

Verbal behaviour as an indicator of personnel wellbeing

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Tatiana S. Putilovskaya

Cand. Sci. (Psy.), Head of Foreign Languages Department,
State University of Management,
Moscow, Russia

ORCID: 0000-0002-6347-7119

E-mail: ts_putilovskaya@guu.ru

Elena V. Zubareva

Senior Lecturer, State University of Management, Moscow, Russia

ORCID: 0000-0002-1855-3629

E-mail: ev_zubareva@guu.ru

Gulnara M. Kassymova

Dr. Sci. (Ped.), Assoc. Prof., Suleyman Demirel University, Kaskelen,
Kazakhstan

ORCID: 0000-0002-4038-9116

E-mail: gulnara.kassymova@sdu.edu.kz

ABSTRACT

The article examines one of the possible applications of speech activity theory and the text psychological structure as the product of this activity to the research of personnel wellbeing. Very often, an employee's wellbeing status is inaccessible to management. The idea is that the verbal behaviour psychological pattern can be used as an indicator of employee wellbeing status perception. The authors' aim was to develop a text analysis model to be used for revealing the peculiarities of wellbeing perception status; to determine the most diagnostic parameters of the model; and to apply them to the personnel wellbeing assessment. The authors' conclusions are based on analysing

numerous personnel speech samples, which show how the model functions as an instrument for measuring the real quality of wellbeing status perception and how diagnostic the proposed model parameters are. The research of speech samples, which belong to university foreign language trainers from Russia and Kazakhstan, allows us to describe a typical teacher who is not satisfied with career opportunities available, the level of salary and constant management pressure. The results of the study can be applied to practical human resource management and the development of new ways of motivating and training employees in any professional field.

Keywords

Employee wellbeing, empowerment, wellbeing status, professional activity efficiency, psychological comfort, objective indicators, measuring perception, verbal behaviour, speech activity, text components, verbal behaviour model

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Вербальное поведение как индикатор психологического комфорта персонала

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Путиловская Татьяна Сергеевна

Канд. психол. наук, зав. каф. иностранных языков,
Государственный университет управления, г. Москва, Россия

ORCID: 0000-0002-6347-7119

E-mail: ts_putilovskaya@guu.ru

Зубарева Елена Вячеславовна

Ст. преп., Государственный университет управления,
г. Москва, Россия

ORCID: 0000-0002-1855-3629

E-mail: ev_zubareva@guu.ru

Касымова Гульнара Маматбековна

Д-р пед. наук, ассоц. проф., Университет имени Сулеймана
Демиреля, г. Каскелен, Республика Казахстан

ORCID: 0000-0002-4038-9116

E-mail: gulnara.kassymova@sdu.edu.kz

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассмотрено одно из возможных направлений применения теории речевой деятельности и психологической структуры текста как продукта этой деятельности к исследованию благополучия персонала. Очень часто статус благополучия сотрудника недоступен руководству. Идея заключается в том, что психологическая модель вербального поведения может быть использована в качестве индикатора восприятия статуса благополучия. Цель авторов состояла в разработке модели анализа текста, с помощью которой можно выявить особенности восприятия статуса благополучия; определении наиболее диагностических параметров модели и применении их для оценки благополучия персонала. Выводы авторов основаны на исследованиях многочисленных

образцов речи сотрудников, которые помогают понять, как модель работает в роли инструмента для измерений реального качества восприятия статуса благополучия, и насколько диагностическими являются предлагаемые параметры модели. Исследование образцов речи преподавателей иностранного языка вузов России и Казахстана позволяют описать среднестатистического преподавателя, неудовлетворенного возможностями карьерного роста, зарплатой и постоянным давлением со стороны руководства. Результаты исследования могут применимы в области практического управления персоналом и разработки новых способов мотивации и обучения сотрудников в любой сфере профессиональной деятельности.

Ключевые слова

Благополучие сотрудников, наделение полномочиями, статус благополучия, эффективность профессиональной деятельности, психологический комфорт, объективные показатели, измерение восприятия, вербальное поведение, речевая деятельность, компоненты текста, модель вербального поведения

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of employee wellbeing is one of the key issues of personnel management which has a definite impact on the efficiency of professional activities, job involvement, labour productivity, employee satisfaction and sound corporate culture of a company. Employee wellbeing is generally considered to be the result of physical and psychological health, good career opportunities and constant growth, comfortable and friendly office environment, and sufficient financial support. One of the key factors of personnel wellbeing is psychological comfort based on job satisfaction, self-confidence, absence of stress in the workplace and willingness to work for the sake of the company, this work being mutually beneficial for the employee and the company. The appearance of numerous wellbeing programmes and strategies of effective personnel management proves the importance of the concept.

In order to work out an appropriate wellbeing programme it is necessary to analyse the whole scope of problems and negative outcomes, which are sometimes very difficult to reveal. Partly, it is due to the tendency of some people to hide the real attitude to their own status perception. To a certain extent, it is the result of the fact that some employees are quite unconscious about their own feelings and attitudes or tend to overlook them. In both cases we need some parameters which could serve as objective indicators of personnel wellbeing.

Our hypothesis is that verbal behaviour could be regarded as a reliable indicator of employee wellbeing. We worked out a model of verbal behaviour analysis, which we decided to apply to the description of personnel perception of wellbeing.

