

**IS UNDERSTATEMENT A CONCEPT OR A CATEGORY?***Ekaterina V. Vlasova*MGIMO University (Odintsovsky Branch), Odintsovo, Russia,  
[e.vlasova@odin.mgimo.ru](mailto:e.vlasova@odin.mgimo.ru)**Abstract**

The aim of the study is to define the British phenomenon "understatement". The relevance of this research is due to the desire to better understand the English character, which still remains a mystery to representatives of other cultures due to a special historically established, indirect, veiled, and sometimes ambiguous tradition of communication. Understatement directly serves to create this ambiguity, causing enormous difficulties in communicating both foreigners with the British and the British themselves among themselves. The main methods of research are: descriptive and structural methods, component and definitional analysis. The results of the study showed that understatement represents a nationally specific communicative category which contains the attitudes and rules of speech behavior of the British and participates in the regulation of the communicative process. Understatement has a certain structure and includes verbal and non-verbal means of expressing communicative content aimed at harmonious, conflict-free communication. The theoretical significance lies in a clear definition of the British phenomenon "understatement", in identifying its speech strategies, linguistic and extralinguistic ways of expression. The practical significance is expressed in using the results of the research in lecture courses of the theory of intercultural communication, stylistics and general linguistics.

**Keywords:** *The British phenomenon, understatement, nedootsenka, concept, category*

**Introduction**

The relevance of the work is due to the lack of a unified understanding of the British phenomenon of "understatement", which is necessary for the reader to correctly interpret the true intentions of native speakers. An attempt is made to correctly define this phenomenon, analyze the content, structure and ways of its expression.

The actual material of the work is theoretical studies of modern linguists of the XXI century and examples from five modern works of fiction by popular British writers Stephen Fry, Sophie Kinsella, Joseph Connolly and Jonathan Coe are given as illustrations of the phenomenon under study. The choice of the analyzed novels is due to the British origin of the authors, whose language helps to better understand the features of the use of the phenomenon we are investigating. In addition, the action of all the novels takes place in England, where the main characters are Englishmen, representatives, mainly of the middle and upper classes. From the speech of the characters of the novels, 150 contexts of the use of understatement were recorded by the continuous sampling method. In this article we will focus on 6 examples illustrating the theoretical part.

*Historical Roots of Understatement*

Understatement is associated with the specific way of life of the British, perhaps with the existing inequality relations that have developed at the initial stage of the formation of the nation, with the tendency of the British to underestimate the reaction to the situation, which is confirmed by a huge number of works devoted to the study of the culture of the English people. As the research material has shown, scientists distinguish two periods in the history of the development of understatement: the Anglo-Saxon period, which represents the Middle Ages in the history of English literature (V-XI centuries) and the Enlightenment era (XVIII century) [1;14].

According to historical sources, the Anglo-Saxons were very sophisticated in the skill of oral communication - it was on this that their culture was built. They had to rely only on their memory and speech. Therefore, their oral traditions were highly developed. The Anglo-Saxons loved to express their thoughts subtly, originally and even ambiguously, highly appreciated the incompleteness of 'understatement', revered all sorts of riddles and poems that passed from hand to hand. These tendencies of the Anglo-Saxons testified to such characteristic traits of character as a certain cunning and resourcefulness. It is from this period that understatement originates, reflecting the play on words,

hints and understatement in the expression of feelings and thoughts of the Anglo-Saxons, their special property of speaking.

Understatement can be traced in early ancient German poems, such as “Beowulf”, where it reflects the peculiarities of the worldview of the heroic era, ridicules enemies and demonstrates the strength, resilience and restraint of the nation. The Germans felt the taste of heroic deeds; they welcomed the valiant defeat and revered the head, which was bloody, but not bowed. Pride and enthusiastic boasting in the face of the enemy are one kind of expression of triumph; stoic restraint and endurance in trouble represent another kind of victory; and understatement serves as a way of expressing both types of fame.

At the initial stage, understatement performs the function of a polite, etiquette-required softening of the utterance, acts as a kind of emphase, creating expressiveness of speech, emphasizing the irony of words and the contempt hidden behind them, bitter and cruel mockery. Over time, understatement turns into a frozen formula, into a stamp.

