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“LINGUISTICS OF DISTANCING” UNITING SCHOLARS AT THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

Anastasia Sharapkova

Lomonosov Moscow State University
(Moscow, Russia)
warapkova@mail.ru

Abstract: The paper deals with the results of the “Linguistics of distancing” conference held on January 25-26, 2021. Within the framework of the conference the issues of ontology and evolution of language in the time of civilizational shift triggered by the pandemic were discussed. In unparalleled times of global coronavirus epidemic, the conference was organized in a unique format – blog conference, with personal communication embedded in its structure regardless of its being still a remote conference. The questions raised in plenary talks and zoom tables stepped beyond the borderlines of actual communication, igniting further discussions on Facebook, YouTube and other platforms. This open format made it not a usual conference but an unprecedented feast of intellectual pleasure, potentially leaving a longer legacy in the academic world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Modern technology has offered both an unparalleled opportunity and unprecedented challenge for humanity, possibly bringing the communication practices to a new level or having a potentially devastating impact on the already established ones. A plethora of tools ranging from efficient messengers to video chats and conferencing apps allowing for bringing people together turned from the springs of possibility into the flood of the new norm. This is the issue that has become even more pressing in the light of the latest Covid-19 pandemic, fostering the reconceptualization of many things seemingly immune to any transformation. Quite surprisingly, it did not lead to any completely novel forms, but rather enforced the fledging practices existing before. Thus, the pandemic ‘tested’ the benefits and drawbacks of digitalization in real time and brought to the limelight the issue of its large-scale impact on human communication.

COVID-19 pandemic instigated a digital revolution in many areas and even more so in academia. Social distancing norms, months-long quarantine, online classes, cancelation of many in-campus activities and isolation from both invigorating discussions with colleagues and students has determined the new approaches to teaching, working, and conferencing in the virtual environments. This is the time of both change and challenge as well as modification and metamorphosis with human identity at stake. Instead of a ‘fully-fledged man’, the humanity got faced with a linear model, leaving much of the beauty and richness of true communication behind the screen. Perceiving it as a rupture of all familiar things it could amount to a breakdown as the title of the conference the present paper tries to overview says: “Linguistics of Distancing: ontology and evolution of language in the time of civilizational shift”.

Academia has long been exceptionally stable in terms of preserving its cornerstone formats. For instance, a lecture as a format of transmitting information is as old as the idea of a University itself and dates back to the Middle Ages, the time the first Universities were launched in Europe. Another example is the conference format that remained largely intact despite all the progress made by novel technologies. Despite the fact that Universities changed considerably in the past centuries, evolving from a Medieval University to Humboldtian, Entrepreneurial and finally to the Digital one, some things were cherished and preserved, as they formed the foundation of education practices. The academia has been reluctant to embrace the Online New World and not without cause.

Now given the pandemic what could have taken decades is introduced promptly in a matter of days both for good and for bad. At the moment, the academia is involved in creative rethinking, reshaping, and redesigning its formats and practices with the powerful tools offered by technology.

The pace with which the researchers adopted digital counterparts of lectures and workshops revealed that the currently available tools can substitute many of personal interactions. Still, as many participants of the conference agreed, there can be no simple technological answers to this challenge and a simple transfer from an off-line conference venue to a zoom screen does not make the communication fruitful. The digital interaction formats obviously still struggle to reproduce social interactions to the full and the online format has to be augmented with personal communication giving a way to a number of hybrid genres.

One of the recent exceptional examples creating an online event with personal communication embedded in its structure is the *blog conference*¹, which has been jointly organized by the Financial University under the auspices of the Government of the Russian Federation and the Philological Faculty of Lomonosov Moscow State University. The unique event combining conference and blog communication was inspired and chaired by Prof. Marklen Konurbaev bringing the outstanding speakers from all over the world together.

