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THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF STUDYING METACOMMUNICATION IN  
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**Abstract.** *The paper provides the study of the phenomenon of metacommunication in modern psychology. The article introduces two basic approaches to the study of the concept of metacommunication, examines various definitions of this term, and adopts a broad understanding of metacommunication as communication that accompanies communication. The paper outlines the analysis of the terms that start with the prefix “meta-” and highlights the concepts that set the categorical apparatus of metacommunication. The conducted research helps to acknowledge the relationship of metacommunication with such concepts as metalanguage and metamessage. Two types of metacommunicative strategies are differentiated. It was stated that by virtue of its characteristics, metacommunication performs vital functions in social interaction.*

**Key words:** *metacommunication, metalanguage, metamessage, implicit metacommunicative strategy, explicit metacommunicative strategy.*

**Introduction.** An enduring theme in psychology is the difference between communication and metacommunication. The scientists distinguish *communication*, i. e., means of receiving and transmitting information that refer to what people say (their intended meanings), and *metacommunication* – means of ensuring the effectiveness of transmitted information as well as other acts of verbal communication in the aspect of interlocutors' communicative contact, i. e., the body language that accompanies communication (how people say something) [1; 4; 5; 8; 12]. Metacommunication influences what is heard and is an integral part of communication. The importance of metacommunication in the process of communication is undisputed, since metacommunicative utterances perform vital functions in everyday communication [10, p. 116], i. e., ensure mutual understanding, build rapport to achieve effective interpersonal interaction.

Informativity and metacommunication coexist in different amounts in a communicative act as a set of speech acts of the speaker and the listener. So, even a scientific public speaking, which is designed to send new information to the listeners, contains such contact-maintaining

utterances as “Let's change the topic of our talk,” “We would rather not touch upon the subject,” “It's high time we asked our speakers to proceed with ...” [4] that are used in order to help the addressee to receive the message, attract the attention of the listener, bring the conversation to a logical conclusion.

**Analysis of recent researches and publications.** Active searches for a concept that explains the patterns and conditions for a successful communication, as well as verbal means of its implementation, led to the emergence of two basic approaches to the definition of metacommunication – psychological and social.

The *psychological approach* assumes a world of individual senders and receivers of individual messages, a world in which the message sent by A causes receiver B to respond and in turn send a message to A who in turn responds until the end of the encounter [8; 9; 10; 11; 13, pp. 2-3]. This paradigm leads to quantitative, experimental analysis of variables. It implies certain assumptions about the nature of metacommunication. The biological individual human and the message observable as speech or writing encoded through another medium are taken as

“real” units which can be measured and manipulated in experiments. The communication process, in this view, consists of the sending of a piece of information encoded into a physical message from one individual to another.

The *social approach* assumes a universe of hierarchically interrelated systems of behaviour which change through time in non-simple ways and which have been described in studies of language, culture and personality [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 12; 13, pp. 2-3]. This paradigm leads to more qualitative descriptions of regularities as patterns. In this view, a social group of humans is the basic unit, but it is the relationships among members of the group rather than the individuals composing it which are of interest. This network of relationships is seen as a system with components of message subsystems. As information flows through the group (and between the group and its social, biological and physical environments), communication is engaged in, in a complex but nonrandom way.

**The purpose** of this research is to investigate the phenomenon of metacommunication as one of the types of human communication via identifying the basic approaches to its definition in modern psychology.

**The methods** of investigation are the following: the studying and critical analysis of the literature on the problem, methods of deduction and synthesis.

**Results.** The term “metacommunication” was introduced into the scientific circulation by the researchers [8, pp. 158, 209] who highlighted a) the aspect of content (communication) and b) the aspect of human relationship (metacommunication) in each act of spoken interaction. For the first time metacommunication was defined by the American scholars – the psychiatrist J. Ruesch and the philosopher, ethnographer G. Bateson as “communication about communication”. Researchers argued that the act of communication consisted of the content of the message and the instructions for interpreting the mes-

sage. They called such instructions metacommunication, in other words, it is a message about the relationship between the interlocutors and the interpretation of the message.