Considering the history of the origin of understatement, A. Hubler (1983) dwells on another historical period. Based on data from the Oxford Dictionary, he notes that for the first time the word “understatement” itself was recorded in 1799 in the periodical *Monthly Review*, which was one of the leading publications of the XVIII century. Understatement appeared at a time when the philosophy and ethics of Enlightenment took shape and became widespread in the country, when the issues of education, behavior in society, and the art of enlightened conversation became particularly important (H. Fielding 1742; A. Smith 1759). Empathy became the main moral principle of the English bourgeoisie emerging at that time. In such a socio-cultural context, understatement becomes a way to show your own restraint, good manners and modesty. The focus of understatement on the interlocutor, on the listening partner, the ethical necessity of its use in the evaluative context of praise and criticism is noted. Thus, the ethical implication of the use of understatement is characteristic of this period.

The period of the XI-XII centuries, which is not mentioned in the above-mentioned works, is still important. This is the period of the formation of a courtly chivalrous romance in Britain, designed for refined secular tastes. The requirement of courtliness (courtesie) in the code of chivalry is the concept of secularism, politeness, manners, familiarity with poetry, music, the ability to feel gracefully. The ideas and rituals of courtesy go back to the Greek and Roman models of behavior, according to which behavior is controlled and changed in the presence of an authoritative person. In the Middle Ages, the values of ceremonial and modesty may also have penetrated into the secular world through monasteries with their strict discipline. Knowledge about politeness and etiquette became necessary for the emerging secular and peace-loving Western European society of the XI - XII centuries. Therefore, all the accumulated knowledge in this area was gathered together, which provided a huge number of armed and ambitious knights with peaceful means for duels, created an opportunity for them to play courtesy, avoiding conflicts. Their violation, on the contrary, created a threat to the peaceful settlement of disputes and led to fights. Thus, secular manners were a necessary means to achieve peace and conflict-free existence of the inhabitants of Britain during the Norman conquest. The code of courtesy and secular manners acted as a counterbalance to the code of military valor in the peaceful field.

### **Materials and Methods**

Understatement is widely represented in modern English, which reflects the temperament of the English, their unwillingness to express their thoughts too categorically (M. Nicholson 1957).

V. Ovchinnikov notes that when the British talk about the “stiff upper lip”, there are two concepts behind it: firstly, the ability to control oneself is the cult of self-control and, secondly, the ability to respond appropriately to life situations is the cult of prescribed behavior.

The observance of restraint in behavior and judgments is a reflection of a sign of respect for the interlocutor (V. Ovchinnikov 1980). The author draws attention to the fact that the British avoid categorical statements and denials with the help of various kinds of inserted phrases such as “it seems to me”, “I think”, the words “very” and “pretty”, softening the sharpness of judgment. So one of the most important features of English speech is the lack of categoricity, which acts as a category of communicative competence, that is, the code of communication adopted in a social group.

T. V. Larina also points out that in “Anglo-Saxon culture such qualities as restraint and self-control are valued” [1;16] . It is not customary for the British to share their problems, troubles and

upset each other. This cultural value is reflected in the proverb: “Laugh and the world laughs with you: weep and you weep alone (Laugh and the whole world will laugh with you, cry and you will cry alone)” [1;16].

It should be noted that foreigners are very sensitive to violations of socio-cultural norms of communication, as they believe that they are violated intentionally with the aim of causing offense or insult. Therefore, an incorrect understanding of understatement leads to the fact that this phenomenon is attributed to various gentlemanly tricks and pretense (M. Eastman 1936; D. Brogan 1945). Researchers note that Americans and Russians are annoyed by the British commitment to underestimation. In their opinion, the British are not able to express their emotions simply and clearly, as circumstances require. The habit of the British to pretend that they are devoid of feelings peculiar to ordinary, normal people, is not liked by representatives of other cultures.

D.W. Brogan in his book “The English People. Impressions and Observations” (New York, Knopf, 1945) explains to Americans the peculiarities of the English character as follows:

“The English habit of understatement, of allusion, of apparent moderation in statement combined with inflexible maintenance of the original point of view, is not only an irritating mannerism but a real cause of misunderstanding. ...Certain things can be said with a smile that cannot be said with a sneer; & there must be reciprocity of the right of criticism. The national habit of understatement that is often mistaken (even by Englishmen) for modesty, leads to misunderstanding” [1;17]. In his opinion, understatement, which has an ambiguous character, can cause misunderstanding.

The ambiguous nature of understatement is also emphasized by other researchers (R. Breitenstein 1970; T. Pr 1955; J. Mikes 1946), who note the difficulty of understanding this phenomenon by representatives of other cultures [1;17].