The major problem brought to this zoom table concerned the fundamentally dual nature of human language. It is a mirror of communication and a communication tool itself. Everything that happens in natural human communication is reflected in the language to a certain degree. At the same time, even the seemingly insignificant changes in the language system can change the nature of communication in general, change the possibilities of meaning transfer and even the person himself. In other words, language reflects the human identity, and it is also the way to shape it. The conference brought together specialists from different fields of humanities willing to understand and evaluate the current outlines of the main instrument of human communication – language.

¹ URL: <https://www.facebook.com/blogconference>

This situation leads to the following questions that are bound to arise yet very difficult to find the answers to: What's going on with us? What happens in the depths of the language system? What happens to the human brain? How are cognitive processes changing? What can humanity expect in the next decade if the subtle and so far barely noticeable processes cumulatively lead to serious shifts in the entire majestic building of human communication that was construed over the centuries? Specialists from linguistics, anthropology and history united to discuss these questions.

Professor Nick Baron, the associate professor of Nottingham University, discussed the mutual impact that language and communication have and how they are changing in the last decades, as “being a historian presupposes understanding the nature of change, its causes and consequences”. The factors that may have the greatest impact on communication practices are changes in the following: the society formation, world's organization and political structure. Everything in communication and thus in language has the key quality – “contingency”. It means that every utterance or work is produced within the historical context and the latter has the defining impact on the former – “the rootedness of time and place, period and location”. The researcher is convinced that history is always a particular choice of events, proceeding in human civilization, which ultimately affects the current civilization of today. And every choice is meaningful. Thus, the diachronic perspective or the embedded nature of time forms the fundamental premise of any purely linguistic work. The linguist considers whether all things are determined by a particular historical moment, location, and language communication. “Throughout the human history the language has been shaped by the contingencies of economics, the material basis of historical change, the cultures that emerge out of these long-term processes”. Through these very lenses he/she approaches the question of the dominance of English as one of many *linguae francae* in the succession of civilizations. It was brought to power through historical and political reasons of first – the British Empire, and second – the American impact on the world's economy. The rise of Chinese thus may seem still rather distant though possible. And it might be brought about by the economic rather than linguistic reasons alone. Viewing language as a primary cultural and social signifier Barron admits that the modernization of language and the globalization of media have already happened and cannot be reversed. Still, he takes an optimistic view on globalization, believing that culture as a unifying signifier cannot be lost.

Professor David Crystal, the world-renowned specialist in the English language, also adopts an optimistic approach to the impact of online communication and digital technologies on the development of language. The professor views the Internet as having a dichotomic impact on communication: on the one hand, the Internet brings people together because it gives us the opportunity to communicate with those who are far away. On the one hand, he does not see very much change in any language yet, because a living language takes time to change: “One needs to reflect here on the recency of the arrival of the internet. It seems that it has been with us forever”. However, this is an absolutely normal process, language has changed over the centuries, it will change now, but it will take at least 30 years, since messengers and social networks have appeared relatively recently and have not yet had time to drastically change the language. On the other hand, in the process of online communication a lot of the information cannot be transmitted. In particular, the following communication elements are lost: 1) non-verbal part of communication (facial expression, gestures, eye-to-eye contact); 2) comment clauses, such as “you know”, “you see”, “I think”, “I mean” (this is due to the fact that in messengers we usually try to reduce the length of the message); 3) during video communication (zoom, skype, etc.) we cannot avoid silence: in live communication, it is very important that the interlocutor let us know that he is listening to us and

that he is interested in the subject of our conversation. This explains the tiring effect all lecturers experienced in lockdown teaching.

The professor also speculated on the problem of identification, which is largely related to the language a person speaks. For example, fixed expressions, proverbs and sayings that are used by native speakers will not always be understandable to a foreigner who has learned this language. This is a kind of cultural code that is embedded in the mind of a person and determines his belonging to a particular culture. Crystal's talk was followed by a detailed streaming discussion on the phenomenon of language both in the context of living changing speech and in the context of self-identification.