G. Bateson [1, pp. 153-154] directed his further efforts to explore other aspects of metacommunication and concluded that communication could occur at a lot more abstract levels than a simple descriptive level. The scientist identified two types of messages. The first type of those messages he called metalinguistic and they focused on language. Messages that formed a different level of abstraction he called metacommunicative and they revolved around the relationship between the speakers. The similar view is expressed by other researchers who consider metacommunication as means that allows the interlocutors to correct the perception of speech behaviour and is a prerequisite for a successful social interaction, which can be achieved both on verbal and non-verbal levels [11, pp. 44, 46, 49-50, 82]. For instance, the smile ensures the effectiveness of the communicative process and is connected with the problem of human awareness in various communicative situations – ‘this is how I see myself in our relations with you in this situation’. The ability to self-reflection, i. e., the activity of thinking about your own feelings and behaviour, and the reasons that may lie behind them, is one of the manifestations of metacommunication. The metacommunicative axiom of pragmatics of human communication, formulated by the researchers [11], proves that a person cannot communicate without establishing a positive attitude towards other members of society.

A verbal message may refer to the objects and things in the world (what is called “object language”) but also to itself – interlocutors can talk about their talk, write about their writing (what is called “metacommunication”) [2, pp. 136-137]. The prefix *meta-* can mean a variety of things, but as used in communication, psychology and philosophy, its meaning is interpreted as ‘about’. Thus, “metacommuni-

cation" is communication about communication, "metalanguage" is language about language and a "metamessage" is a message about a message. Actually, people use this distinction every day, perhaps without realizing it. For example, while sending someone an e-mail and put a smiley at the end, the smiley communicates about interlocutors' communication; it says something like 'this message is not to be taken literally; I'm trying to be humorous.' The smiley is a metamessage, i. e., a message about a message. When people say, in preface to some comment, "I am not sure about this, but ...," they are communicating a message about a message, commenting on the message and telling that it may be understood with the qualification that a person may be wrong. When interlocutors conclude a comment with "We are only joking," they are metacommunicating, i. e., communicating about their communication. In relationship communication people often talk in metalanguage and use such utterances as "We really need to talk about the way we communicate when we are out with company," "You are too critical," "I love when you tell me how much you love me."

Metalanguage reflects one of the most important properties of the language – its reflectivity, i. e., the ability of language to describe its own structure and use. R. Jakobson [6] suggested that in the case when the speaker and listener need to check whether they use the same code, the subject of the message becomes the code itself: the language performs a metalanguage function, i. e., the function of interpretation. The scientist noted that the metalanguage function is updated by means of the use of the metacommunicative utterances of the following type: "I do not understand you – what do you mean?" "Do you know what I mean?" and therefore plays an important role in our everyday communication.

Metacommunicative skills develop rapidly during the preschool years [9, p. 137]. These studies restricted the definition of metacommunication to *explicit metacommunicative strategies* – when a child

steps out of the play frame and speaks in a narrator's or director's voice. Metacommunicative skills in play have been linked to a child's ability to participate in intersubjective social interactions. *Implicit metacommunicative strategies* are also widely used in social pretend play. So, metacommunication is achieved either explicitly (via comments on play) or implicitly through children's early differentiation between pretend language and nonpretend language. Likewise, when adults talk, metacommunication may be implicit. For example, if a speaker is uncomfortable with the way that a conversation is heading, the speaker may simply change the topic abruptly – an implicit metacommunication – rather than choosing an explicit communication such as, "I'd rather not talk about that; let's change the topic."

Developmental psychologists, using controlled experimental methods to study individuals, have found that the choice of metacommunicative strategies can be partially predicted by individual traits and age [9; 11]. At the same time, conversation researchers have found that many conversational behaviours can be explained with reference to the preceding discourse context [4; 5; 13].

Speakers use metacommunication to comment on a conversation, both *reflexively*, on the current conversation, and *reportively*, on the past conversation. Metacommunicative abilities help to clarify some information, maintain the communicative contact, negotiate and engage in coherent discourse [2, pp. 137-138; 9, p. 137]. Interlocutors use some special metacommunicative strategies in an ongoing stream of discourse to increase their metacommunicative effectiveness:

- *explaining one's feelings*. It can help to avoid or resolve conflicts better and move past difficult feelings more easily;
- *giving clear feedback*. This will help the other person get a general picture of the messages that will follow;
- *paraphrasing*. It often helps, especially with complex messages, to paraphrase so as to make the meaning extra clear;

- *asking for clarification*. If people have doubts about other meanings they should ask for clarification;
- *using metacommunication to talk about one's talk*. Metacommunication is especially important when people want to clarify the communication patterns between themselves and other people: "I'd like to talk to you about the way you talk about me to our friends", "I think we should talk about the way we talk about our relationships."