Thus, understatement, which at the initial stage had an ethical function, acquired social and cultural functions over time and developed into a “mask” at a later stage, allowing to maintain friendly relations, remove conflict situations and at the present stage is often a frozen formula (stamp) reflecting the character of the nation.

In modern research, understatement is defined as an indicator of the flexibility of the mind and ingenuity of the British. The phenomenon we are studying is also used in modern English, demonstrating the innate ability of native speakers to express their feelings and thoughts with restraint, demonstrating their character and temperament.

#### *Modern interpretation of the term "understatement"*

In modern linguistic literature, there are various interpretations of the term "understatement" – "omission", representing verbalized/basic and non-verbalized/hidden parts [2], "understatement/mitigation" [3], "omission/understatement" - omission-hint and own omission [4], "negative politeness" [5;19]. Some linguists point out that the term "understatement" has no translation into European languages, including Russian. Meiosis, litota, irony, sarcasm are distant analogues of understatement. T.A. Ivushkina and E.V. Vlasova call this phenomenon "nedootsenka", since this term has already been used in the works of linguists of Moscow State University and other scientific studies. In addition, the term "nedootsenka" retains one root in the words nedootsenka/understatement and pereotsenka/overstatement, representing tracing words in the Russian language [1;12-13]. Thus, for us, understatement is an underestimation that demonstrates the understatement of true information in order to elicit a specific reaction from the interlocutor. Understatement is a veiled author's attitude to the events taking place in order to maintain a friendly disposition between the interlocutors.

## **Results and discussion**

### *Understatement – a concept or a category?*

Most linguists define understatement as a (linguamental /linguocultural/linguospecific) concept [7;5], other researchers believe that this term is a (communicative/ sociolinguistic/ linguoculturological/linguopragmatic) category [8; 9; 10]. In our article, we will look at how the concept and the category relate in order to clearly define the phenomenon under study.

In modern linguistic literature there is a large number of studies devoted to the term "concept" [11; 12; 13; 14; 15]. This term is quite often applied to any objects of a conceptual nature, replacing the terms "notion" and "category". The term "concept" is mixed with the term "notion", since the primary meaning of these words in the Russian language coincides: "concept" is a tracing paper from the Latin language *conceptus* – "notion" [16;5-8]. It should be noted that in scientific discourse, the above-mentioned words are represented by terms of different sciences: "concept", which originally appeared in mathematical logic, is fixed and used in linguoculturology, and "notion" is used mainly in philosophy and logic. Initially, the Latin word *conceptus*, used in the meaning of "grain", means "first sense" and cannot be identified with the term "notion", which is defined as a formed object of thought. Based on this, the concept is a mental formation that precedes the concept.

The category was first studied by Aristotle and was considered as a unit of scientific thinking, which assumed a more general notion. Aristotle identified 10 basic categories, which were reduced by the Stoics and Kant to 4: "quantity", "quality", "space" and "time". It should be noted that in modern cognitive linguistics, these categories are defined as concepts. Thus, concepts represent the initial cognitive formations that served as the basis for the emergence of concepts. Notions, in turn, are a means of generating categories.

Categories, unlike notions, have more power / volume) and are cognitive units that establish factors and stages of cognition. Categories systematize knowledge and cognitive process, and also subdivide whole classes of notions into rubrics. Thus, categories as cognitive structures belong to a higher level of generality, notions – to the average, concepts – to the low.

Based on the above, understatement can be considered as a concept and as a category. E.P. Zakharova notes that each science is characterized by its own categories with a certain structure and content [17;87]. Thus, understatement can be classified as a communicative category. We consider understatement to be a category of speech communication, which includes a number of behavioral rules of the British and regulates the communication process. The category under study has its own specific communicative content, which is expressed using verbal and non-verbal means.

The attitudes and rules of English speech behavior are contained in the communicative/speech strategies of understatement. Strategies for mitigating negative emotions aim to reduce the categoricity of the statement and create a softened form of unpleasant information. Speech strategies for mitigating positive characteristics are associated with the cultural tradition of native speakers to avoid showing a positive assessment [1;39-41].

