruiting discourse* – was formed. The uniqueness of the communication process in recruiting determines its extrinsic value as a subject of linguistic studies from the perspective of discourse analysis. Our attention is focused on job interviews as an inherent and a centre-forming part of communication in recruiting and the main component of the personnel sourcing.

The ubiquitous spread of the Internet opens up many new opportunities for specialists and researchers of various fields to study the features of the functioning of all kinds of discourses (Bochina et al., 2015; . Bochina et al., 2014; Akhmerova et al., 2015; Venera et al., 2016; Crystal, 2006). The analysis is based on recordings of real job interviews broadcast on TV programme "Kadry reshayut" of online channel "Success" (Uspehtv: YouTube. – URL: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8E432C1F803541>). The analysis of live communication material has revealed that stress techniques actualized by interviewers through the use of verbal and non-verbal actions are present in virtually every job interview.

Continuing a series of word-formation from the substantive *stress*, we may be permitted to introduce a naming unit of *stress tactics*, which are used to implement elements of stress interviews in standard interviews. The described tactics are a part of a series of speech acts, accomplishing a super-task of the interviewer, i.e. to diagnose jobseekers.

The best result in implementation of a recruiter's main strategy is achieved by a complex approach to staff assessment. The studies of communicative material demonstrate that stress technologies actualized through verbal and nonverbal actions are present in virtually every interview. Nonverbal actions include, for example, a delay of an interviewer for more than 15 minutes as a way to test the patience and endurance of a job seeker along with the level of interest in the position. Artificial stressful and,

therefore, awkward situations for job seekers may also be introduced through tempo change during the interview: "from monotone indifferent to aggressive and hard" (Лухманова, 2005, Pp. 96-97). «At first the welcome may be really cold (there is doubt that the vacancies exist)». This effect is achieved by absence of etiquette greeting forms or indifferent, sweeping glance. Verbal means are represented by a wide range of speech acts analyzed and described below.

### 2 Methods

Identification and description of speech strategies and tactics primarily involves working with live language material, more precisely, communicative, i.e. with real communicative acts in their verbal and non-verbal manifestations. Only the complex of all these tools can provide an exhaustive picture of the implementation of a particular strategy in a specific speech situation. The empirical base for this study was videotapes of the TV program «Personnel decide» on the online TV channel "Success", which were stenographed for linguistic analysis as they were published on the TV channel (2010-2014).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Verbal stress technologies

Each job seeker who takes part in an interview experiences emotional tension similar to the state of a student during an exam. We are referring to the so-called psycho-emotional stress that causes fear, anxiety and other negative emotions and has a negative impact on the mental health of a person (Щербатых, 2003). Many theoreticians of recruiting share the view that the high class interview should not resemble the exam. It should be a conversation between two equal talking partners – two professionals. However, it is certainly only the illusion of "equal dialogue" as recruiters "torture, test, ask, and identify the level of knowledge" and, therefore, conduct an examination (from the definition of the verb "to examine" (Даль, 1981, P. 663).

In this regard, one of the interviewer's goals is to maintain benevolent ambience. Tools for recruiters are as follows: etiquette tactics at the beginning and in the end of the interview; tactics implementing the strategy of a final decision which accompany the main diagnostic strategy of an active communicant. It is essential to turn communication during the interview into a conversation rather than questioning (which is always a danger). Calm and pleasant environment promotes faster and more objective assessment of the job seeker.

Many Internet resources with a large amount of information in support of job seekers have appeared in recent years (<http://www.headhunter.ru>, <http://www.superjob.ru>, <http://www.job.ru> et al.). It resulted in maximizing the risk of so-called ready ("programmed") socially desirable answers. HR managers are evolving new evaluation methods of job seekers by using more and more complex and psychologically conditioned options. Verbal actions for artificial introduction of the interlocutor into stress take a special (if not the most important) place in a range of speech tactics which verbalize the central strategy of recruiters thus bringing a real opportunity to objectively assess the job seeker as a potential employee for a particular position.

As noted earlier, the study of verbal interaction between recruiters and job seekers during interviews revealed the presence of stressful situations caused by communication means. Proper use of stress technologies does not interfere with the positive mood of the communicants. However, it allows testing the job seeker's moral restraint, ability to handle stress, quick wittedness, creativity, and even find out the sense of humor. The analysis of the communicative material defined clear duality of the interviewer's goal to conduct interviews with stress technologies:

1. To “knock down” a job seeker from a “rehearsed” communicative way in order to make him/her talk more explicitly and stop using prepared replies, i.e. to make a step from implicit to explicit information.
2. To check behavior of a job seeker under extreme conditions which is also essential for a future employee as the requirement of high stress resistance is often put forward by the employer.