Steve Pax Leonard takes a pessimistic approach, seeing the threat of digital civilization in what he calls "devitalization" of language that we are experiencing now: the life, energy, whim of language has been sucked out from it. Media platforms, such as Twitter, have a simple architecture that does not give room for a sophisticated oratory. We are moving from culture of books and creative thinking towards a society of memes, hashtags and maximally simple way of perceiving the world. We may appreciate technology for making our lives easier, but if the digital world is everything you know, it is not very enriching: language of social media is devoid of linguistic sophistication that you can find in Shakespeare, Shelley or Joyce. "Dumbing down" is a problem that is obvious when it comes to footnotes that publishers ask writers to add; people are becoming lazy and relegating a lot to search engines. The second concern is that we are becoming a society of "scanners and skimmers", which implies the ultra-rapid mass sampling that we can get from the Internet. Our concentration spans have been massively reduced because nowadays we are bombarded with loads of digital information all day long. It would be a great loss to the humanity and culture if we just stop reading. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure that in 50 years people will be still reading great works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, and if they do not, they will be definitely much less informed than they could be.

What we are all losing is what Wade Davis, a famous anthropologist, called "ethnosphere": by this term he means the summary of human knowledge packaged within more than 6 000 languages spoken in the world. In this regard, one of the most depressing facts is that every month we lose one language that is not even documented, and it means that we do not even know what exactly we are losing. In a blink of an eye English has become the global lingua franca. Yet we may end up in a world which is devoid of any linguistic diversity and thus might never have a chance to study how people think in other cultures. Leonard reminds of Bakhtin's idea that we do not own words, we rather inherit them, which means that if a nation forgets a word, they lose not only their own associations but also experiences and links with this word belonging to people you inherited it from; so it is so important not to let the language code become simple and "binary".

Permanent shift to digital education can entail catastrophic consequences for human cognitive capacities, making humans more dependent on apps. If we delegate too much function to the machines, all the 500 words of our everyday vocabulary that we own are going to become superfluous, a relic of previous ages. The goal of educators is to convince people that literature and languages are to be studied for their own sake. Finally, returning to the issue of social networks, the binary structure of social media and their lack of sophisticated oratory are not the only danger that they pose. Social networks could be another threat for complex language, the facet of human identity.

Prof. Andrey Kibrik, a specialist in discourse and multimodality studies, focused on language system stability and its instability in the Internet epoch, the dichotomy between what is preserved and what is changed, the area of normality and the area where linguistic novelties are

formed. The main problem he zoomed into was how the communication system preserves its core, despite its inherent changeability.

One of the earliest examples of drastic changes is creating the written language itself, which allowed the human experience to step beyond the boundaries of time or place. The invention of printing is another milestone, it made books available to everyone, not only the privileged ones. The next stage is presumably the Internet. Thanks to it, we have witnessed thousands of “writers”, “many of them even have no idea how to write properly”, leaving an impression of literacy deterioration. These changes are feared, yet Kibrik believes that we are still unlikely to estimate the scale of the new trends and the potential impact of this phenomenon, given the short period of several decades. In the light of the whole human history, the evolution of Homo sapience, temporary changes lasting only for a few years can not alter any language dramatically. Provided that language codification still works and classical literature is still read, these novelties that rise and go represent just an issue for analysis. Kibrik believes, “It is important to keep the balance. Universities should not only hold to systematicity but also take into consideration the changes happening in society”. The solution could be discourse, a cornerstone concept of modern linguistics, the idea of different genres and schemes existing in it. If students know how to recognize these models, they will be prepared for communication in different social spheres under the constant pressure of the lack of norm. We should not ground teaching on the inflexible schemes, on the contrary, we need a freedom of communication. This is the way by which the language expands and evolves.

Multimodal communication was most drastically influenced by online communication. The structure and patterns of the eye contact and eye gaze are lost. It is impossible to look in someone’s eyes through the web camera, because if you watch your interlocutor’s face, he watches you looking down. The direct eye contact does not occur, and “it is a serious failure which should be compensated for”. Thus, sometimes this perceptual lack is compensated for verbally and new patterns arise.