Let's consider the example of a speech strategy to mitigate the message of not very pleasant information – the girl's illness:

“A few weeks ago, she had a bit of a ... funny turn. So the doctor asked me to keep an eye on her, that's all”<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, the speaker is trying to find the necessary words to hide a brain tumor. Understatement is realized with the help of a pause, expressed by an ellipsis, through the adverb “*a bit of*” and the phrase “*that's all*”. In fact, “*funny turn*” is nothing more than an epileptic seizure, which is not customary to talk about in British society.

The next example presents the mitigating negative information for ethical reasons:

“She just noticed that you were from a different ... culture, I suppose.”<sup>2</sup>

Due to the unwillingness to focus on the addressee's nationality, the addressee speaks about his belonging to another culture. Understatement, expressed by using the phrases: “*I suppose, just noticed*”, reduces the speaker's responsibility for categorical information.

The category under the study is expressed using linguistic and extralinguistic means. Linguistic ways of expressing understatement include lexical means (emotional-evaluative adverb + adjective; moderators: *a bit of/ a sort of*, etc.); syntactic means (ellipsis, dash) and stylistic means (litota, irony), etc. Let's focus on the lexical means of expressing understatement:

“He was fairly breathless when finally he fetched up at the thing – just one girl being served.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See: Coe J. Number 11 // VikingPress, 2015 // URL: [https://royallib.com/read/Coe\\_Jonathan/number\\_11.html#0](https://royallib.com/read/Coe_Jonathan/number_11.html#0)p. 9 (accessed: 12/20/2021).

<sup>2</sup>See: Fry S. The Stars` Tennis Balls / Hutchinson, 2000. p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>See: Connolly J. Summer Things. – London, 1998. p. 133.

In this context, the condition of a “*fairly breathless*” boy standing in line for ice cream is described. With the help of understatement, expressed by a combination of an emotional-evaluative adverb and an adjective, the speaker indicates that the child is very tired.

Let’s consider the syntactic means of expressing understatement:

“He’s...” Mat thinks for a bit. “You know.”

I quell an urge to retort “No, I *don’t* know, that’s the point. But that would ruin the mood, so instead I say brightly, “What about your mother? What’s she like?”

“Oh.” Matt thinks for a while again.

“She’s... You know. It’s hard to say”<sup>4</sup>.

A man does not want to openly talk to a girl about the habits, character, behavior and worldview of his parents – representatives of the upper classes. The man is convinced that his chosen one, a representative of the middle classes, will not like his parents, so he deliberately interrupts his speech with the help of pauses expressed by ellipsis and the softening phrase “*you know*”. It should be noted that native speakers often use the expression “*you know*” as a way to fill a pause in a conversation if they are not sure how or what to say next.

The extralinguistic way of expressing understatement is represented by a nonverbal means – a behavioral reaction to a situation:

“Oh, hi,” I say, speaking for the first time since I was drenched. “Here’s your laptop. I hope it isn’t wet.”

I hold it out—it isn’t wet at all—and the guy steps forward to take it. He’s looking from me to the ravaged ceiling to the puddles of water and plaster, with increasing disbelief. “What *happened*?”

“There was a slight ceiling incident,” I say, trying to downplay it. But like a Greek chorus, all the other customers eagerly start filling him in.

“The ceiling fell in.”<sup>5</sup>

In this example, the heroine, showing ironic modesty, speaks of the incident with the fallen ceiling as an insignificant event. She does not swear with the owner of the cafe, but simply calmly asks to give her a glass of mint tea:

“Don’t worry,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I’m not going to *sue*. But I wouldn’t mind another mint tea.”<sup>6</sup>

Let’s consider another example of a behavioral reaction to a situation:

“*Attacked*” I nearly drop my phone in horror. “Are you — *What happened*?”

“It’s really nothing,” he says at once. “Some guys decided they wanted my wallet, that’s all. Only I seem to have done in my ankle, and I can’t move and I’m a bit out of the way here. Thankfully they were too repelled by my ancient phone to take that.”<sup>7</sup>

A man with a broken ankle restrained: “*I’m a bit out of the way*”, humorously: “*Thankfully they were too repelled by my ancient phone to take that*” tells about the attack on him, hiding his ill health: “*It’s really nothing*”. Thus, the character demonstrates a strict prohibition on expressing excessive emotions and seriousness, for fear of appearing too emotional and pretentious [18;322].

Based on the above, it can be concluded that understatement as a communicative category determines and influences the process of communication and the choice of verbal and non-verbal language ways of expression. Understatement reflects the formed manner of behavior of the British, not aimed at maintaining a friendly disposition between the interlocutors.

