Modeling an Online Speaker’s Speech Activity
Under the Conditions of Uncertainty

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Abstract. Introduction. The article describes the requirements for the image of an academic speaker under conditions of uncertainty. Criteria for forming an online speaker’s image in modern information and communication space are considered. The significance of changing the status of an academic speaker-lecturer and student-listener as participants in the communication act in a digital environment is studied. It is concluded that the space of uncertainty has created a new image of an academic speaker with a number of distinctive features and peculiarities.

Purpose of Work. The aim of the undertaken research is to identify and describe the fundamental changes that have influenced the formation of a new type of academic speaker and to determine the peculiarities of his perception by the audience in the context of virtual communication. The goal required solving the following interrelated tasks: to investigate the conditions for the formation of an academic online speaker; to identify the distinctive features of the online speaker from other types of speakers; to analyze the process of adapting a new type of academic speaker to the virtual communication environment in the distance learning format.

Methodologies and Techniques. To achieve the goal of research and solve the identified problems the following methods were used: the method of system description (as the main one), the method of comparative analysis, the method of linguistic observation and the method of frontal survey. A frontal survey of the second-year students of Department of Law of the Don State Technical University was used as an empirical basis for the study, in which 150 recipients took part.

Results. A working definition of the term «online speaker» is given, the conditions of uncertainty in which the speaker has to build up communication with the Internet audience are characterized. The results of observing the unplanned mass transfer of academic communication in higher education to
online environment are described. The factors influencing the formation of the online speaker’s image are identified.

Practical Significance. The materials and results of the study may be of interest to teachers of higher education, educators and heads of educational institutions working under the conditions of distance learning.

Recommendations. The change of the system of interpersonal interaction in the academic environment of higher education requires not only the introduction of new educational online technologies but also a detailed study of the forms of communication behind them, the development of other ones, including professional and image approaches to organizing communication.

Keywords: Online speaker · Indeterminate communication space · Distance learning · Online lecture · Speaker’s image

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1 Introduction

The problems appeared in Russia nowadays in connection with the pandemic of the new coronavirus have influenced the development of events in the educational environment. It is no secret that the situation has led to the need to reformat the traditional learning process. Scientists no longer hide the fact that in the near future full-time education will undergo significant transformations towards sufficiently broad introduction of e-learning elements. This is facilitated by the continuous development of information and multimedia technologies, using which the teacher and his students being at a considerable distance from each other find themselves in the space of virtual communication. The situation is further aggravated by the state of uncertainty, in which it is impossible to calculate the time to exit the crisis. For this reason, as researchers note, «changes will come in the teaching community itself, which is rather conservative and it will have to change life algorithms» (Anpilov and Sorochaykin 2020).

The familiar academic sphere of communication that naturally went to the Internet has been rapidly transformed. In this regard, the problem of new educational online technologies is highlighted because it will be necessary to «rebuild the system of interpersonal relationships with colleagues and students due to the loss of previous forms of social and professional training (lectures, seminars, lessons, faculty meetings, conferences, symposia, etc.)» (Anpilov and Sorochaykin 2020).

The Internet has so deeply become entrenched in everyday consciousness that it is almost impossible to imagine the life of a modern person outside the global system of information storage and transmission. The Internet has rapidly entered and fundamentally changed the academic environment, having offered a wide variety of methods and techniques for interaction within the university community and dissemination of new knowledge using the latest electronic digital educational technologies. Scientific online conferences made it possible to expand the range of participants, since earlier many could not come to the conference due to long distances. Most university lecturers make extensive use of the Internet in their work. Today such forms of teaching as an
online lecture, a webinar, a web conference are not something extraordinary. Information and educational technologies have become particularly relevant in the context of distance learning in which direct communication between the teacher and students becomes impossible for a number of objective reasons. Describing the communicative space of the Internet as virtual reality, Grigor’eva (2010) pointed out such features as «distance, interactivity, mediation, global cross-cultural character». Two components of the learning process are emerging in a new way against the background of these objective changes that have befallen the academic community – the format of the online lecture and the image of the lecturer.