### 3.2 Recruiter’s Stress Tactics

Actual stress tactics include, first of all, interrogatory constructions specially designed for acquisition of responsive information. An interrogative construction is a linguistic universal. It means that demand for a question is present in mind of any person by nature; consequently, provocation speech is given to people genetically (as opposed to ritual speech which people master by learning the rules of the society).

The recruiter’s super goal is to assess suitability of the job seeker for the position both as a professional (professional characteristics) and a person (personality traits). Along with other specialized verbal actions making a stressful situation through verbal means is one of the most difficult tactics used by interviewers who need to be high class experts in recruitment. Analyzing the candidate’s reaction under conditions of emotional irritation recruiters risk to cross the border of the allowable and move from cooperative actions into confrontation thus making a communicative error (“to deprive oneself of the possibility of further interaction with the candidate”).

#### Tactics of unexpected questions

A well-known Austrian linguist R. Rathmayer who has been researching the development of Russian business speech for more than one decade notices that *offset questions* (in the present paper we use the term *unexpected questions – author’s comment*) are successfully used to reveal real potential and personal qualities of job seekers. However, it is mentioned that in the corpus of the interviews (conducted in different Russian cities in 2008 and 2010) used as a research material “such questions did not appear often”. R. Rathmayer explains it by preference of “neutral, fact-oriented” questions (Ратмайр, 2013, P. 300-301). However, the analysis of 42 records of interviews from a later period (since 2010) and examples from theoretical sources has revealed the tendency of recruiters to a wider use of unexpected, not always tricky questions. These interrogative constructions are used to actualize the **tactics of unexpected questions** (TUQ). In our opinion, this is connected with the level of preparedness of prospective interviewees and a wish of experts to protect themselves from “ready” answers (as described earlier in chapter *Stress Tactics*).

The TUQ implies two aspects which determine “unexpectedness” of the speech actions. Firstly, a recruiter poses a question with content stressful for a candidate. For example, the interviewer asks the job seeker why he should be chosen from all other candidates. Secondly, even a usual question may shock the job seeker if it is asked followed by sudden change of the conversation subject (tactics of interruption).

R: – *Why do you think / some people assign tasks / sometimes even too ambitious / and on in two times or even more often do not accomplish them?*

JS: – *My opinion is /that there are many different reasons here // Incompetence as a manager / is one of the reasons / insufficient motivation...*

R: – *Have you ever fired anyone?*

JS: – ... *incorrect // Well // Very seldom //* (KP, episode 11)

In some cases recruiters intensify a stressful component in communication by verbalizing the tactics through the use of questions in a row coupled with speech interruption.

R: - *well / what do you think / Evgeny Chichvarkin / is it / nice PR / or is he so interesting for mass media / that people always follow him/ or is he an unusual personality?*

JS: – *Nothing in life is possible without PR //*

R: – *Uh-huh //*

JS: – *Well / let me say / that I like / such // so to say a model of PR-behaviour / yes / of Zhirinovsky //*

R: - *What do you dislike about your job?*

JS: - *There is / no // I think / that there is no such a thing / because ...*

R: - *Fine/ what irritate you about other people? Do you feel it? Or are you tolerant?*

JS: - *Yes / I am tolerant enough / that’s why irritate me / no //* (KP, episode 26).

In the first speech act emotional tension is aggravated by the use of negative verb *to dislike*. In the second act sharp transition to the next question is mitigated by explicitly expressed evaluation lexical token *fine*, which once again shows the desire of the dominant communicant not to violate the rules of verbal communication during the job interview.

Realizing TUQ through questions of this type, the interviewer expects not only to test the job seeker's ability to quickly “switch” from one topic to another, but also to see non-verbal response, to assess whether the candidate has a sense of humor:

R: - *Tell me / how many 5 ruble coins should you put / against each other / to reach the Moon?*

JS: - *Well / you should start doing it / and when understand /that / in general / do not reach the Moon / maybe / reconsider //*

R: - *Are you ready to move?*

JS: - *To a new city?*

R: - *Yes/*

JS: - *No /* (KP, episode 30).