Kibrik claims that to metaphorically view our intelligence, communication and cognitive capacities as akin to computer processing is heuristically wrong and oversimplistic. Man, not machine, however sophisticated it could be, should stand at the core of all processes and communication. Language is a natural product, “the ideal result of ideal crowdsourcing”, as Prof. Konurbaev puts it, and attempts to standardize it to the point of artificial intelligence hold a potential threat to the human essence.

Many of these ideas were echoed in the presentation by **Professor Tatiana Chernigovskaya**, a specialist in neuroscience and psycholinguistics. She specially focused on young people; the so-called generation Z is now primarily living in the Internet space and virtual communication, crossing the borders of distance and language easily. It might be the case that something completely unexpected is going on in the human brain, making this shift possible. On the one hand, there have always been dramatic technological changes. Thus, it is tempting to evade the question with admitting that these changes are not as huge as they may seem from within. On the other hand, they have never been so global, with a type of civilization changing. Meanwhile, Prof. Chernigovskaya resorts to a biological perspective stating that the human brain takes at least hundreds of thousands of years to rebuild its structures in a biological sense, so talking about those people born in 2000 as having a different brain is premature. Simply because evolution does not go so fast, it takes a longer time. It is not the brain but the neural network that is changing, adapting, and responding to the environment the child grows in, being affected by the surroundings, education and experience. Thus, the brain does not and does change depending on what is considered a change.

Adapting to online changes, we have to consider several factors: 1) different types of personalities having obvious preferences in what type of information is processed better, 2) physical experience and emotion, 3) motivation. Complex biochemical machinery brings all the processes together, ensuring proper processing of information. The fact that the process of education and learning at large is so complex and multifaceted makes it difficult to teach online as most part of channels potentiality applicable to boost motivation and ensure emotional links are not available.

Chernigovskaya quoted Lev Shcherba's definition of philology as an art to read complex texts, not to purchase something at Harrods. Words in complex texts have associations critical for analysing literature. Thus, the aim of teaching as well as professional translation is to transfer these associations. The latter brings about another long-standing issue of organization of mental lexicon. Words are organized not into logical 'drawers' but in a highly scattered manner with clones and duplicates. Therefore, the reading experience is the cornerstone for human brain development and even consciousness. Brodsky, a Nobel laureate in literature, wrote that poetry is "an extraordinary accelerator of consciousness, of thinking, of comprehending the universe". Thus, to understand the difference between the seemingly simple words, it is imperative to read the masterpieces of literature as every word unfolds numerous associations that could be acquired as learned through reading. Unfortunately, via online means only it is not possible.

Professor of the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) **Maxim Krongauz** has been exploring the ongoing changes in the Russian language for several decades. He believes that a change is one of the main distinctive features of language, and the meaning of this term has altered since the beginning of the last century: "There are different languages in the heads of different generations. Especially if we are talking about language as an instrument. Of course, we use different means". Krongauz identifies two main processes that are going on with language: the appearance of new phenomena and the disappearance of the old ones. Language exists in dynamics – the rate of changes differs from one historical period to another. Now the dynamics is very intense, especially under the influence of the Internet, while more attention is paid to semantic and pragmatic changes and language behavior. This intensity and huge pace make it impossible to slice the linguistic material into the traditional Saussurean diachronic and synchronic pieces to be scrutinized.

Krongauz disputed with the widespread belief that language is a universal mechanism that does not change akin to the "ivory tower" or the "inborn universal mechanism". This point of view on the language could be true to a certain extent but the changes that we can all witness exist as well. In his opinion, inclining to one or another point of view is entirely a matter of focusing attention. Focusing on changes seems more interesting, although there is always something unchangeable or stable that makes this comparison possible. Different functional styles are characterized by different pace and scale of these changes. The most drastic ones are noticeable in the conversational style. There are fewer changes in journalism, but the boundaries between genres and communicative styles are not absolute giving rise to hybrid genres and numerous incorporations of other styles into the 'classic' styles.