2 Materials and Methods

The methodological base for studying the image of an online speaker is based on sociolinguistic, psychological and rhetorical approaches. The works by Akhayan (2018), Antoshintseva (2010), Goroshko (2011), Zemlyakova (2011), Grigor’eva (2010), Sukhomlinova (2019) are devoted to the issues of formation, functioning and virtualization of digital teaching methods and techniques, as well as to the description of new genres of academic discourse. The problem of defining the concept of «rhetorical ideal» has already been raised in science. The issues of establishing criteria for the rhetorical ideal, the problems of speech improvement in the aspect of the formation of the speaker’s communicative culture have entered the sphere of scientific interests of Kirillova (2017), Khlebnikova (2007), Sternin (2002), Moshkina (2013), Mikhal’skaya (1981), Annushkin (1998). The development of the theory of a rhetorical personality, the creation of a rhetorical portrait, analysis of the features of the formation of the speaker’s rhetorical image are of interest in the works of Kolesnikova (2015), Barabash and Chekunova (2017). The study of phonostylistic features and prosody of the sounding speech was carried out by such scientists as Freidina (2017), Bloch (2012), Kachner (2003), Velikaya (2012).

Researchers have repeatedly noted that modernity has brought a digital lecture to life as a new genre of academic discourse. «It is characterized by a certain set of specific linguistic and paralinguistic means, i.e. means involved in organizing the text of the verbal language and forming the communicative and pragmatic aspect of the text» (Sukhomlinova 2019). It is an online lecture that is delivered in real time and significantly different in form and content from a regular lecture has become the most common form of communication for broadcasting new educational material in the framework of distance learning. «In an electronic environment, text becomes multidimensional, multichannel, paralinguistically active, hypertextual, creolized. These properties distinguish information provided by electronic media from other forms» (Antoshintseva 2010). The online lecture is held on various digital platforms Skype, Zoom, Google meet, etc., each of which has its own advantages and disadvantages. Nevertheless, any of the platforms presented on the Internet is effective, simple and convenient to use.

The positive features of an online lecture, in our opinion, include a wide audience outreach (from 50 to 200 or more students) and a number of opportunities. An online lecture can be recorded and stored for further multiple broadcasts. Such a lecture allows
you to «save» your voice without straining your vocal chords. Finally, you can view the lecture material in the recording, correct errors and shortcomings, revise and improve your image and self-presentation. «A real live communication of a speaker with an audience is unlikely to ever be a thing of the past, but webinars will still come out on top in communication thanks to greater simplicity, time saving, greater activity of listeners and improvement of online learning» – G.P. Kuzmina rightly notes (Kuzmina 2013). However, while delivering an online lecture there are also negative aspects. This form of academic discourse limits the ability to control your audience, as it is quite difficult to monitor the reaction of the audience. It is also problematic to check the actual learning of the proposed material. Besides there are potential problems with communication and system support (low Internet speed, system failure, poor image or sound quality).

The main feature of the online lecture is the distant nature of its delivering. The lecturer does not see his students as a group of people. Only square windows with a listener’s photograph or name are visible to him. He has access to the list of participants in the online lecture that is displayed on the right side of the screen. The audience’s position is different. Students see the teacher on their monitor screens and can appreciate the image of the lecturer and the quality of the material presented. The image of the online speaker, the manner of his speech behaviour, methods of influencing the audience, the use of additional accompanying tools (presentation, sound range, etc.) largely depend on the communicative goals and objectives that the speaker sets for himself.

Nevertheless, the prerequisite for creating a generalized image of an academic online speaker appeared owing to or contrary to the current situation of unpredictability.

We are firmly convinced that the generalized image of an academic online speaker consists of two interdependent components - visual and prosodic.

3 Research Results

In April 2020, a survey was conducted among students of the Department of Law at the Don State Technical University to find out how effective the unexpected transition to distance learning turned out to be and how they imagine a lecturer in a new communication format.

In view of the fact that students receive primary experience in distance learning and this format of academic communication is unusual and complicated for them, we have to be clear about how much time students can spend on online classes. 58% of respondents answered - not more than 4 h, 29% - not more than 2, and only a small percentage indicated the opportunity to study more than 5 h. In about two weeks of intensive studies (3–4 pairs per day on an average), students began to complain of decreases in visual acuity, fatigue, distraction, inability to concentrate on the subject, plus the stress of permanent staying in an enclosed space. Stress is known to reduce cognitive abilities. Therefore in the online learning mode the time parameter requires a significant reduction. More than half of the students have noted that the most optimal time for one lesson ranges within 40–45 min, during which teamwork and the teacher...
and students co-operation are acceptable. Students work a lot, the number of hours spent at laptops has increased significantly. The second half of the pair is advisable to replace with individual work, independent study of the material or creative task. This means that the speaker must distribute the plan of his lesson in the way that for a short time he can present the most important points of the topic to the audience, focus on complex concepts and definitions and answer students’ questions.

Doing the same thing online as offline is no longer possible. One of the main problems faced by the teacher is the lack of the ability for his eye to embrace all students at the same time and assess how much interested they are. Therefore, students give preference to collaborative and recently popular project activities, in connection with which the search for new sustainable forms of interaction is so important. It is very important to focus on solving applied problems. Moreover, there are convenient and interesting tools for collaboration online.