We should not forget that during the interview the potential employee’s nonverbal behavior (gestures, posture and appearance) is taken into account in the analysis of the communicative behavior. In the provided example the non-verbal reaction to a strange question of the recruiter is a slightly surprised smile without a share of aggression, which, of course, is in favor of the interviewee who evidently has the skills of stress management.

The study has highlighted a type of the analyzed tactics verbalized by unexpected (some time ago) but a well-known at present (expected) question often used during the interview. It is based on a metaphor so loved by recruiters.

R: - *Sergey / should a leader be loved or feared?*

C: - *There is such a notion / we are not obliged to love anybody at work / we have to respect / that is why rather fear // It’s impossible/ to be loved by everybody / well / and in your team you will always find /people who will simply respect you / but / when you let people love you / well / there is a tendency / that*

soon they will seat on your neck and do not value the attitude / you have towards them //

R: - *Sergey / tell me / why is a tennis ball fuzzy?*

JS: - *Fuzzy? Do you mean a tennis ball?*

R: - *Yes / it is so / villous //*

JS: - *I understood / <...> / a fine analogy ... The ball is hard / while the fuzz cushions a blow/ as / the ball impacts a racket / it does not blow away wildly / that is softer / right?*

R: - *Yeah-yeah // (KP, episode 2)*

The research has revealed cases when a stressful situation is caused by a manager with nonstandard methods, e.g., by an offer to talk about oneself in a surprisingly short period of time.

R: - *Nadezhda / literally for a minute / tell me what is most important about yourself / in your opinion // (KP, episode 21).*

Almost each job seeker realizes that recruiters will ask to make a self-presentation. In preparation for the job interview they rehearse it in stages in advance. The limit of one minute instead of a longer period of time will force them to talk about the most significant things. Thus, the required result may be achieved in a short period.

In episode #34 the interviewer starts the job interview in a non-standard way by asking an unexpected question immediately after the greeting.

R: - *Hi / Anya / I am Lena!*

JS: - *Hi / Lena / I am Anya!*

R: - *Nice to meet you! Tell me / please / how often do you attend the premises of Flakon design-factory?*

Including tactics of unexpected questions from the onset of the conversation the interviewer is trying to take the interlocutor away from prepared answers to sincere ones. So, an experienced recruiter while commenting on this job interview cites a situation where the average job seeker may have to answer the following question: "We really appreciate the cleanliness in our office. Did you wipe your feet at the entrance, didn't you?" Surely, any person would not hesitate to give a socially desirable answer «Yes, of course». This would be followed by the remark: "Well, we also appreciate honesty. In fact, there is no rug there; you could not wipe your feet". This remark indirectly explicates the question's purpose thus pointing to failure of a job seeker's selected tactics. In such a way recruiters try to avoid the prepared answers.

This episode also presents an example of stress technologies used at the end of the interview that has certain additional function of diagnostics.

R: - *Anya / I like your monologue / I enjoyed enormously / and listened to you / and / believe me / I do not have any questions / to ask you //*

JS: - *Why on earth // Maybe / only the question about the future // If it happens / that you'd be given this position / what is the first thing / you will do on a design factory / your first step / what will it be?*

In a positive way the HR manager starts implementation of the tactics from the phrase *I like your monologue, I enjoyed enormously*, thus, first of all, makes it clear for the job seeker that she is talking too much (implicitly through the lexeme *monologue*). Secondly, the manager creates a situation with emotional tension to check the interlocutor's stress resistance and determine her level of mastering stress-management skills.

#### 4 Discussion

Verbally expressed stress technologies implemented by corresponding tactics (from the main communicative strategy of the interviewer – the strategy of a job seeker's diagnostics) – interruption, unexpected questions, alleged misunderstanding, attention control – were listed above. They are called stress tactics. Here the substantive *stress* defines the state of psychic tense stipulated by actions performed under fairly difficult conditions.

The stress technologies are based on verbal and non-verbal provocation as a tool for understanding behavior of a job seeker in a particular situation.

We have come to the conclusion that stress tactics are applied by recruiters in the following aspects:

1. To assess various qualities and skills that may be checked only in stress situations;
2. To detect the candidate's stress resistance;
3. To provide an honest answer (not socially desired and, as a rule, prepared) which should be verified in a stressful situation;
4. To check the level of aggression.

#### 5 Conclusion

Therefore, the interview as a communicative centre of the recruiting discourse is a communicative act in which HR managers refer to unique speech acts to diagnose job seekers. The core of these tactics is special stress technologies that allow proving the candidate's eligibility for a vacancy in a limited period of time.

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