Krongauz views language not only as a means of communication but also as a potent instrument of influence and power. Every new regime tries to create its own style, change the acceptable rhetoric. He cites as an example the "newspeak" invented by Orwell in his dystopian world. In the modern world, social currents have intercepted this tool and started to invent new words and discourses that are considered acceptable to talk about several things. These are politically correct, feminist or ecologically friendly discourses. Meanwhile, the authorities cannot withstand this linguistic competition, they do not have time to create the language acceptable for conversation with the society, and they are always lagging. The idea at the core of these linguistic novelties is that

through language we can change how people think and how they see the world. It goes without saying that it is not simple, yet these attempts still change a lot of issues in the society and raise numerous discussions. "Social movements are the center for the formation of a new language, politicians are more likely to pick it up and use this language, but not to create it".

This thought-provoking discussion about changes affecting the functional styles was followed by a dialogue with **Professor Andrey Lipgart**, the Dean of the Philological Faculty at Moscow State University, a specialist in functional stylistics. Since the character of communication has drastically changed with the appearance of the Internet, its practices were affected by that as well; the Internet, supposed to be the boon bringing people together, in fact divides them depriving their communication of the whole wealth of nonverbal information. Being dismissed for a long time the latter turned out to be critical for the verbal information processing as the year of pandemic has demonstrated. Language has been seen as a mere tool, which itself may deteriorate the very understanding of styles, the norm, and their functions. This all may potentially induce the evolution of functional styles themselves.

Professor Lipgart starts with delineating the visibility of changes and the evolution of functional styles. First of all, the telegraph style of communication in social networks is in fact the conversational style that has been there for decades. Previously, spoken language was not recorded, but now it is manifested through social networks as they fix the language of communication and not the literary written style. Secondly, there is the question of the functional styles proper and their development through larger periods of time. The problem with novel technologies is not in the way of communication (people used to exchange letters, for example or read books much more). The 'drama' is about the so-called "clip thinking". The more a person is exposed to high quality texts, which are not simple by all means, the better he will be further at analyzing, comprehending, and conceptualizing complex texts. And the latter part is of utmost importance for teaching purposes.

Given that styles emerge and are recognized as distinct in human societies, the level of society development, of the sophisticatedness and readiness to discuss certain questions determines the palette of styles existing. The primitive tribes may have language, yet it is naïve to expect that they will use some complex styles to discuss nature, like the scientific one. The communication style exists in nearly all the languages, yet the official or scientific style appears much later when the society is ready in terms of the content. Once all the styles get formed in hundreds of years, they are used to a certain extent by each speaker. Functional styles do not necessarily change with the development of societies and the emergence of new knowledge.

Functional styles may change and even emerge depending on the social demand. For example, in England in the 14th century, there formed the conditions for the Reformation nearly a century and a half ahead of Europe. There were many scholars who were ready to question the authority of the papacy and translate the Bible with the activity of John Wycliffe and his followers. This social trend was in line with the purposes of English kings and necessities to stop communication with Rome. Therefore, the rulers encouraged the activities of scholars and translators. Ultimately, it led to the prime example of 'stylistic intervention', which is the King James Bible being introduced into the mass consciousness and language. Concluding, functional styles are not the drivers of social or ideological changes, but the changes are the drivers of any development, changes, or evolution of functional styles.

Professor Svetlana Ter-Minasova points out that the Internet is a great modern innovation, but as all the great innovations it has both benefits and costs. Everyone who studies the Internet knows Mark Prensky, an American writer and author of the article "On the Horizon". In this article, he referred to the younger generation as to "digital natives": for them, the Internet is comfortable

and familiar environment, because they were born already in it. Despite all the disadvantages that come along, the Internet is possibly the most revolutionary development for human communication, because it has made it possible to connect people of all ages and from all parts of the world. However, Fyodor Tyutchev said in one of his poems, “You will not grasp her with your mind / Or cover with a common label / Russia is one of a kind”; Russia’s historical path is unique and it is peculiar in the digital revolution as well. Nowadays, the unprecedented shift in education complicates the situation: professors have to teach virtually “foreigners”, because many of the teachers are not simply “digital immigrants” (generation of their students’ parents) but rather “digital dinosaurs” (generation of their students’ grandparents).