Another understanding of metacommunication is observed in E. Goffman's investigation [3, p. 35]. The scientist defined metacommunication as a feedback, which indicates that the recipient received the message and understood it correctly. The feedback channel signals the active participation of the listener, expresses the consent, acceptance, understanding of the statement of the interlocutor. Back channel messages are vocalizations of the listener, aimed not at the interception of the initiative in conversation, but in support of the speaker. Feedback signals are represented by verbalized replicas of the following type: *Yes? Huh? You did? Really? Indeed?*

Metacommunication is an act of communication between two individuals that also communicates something about the communication itself, or about the relationship between two people, or both. Metacommunication includes information such as verbal, nonverbal, contextual and historic cues of the dyad that tell the receiver how the message should be interpreted [7, p. 37]. Interlocutors can also use nonverbal messages to metacommunicate. For instance, they can wink at someone to indicate that they are only joking or sneer after saying "Yeah, that was great," with the sneer contradicting the literal meaning of the verbal message. Metacommunication lies beyond the superficial, discernable and simple level of interpersonal exchanges and encourages examination of multiple levels of meaning.

**Discussion.** Metacommunication is an crucially important concept that should be researched in all its manifestations. It

helps people understand their relationships with others. Whether implicitly suggested or explicitly stated, the relationships between people reside at the core of the impersonal communication process. Up to now there is no single approach that would make it possible to describe metacommunication in its complexity. In modern psychology metacommunication is defined ambiguously: as communication about communication; as a continuous sequence of utterance exchanges that contribute to establishing a positive interpersonal relationship; as a feedback, which indicates that the addressee received the message and understood it correctly; as communication that regulates interpersonal relationships by language means; as a comment on a conversation; as a message about the relationship between the interlocutors and the interpretation of the message. In our study, metacommunication is defined as communication that regulates the process of interaction via verbal and non-verbal means, the main purpose of which is to facilitate the deployment of the communication process at all its stages.

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## ТЕОРЕТИЧНІ ЗАСАДИ ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ МЕТАКОМУНІКАЦІЇ В СУЧАСНІЙ ПСИХОЛОГІЇ

Грабовська І. В.

**Анотація.** Стаття присвячена дослідженню явища метакомунікації в сучасній психології. На основі критичного аналізу наукової літератури ми виділили два базових підходи до визначення феномена метакомунікації, розглянули різні дефініції цього терміна і прийняли широке розуміння метакомунікації як комунікації, що супроводжує комунікацію. Було досліджено низку термінів, що починаються з префікса «мета-», і виділено поняття, які становлять категоріальний апарат метакомунікації. Розглядалося співвідношення метакомунікації з такими поняттями, як метамова і метаповідомлення. Виокремлено два типи метакомунікативних стратегій. Було встановлено, що завдяки своїм властивостям метакомунікація займає важливе місце у соціальній взаємодії. Встановлено, що метакомунікація є надзвичайно важливою не тільки теоретичною концепцією, а й допомагає людям зрозуміти їхні стосунки з іншими. Незалежно від того, пропонується це явно чи ні, проте відносини між людьми знаходяться в центрі безособового процесу спілкування. З'ясовано, що у сучасній психології метакомунікація визначається неоднозначно: як спілкування про спілкування; як безперервна послідовність обмінів висловлюваннями, які сприяють встановленню позитивних міжособистісних відносин; як відкликання, яке вказує, що адресат отримав повідомлення і правильно його зрозумів; як спілкування, яке регулює міжособистісні відносини мовними засобами; як коментар до розмови; в якості повідомлення про відносини між співрозмовниками і інтерпретації повідомлення. Метакомунікацію визначаємо як комунікацію, що регулює процес взаємодії за допомогою вербальних і невербальних засобів, основною метою яких є сприяння розгортанню комунікаційного процесу на всіх його етапах.

**Ключові слова:** метакомунікація, метамова, метаповідомлення, імпліцитна метакомунікативна стратегія, експліцитна метакомунікативна стратегія.