## Conclusion

The conducted research of understatement allows us to draw the following conclusions:

<sup>4</sup> See: Kinsella S. *Love Your Life*. A Penguin Random House Company / UK, London, 2020. p. 111-112.

<sup>5</sup> See: Kinsella, S. *I owe you one*. London. Transworld Publishers, 2019. p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See: Kinsella, S. *I owe you one*. London. Transworld Publishers, 2019. p. 230.

1. Understatement appeared in the Middle Ages, developed during the period of chivalric culture and the Enlightenment, when politeness, etiquette and education became necessary for courtesy and avoidance of conflicts.

2. In modern language understatement is interpreted as restraint, silence, mitigation, nedootsenka. We define this phenomenon as "nedootsenka", which is an understatement of true information in order to cause a specific reaction from the interlocutor.

3. In the linguistic literature, understatement is considered as a concept and a category. Categories, in our opinion, have a higher level of generality in contrast to the concept. Categories systematize the cognitive process and divide whole classes of concepts into categories.

4. Understatement is a category of speech containing the attitudes and rules of speech behavior of the British and involved in the regulation of the communicative process. Understatement has a certain structure and includes verbal and nonverbal means of expressing communicative content.

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### **Является ли understatement концептом или категорией?**

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#### **Аннотация**

В статье дается определение британскому феномену “understatement”. Актуальность данного исследования обусловлена желанием лучше понять английский характер, который до сих пор остается загадкой для представителей других культур в силу особой исторически сложившейся, не прямой, завуалированной, а подчас и двусмысленной традиции общения. Недооценка непосредственно служит созданию этой двусмысленности, вызывая огромные трудности в общении как иностранцев с англичанами, так и самих англичан между собой. Основными методами исследования являются: описательный и структурный методы, компонентный и дефиниционный анализ. Результаты исследования показали, что недооценка представляет собой национально специфичную коммуникативную категорию, которая содержит установки и правила речевого поведения британцев и участвует в регуляции коммуникативного процесса. Недооценка имеет определенную структуру и включает в себя вербальные и невербальные средства выражения коммуникативного содержания, направленные на гармоничное, бесконфликтное общение. Теоретическая значимость заключается в четком определении британского феномена “understatement”, в выявлении его речевых стратегий, лингвистических и экстралингвистических способов выражения. Практическая значимость выражается в использовании результатов исследования в лекционных курсах теории межкультурной коммуникации, стилистики и общего языкознания.

***Ключевые слова:*** британский феномен, недосказанность, недооценка, концепт, категория

### **Understatement концепт немесе категориясы ма?**

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#### **Түйіндеме**

Зерттеуде британдық "understatement" феноменін анықтамасы нақтыланады. Бұл зерттеудің өзектілігі ерекше тарихи қалыптасқан, жанама, жасырын және кейде түсініксіз қарым-қатынас дәстүріне байланысты басқа мәдениеттердің өкілдері үшін әлі күнге дейін екіойлылық ағылшын сипатын жақсы түсінуге деген ұмтылысқа негізделген. Дұрыс бағаламау бұл түсініксіздікті құруға тікелей қызмет етеді, бұл шетелдіктердің британдықтармен де, британдықтардың өздері де бір-бірімен қарым-қатынасында үлкен қиындықтар туғызады. Зерттеудің негізгі әдістері сипаттамалық және құрылымдық әдістер, компоненттік және анықтамалық талдау болып табылады. Зерттеу нәтижелері дұрыс бағаламау - бұл британдықтардың сөйлеу мінез-құлық дағдылары мен ережелерін қамтитын және коммуникативті процесті реттеуге қатысатын ұлттық ерекше коммуникативті категория екендігін көрсетті. Дұрыс бағаламау белгілі бір құрылымға ие және үйлесімді, дау-дамайсыз қарым-қатынасқа бағытталған коммуникативті мазмұнды білдірудің вербальды және вербальды емес құралдарын қамтиды. Теориялық маңыздылығы Британдық "understatement" феноменін, оның сөйлеу стратегияларын, лингвистикалық және экстралингвистикалық білдіру тәсілдерін нақтылауда анықталады. Практикалық маңыздылығы зерттеу нәтижелерін мәдениетаралық коммуникация, стилистика және жалпы тіл білімі теориясының дәріс курстарында қолдануда көрінеді.

*Түйін сөздер: британдық феномен, айтылмаған, бағаланбау, концепт, санат*

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