Systems of language teaching in Russia have changed a lot, and they are still open to new changes. In the Soviet system of teaching English as a second language, which raised many of current professors, it was enough to introduce grammar and lexis, because communication was hardly possible within the Iron Curtain; materials for language teaching and learning were available in the form of classical literature. In Post-Soviet academia this disproportion was resolved, and the communicative language teaching approach was introduced. Now the question is how to adapt the teaching material so that it could be more digestible to a “digital native”. Professor Ter-Minasova sees the answers in avoiding “scientism” and overcomplication, and in creative harnessing of autonomous learning with the help of the Internet.

Distance education, or e-learning, has its substantial inconveniences – for example, the lack of the possibility to track the involvement of students. However, in such an extraordinary situation it is better than nothing; communication is communication whatever form it takes, and hopefully the current situation is not forever and is something to be described in future novels as what we managed to survive.

Professor Olga Alexandrova, the head of the English Department at Moscow State University, deepens the discussion by taking a cognitive perspective. The end of the 20th century was the time when modern linguistic trends were established on the crossroads of and in opposition to “generative grammar” and functional studies (A.I. Smirnitsky, O.S. Akhmanova). Prof. Alexandrova reminded the audience about the history behind the development of cognitive linguistics approach starting with the 1996 book “A Brief Dictionary of Cognitive Terms” («Краткий словарь когнитивных терминов») edited by Elena Koubriakova. Even though it was published in 1996, which is 25 years from now, it is still relevant. A notable aspect of this dictionary is the way the entries are composed: rather than giving brief definitions, this book provides one-two page analysis of every concept. Importantly, cognitive linguistic methodology has evolved into two different schools, traditionally referred to as American and European. Aside from this distinction, there is yet another dichotomy within Russian linguistic studies as such: “linguistics” and “the science of language”. The latter pays more attention to everything that is purely human, because every human being has their unique set of feelings, perception and cultural basis. Yuri Stepanov, an outstanding Russian linguist, said in one of his publications that even though we all live in single objective reality, every person still sees it through the lens of their own mindset and feelings. Without focusing on human matters, it is hardly possible to grasp the nature of the language and the way we express our attitude to things.

The situation with the pandemic and online education clearly showed that the total relocation of the whole educational process into digital dimension is hardly possible without losing a significant part of an essential human component; this is not only the teacher’s, but also students’ attitude to the current state of affairs. In online interaction, the teacher and students are deprived of a significant part of both communication and educational process, being unable to see and hear each

other in a natural way. Cognitive linguistics with its anthropocentrism is a promising and broadly applicable branch of linguistic studies even as a part of curricula at non-linguistic faculties: nowadays, a great number of jobs require communicative linguistic skills, which is closely linked with the cognitive linguistic approach to language-learning. What is most important about successful communication, especially international and cross-cultural, is something that was called “bipolar communication” by Galina Molchanova: when you communicate with representatives of another culture, your objective is not only to express your own message, but also understand the socio-cultural basis of your counterpart.

Larisa Chizhova, the head of General and Comparative Linguistics Department, spoke about the global shift in the ways of communication and continued the discussion in the cognitive linguistic vein. She quoted George Lakoff, saying that we live in the linguistic environment that is ever-changing irrespective of our attitude to those changes; social changes affect communication in general and everyone’s speech along with it. The key question is the speed of the change and where is the line that marks the decease of one language and emergence of another. The answer to these questions is that any language is alive: the accumulation of all the changes does not alter the system of the language, i.e., language code or systemic relations that help the participants of communication understand each other.

It is a well-known fact that different substructures of language are exposed to changes to different degrees: the lexical level is able to change at a great pace, while the grammatical level is changing slowly. However, grammar changes still take place, and the English language, with its immense influence on economics and culture worldwide and globalizing power, is contributing to grammar change in other languages as well; the Russian language is no exception, and some grammatical patterns of the English language are now embraced by it.