It was curious to determine who of the lecturers in online mode students liked the most. The question was rather aimed at revealing the subjective attitude of students to their teachers. A quarter of respondents pointed out that all lecturers teach classes interestingly, 15% did not reveal preferences having indicated the absence of the difference between teaching styles. Nevertheless, lecturers delivering lectures on rhetoric, judicial eloquence and speech culture received high scores, i.e. teachers having broad rhetorical skills due to their professional activities. It was them who were able to switch to a new communication format quickly and efficiently.

Students’ answers aimed at identifying the causes of the failure of the online speaker are of great interest for the study. Recipients have responded that not everyone likes to see only the lecturer’s head on the screen. The presence of foreign objects in the background and noise (noisy family members) are distracting. Teachers refuse a 5-min break in the middle of the pair. The lecturer’s inability to use new digital technologies and the lack of online work skills are striking. The lecturer refuses non-verbal means of communication, stops gesturing. One of the recipients writes: «As a generation that spends more time online, we are used to this type of communication, while many teachers find it difficult to get used to «non-living» communication». In short, the cornerstone is the lack of visual contact and the inability to reformat the learning process in a short period of time.

Students were asked to give their opinions on what from their point of view the success of the online speaker depended. The answers were very mixed. 77.4% of respondents indicated the ability of the lecturer to convey the material in an accessible way. 64.5% focused on the teacher’s ability to remain calm. 58.5% believed that success depended on the lecturer’s manner of speaking, i.e. upon rhetorical excellence. Students considered that the quality of communication on the Internet, the demonstration of illustrative material, and such a fact as the simplicity of the subject might affect the success of rhetorical skills insignificantly. This included private opinions. Thus, students believe that the speaker’s work will be improved by the ability to find original forms of interaction with the audience: to use presentations, to demonstrate interesting illustrative material, to «break away» from the lecture text and encourage students to think using rhetorical means (question-and-answer, rhetorical question, etc.). A very important observation that deserves our attention is the need to segment the lecture text into microthemes. While pronouncing, each microtheme should be
separated by a long pause. It is advisable to precede the pause with a rhetorical question that requires no answer. This will keep the audience in a state of active listening. You can pause by asking a question that needs to be reflected. The time is necessary to consider a complex problem and prepare a complete and comprehensive answer. By the way, many scientists involved in the study of verbal communication pointed to a speech pause, but in the online environment the ability to use pauses and correctly insert them into the text becomes especially relevant. «The speech portrait of an Internet speaker (rhetorician) is a group of speech characteristics that confirm the set of a certain audience’s perceptions of the qualities necessary for an ideal speaker on the Internet» (Barabash 2019).

In order to look attractive on the computer screen while conducting an online broadcasting, fashion theorists offer rather interesting recommendations for creating of the speaker’s appearance. The greatest emphasis should be placed on the upper body, since the speaker usually takes a sitting position. A full-length speaker is less attractive because the proportion of visual contact decreases and the need to accompany his speech with additional non-verbal means increases. If a person wears glasses, it is necessary to take care of the original frame, emphasizing the look, but not hiding the eyes. A brooch, a pearl necklace or a chain with a pendant are relevant in a woman’s image. Hairpins look stylish. It is recommended to pin long loose hair to the back of the head. There are classical requirements for clothing – a strict suit for men and the same classic suit, close to a man’s, for women with necessarily long sleeves. The black colour for a jacket is topical with a white blouse or shirt. A man’s suit is well complemented by lapels and a tie. Makeup is recommended for women with more emphasis on the face complexion so that the skin does not shine. Light makeup with lip line focus looks stylish. It is necessary to pay attention to the hands, because hands are the main expressions of non-verbal communication, they work all the time, and so they can be decorated with a bracelet for women and watches for men.