Some of the changes may lead to the loss of the roots of some cultures, when people are not able to “keep in touch” with their predecessors any more. For example, Russian-speaking people of the 21st century are often wrong when they think that they truly understand Pushkin, as well as English-speaking people generally do not understand Shakespeare properly.

However, we should not be pessimistic and fear losing all the connections because there is certainly a grain of truth in Chomsky’s view that language in the most general sense is not changing at all: the generation gap that we are witnessing today is certainly not as fatal as it may seem, because different cultures and different generations share the same wellbeing, with some particular segments being divided into certain elements. Elements themselves are universal, what can vary is the way how these elements are expressed in each language. For example, the action of reading presupposes somebody who is reading, what is being read, etc. in whatever language we take, irrespective of the forms in which the elements are expressed.

There are certain ontological values: the concepts of good and evil, intergenerational and familial relationships, attitude to the truth, justice and power, which are different at different stages of history. In this regard, the cultural code is able to survive only provided that all the cultural values are preserved with the so-called “precedential texts” that perpetuate these values. Preservation of precedential texts is maintained by social institutions.

Despite the fact that the menace of the digital matrix displacing analog human mind seems to be a phenomenon of the 21st century, it has existed before in history, for example, within the philosophy of Francis Bacon or physicists such as Isaac Newton, who regarded the human as something unimportant and unworthy of detailed consideration. According to George Herbert Mead, there are different types of the Self: the reflection in the mirror (when a person is willing to be honest and to see himself as who they really are), the others’ image of ourselves, and finally, a mask that we put

on to meet the expectations or assessment of the others. The digital matrix means that the mirror reflection is overpowered by the mask for practical purposes.

Artificial intelligence may surpass human mind in respect of speed, but it will never surpass it in respect of profundity. Meanwhile, metaphor is what makes us human, because animals have linguistic codes as well. In human language, the same code unit can have a countless variety of different meanings.

Concluding, all speakers agreed that the raised questions are pressing and important, and everyone approached them from different perspectives, seeing human language as the crucial aspect of human identity forming the basis of civilization. However, it is doubtful that the answers could be easily found. We are indeed in the eye of the storm, but it is imperative to understand, conceptualise what is going on to foresee our future. The quest for the answers is of utmost importance.

It is noteworthy that unlike many online formal academic conferences the “Linguistics of distancing” conference was not held in the zoom-screen-only format, with presentations following one another, with short reviews and little or no opportunity to ask questions, but in the format of an inherently humane and intelligent discussion of the really pressing issues by the top-notch experts in linguistics, culture, anthropology and history studies. Each speaker’s presentation was organized not as an ordinary ‘speaker-only’ mode, but a dialogue between two or more specialists, with Prof. Konurbaev leading the discussion. The thought thus was unfolding gradually revealing the full cloth of scientific narration bit by bit. Moreover, the very format of a *blog conference*, with professionally prerecorded discussions uploaded on the specially designed site, makes it possible to watch the lectures in a good quality afterwards and ask questions in the comment section. Thus, the conference at large has become a fully-fledged, thoughtful discussion with a long-lasting impact on the scientific community expanding beyond the conference itself.

The legacy of the conference could be presented with simple numbers speaking louder than words. More than 22 thousand views on Facebook in just a few months, thousands of likes and comments. This is the revelation of both: the need to search for the answers and the pleasure to see intelligent people trying to find these answers in a fruitful conversation.

Thus, this blog conference seems to be an ideal marriage between a serious scientific event and an online interactive mode of communication. I would like to argue that the digital formats of all kinds of online events are not meant to substitute for physical interactions entirely, but are rather to reshape how research communities are able to communicate on serious issues. Various new *hybrid formats* are bound to emerge.

About the author:

Anastasia Sharapkova is Cand. Sci (Philology), senior lecturer in the Department of English linguistics at Lomonosov Moscow State University (Russia).