Students’ opinion about the visual image of an online speaker differs slightly from the requirements of fashion standards. They state that the classic appearance of a person allows you to create a complete image. Preference is given to the solid coloured clothes without bright specks. Despite this, the majority of respondents underline that a strict appearance is optional for distant communication. It is enough that the clothes look neat and help create an individual image. Students also added the visual image with the background on which the speaker works. A bright background with multimedia shifts interferes with the perception of serious scientific or educational material, and prevents the creation of a business environment. Listeners want to see on the screen a smiling person in a good mood and with positive emotions. Students are attracted primarily by a harmonious and integral image that includes intelligence, charm, friendliness and respect for the audience. The speaker’s appearance with his purely individual features is added to this image. «The audience appreciates the speaker’s ability to interest listeners in the topic of speech and his personality, the ability to create a friendly atmosphere of communication that promotes self-realization and personal development» (Kolesnikova 2015). Oddly enough, the creation of the speaker’s positive image is influenced by pets, which accidentally come into view of the audience. Thus one of the respondents wrote: «I like it when pets appear suddenly. It really attract».
Under current conditions, it is very important to show individual author’s methods of presenting a rhetorical image (Sagiryan 2018). According to E.L. Freidina’s remark, «the manifestation of the speaker’s individuality is an essential characteristic of rhetorical discourse, which significantly affects its effectiveness» (Freidina 2017). The author further notes that «the audience wants to see in the image of the speaker not only stereotypical, but also purely individual features» (Freidina 2017).

Speaking about prosodic qualities of speech, students drew attention to a number of points that reduced the perception of the sound image, and the recipients attributed the revealed circumstances to the online speaker’s failures. The most common observation is fixing a monotonous delivering of the lecture. Most listeners expressed the opinion that indistinct, inconsistent and slurred speech was heard from the screen that should be carefully listened to. Poor diction, fast tempo, insecure and quiet voice, teacher’s manner of lecturing «to himself» did not contribute to the qualitative perception of the lecture material. «A good voice, a good pronunciation and clear articulation are required. The speaker must critically reflect on his speeches and improve them» , one of the responses said.

In identifying features of sounding speech, it is important to characterize the whole range of prosodic means involved in creating an intonational and sound pattern. In the online lecture format, the phonetic component of speech is given a special significance. The prosodic image of an online speaker consists of several components. Taking into account the individual manner of the lecturer to present informative material, the emphasis should be primarily placed on clearly expressed articulation. The absence of diction defects is an important condition for effective speech and a bright touch to the speaker’s portrait. Unfortunately, the audience catches the rhetorician’s pronunciation flaws with lightning speed and pays attention more to the speech drawbacks than to its content. The second important component of sounding speech is a speech tempo. Perhaps this is the most complex sound indicator, according to which there are no clear recommendations for the online education format. In the context of a regular lecture, the speaker has a real opportunity to monitor the state of the audience, so while delivering he either speeds up the tempo or slows it down depending on the emotional mood of the audience. There is no such opportunity in the online format. It is difficult for the lecturer to catch the main point whether the students have time to write down and comprehend the material, whether the audience is energetic enough or tired, etc.

The speech tempo should be alternated between fast and medium. By increasing the speed of speech, you can give illustrative information, while at an average tempo the text for writing down can be read. Slow tempo is completely inappropriate because it quickly weakens the attention of the audience. A stable average speech tempo with acceleration seems to be the most attractive for the online format.

The sonority of the voice neutrally acceptable in a regular lecture takes over the main background load during online broadcasting. Voice modulations in this case are necessary to have a greater effect on the listeners’ auditory receptors. The sonority of the voice in combination with the timbre is involved in the formation of the intonational pattern of the speech. Variability of the sounding voice melody provides prosodic expressiveness of the speech. The timbre of the voice, as a rule, is given to a person by nature, but it can be improved (especially if professional activity is associated with public speaking). A deep timbre that is preferably low and rich in
modulations is well perceived. The speech should sound natural. Such speech is characterized by moderate expressiveness, openness, segmentation and possess the effect of ease. «The speaker’s individual style is formed not so much due to the variety of phonetic equipment tools but due to their combinatorics that contributes most to the speaker’s self-expression and make his speech style vivid and memorable» (Freidina 2017).

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of the analysis of students’ responses to the questions, it was possible to outline a generalised image of an online speaker in virtual communication format. This portrait is still far from ideal, but close to the harmonious image that Kolesnikova (2015) spoke about. «The harmonious image of a speaker, according to the author, is his pleasant appearance, sonorous and beautiful voice, his timbre and various intonations, good diction, aesthetic performance of speech that have beneficial effect on listeners» (Kolesnikova 2015).

Summarizing the above, certain conclusions can be drawn. Online learning, distancing, virtual reality are not concepts from the terminology of futurologists, but phenomena of objective reality. Distance learning has already entered the life of the academic community and is rapidly strengthening its position. The requirements for conducting lectures and practical classes have changed and a new specificity of communication between the student and the teacher has appeared. The teaching staff must master a variety of educational technologies in the shortest period of time, taking into account the opinions of students who are ahead in this process. Real communication remains a priority, because a person’s look, a friendly face, kind words will not be replaced by any technologies, no matter how advanced they are.

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