The first aim of this article is to describe the principles of such a model formation. The second aim is to pick up the first, or preliminary, evidence of its applicability and to show how the model works as an indicator of employee wellbeing. The third aim is to lay the foundation for further joint research in the area of human resources management and verbal communication. The principal tasks of the work are 1) to create a model of verbal behaviour and to point out specific parameters to be used as indicators of employee wellbeing; 2) to work out diagnostic principles of applying the model to the assessment of personnel verbal behaviour as a reflection of its wellbeing perception.

METHODOLOGY

The most important part of the present research is fully based on the theory of speech activity worked out by I. A. Zimnyaya [2001]. According to this theory, a text can be regarded as the product of such types of speech activity as speaking and writing. A very important assumption we rely on is that a text always reflects all the peculiarities of the speaker or writer and is an objective

reflection of their verbal activity. A text is characterized by a combination of three major aspects: subject matter, semantic content and language design, each having its own parameters of assessment. The components and parameters of verbal behaviour analysis are supposed to be appropriate enough to use them for evaluating the wellbeing perception of employees.

We have to emphasise that the idea of using the text as a product of speech activity is not new and is used in different areas of linguistic psychology. For example, it was applied to the analysis of the fiction text, and it was proved that when creating a work of art, a writer does not only describe reality, but adds his own specific reflection of the surrounding world [Nurullina and Usmanova, 2018]. So, the first research method consists in creating a verbal model of personnel wellbeing analysis and selecting the parameters most suitable for this purpose.

The second research method is observing and note-taking followed by analysing numerous examples of speech patterns produced by the university staff who specialise in foreign language teaching. These written and oral examples were primarily taken from the minutes and recordings of department meetings and in less formal situations of community discussions.

The third method is interviewing the university professors and tutors aimed at finding out their attitude to wellbeing and assessing the level of their own subjective perception of personal wellbeing. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions aimed at revealing the attitude of the staff to their wellbeing status, and pointing out the most appropriate verbal ways and means of expressing this attitude.

RESULTS

The first significant result of the present research is related to the concept of employee wellbeing and the way it is perceived by personnel. The survey of academic literature shows that wellbeing is generally regarded as a complex structure which consists of such components as engagement in professional activities, meaningfulness of the working process, job efficiency and personal growth, relationships with the professional community and favourable emotional background. Martin Seligman, a famous psychologist who put forward the theory of learned helplessness, developed the so-called PERMA model (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments), which is very widely used by human resources practitioners. When employees assess these positions in a positive way, they experience the feeling of job satisfaction, fulfillment, enthusiasm, absorption, dedication and even happiness which is directly associated with subjective and psychological wellbeing [Kahn, 1990; Linley et al., 2009; Eldor and Vigoda-Gadot, 2017; Zakhарова and Leonova, 2020]. It can be brought about

by a wide scope of environmental conditions which include cross-cultural issues, age and gender attitudes, the extent of personal engagement at work, and the degree of technological comfort due to innovations. The concept of subjective wellbeing depends on a number of psychological characteristics of a person, such as cognitive functions and temperament, and on his goals, specific cultural background, ability to adapt to stress and other difficulties and to cope with them [Diener et al., 1999]. For example, the study of interaction with distressed network members showed that with the help of special interventions providers can be encouraged to make use of high quality verbal person-centered messages [Harvey-Knowles, 2018], which means that verbal mechanisms have considerable impact on behaviour.

High level of adaptability and favourable psychological features are the first step on the way to controlling and moderating one's own perceptions of wellbeing and hiding emotions a person is experiencing. Besides, certain cultures avoid any type of manifestation of personal feelings and sharing their attitudes with other people, especially those who occupy senior positions. For this reason, it is sometimes very difficult to reveal what employees really think of their wellbeing status, and it is necessary to turn to various research technologies which could serve as diagnostic tools. One of such technologies is verbal analysis based on the theory of speech activity put forward by I. A. Zimnyaya, a famous Russian academician in the field of psychology.

Probably, the most valuable result of our research deals with the verbal model creation. For this purpose, we used the structure of a text as the product of writing and speaking. Let us look at the components of the text structure mainly identified by I. A. Zimnyaya [2001].

The first of them is the subject matter, or content, of the text. It is the component by means of which a speaker or writer reflects the surrounding world and reality. It is characterized by the following parameters:

- scope of information measured by means of the so-called information saturation index (volume of information per volume of the text);
- depth of reflection measured in the number of links between elements of the content;
- appropriacy measured in the number of links with exact reflection of the surrounding reality.

The second component is the semantic content of the text which reveals its predicative relationships. The main unit of this component measurement is the so-called predication which expresses the character and type of interrelations between different elements of the content. According to this criterion the semantic content includes a group of parameters related to various types of links:

- total number of predications;
- the number of implicit and explicit ideas;
- cause-and-effect relationships;

- evaluation relationships;
- communicative orientation of the text.

It is noteworthy that the semantic content is mainly revealed by means of verbal structures, whereas the subject matter is generally associated with nominative structures.

The third component is the verbal design of the text which encompasses the following parameters:

- text volume;
- complexity of thought measured in the number of complex and compound sentences, enumerations, complex verbal constructions, etc.;
- text cohesion;
- text modality;
- cause-and-effect lexis;
- emotional colouring of the text;
- the percentage of different parts of speech per volume of the text;
- degree of formality;
- intonation pattern (refers to speaking).

According to our hypothesis, all the three components of the verbal behaviour model as well as their parameters described above have different diagnostic power which depends on how sincere an employee is and how much he is willing to hide his real attitude. It also depends on how conscious an employee is of his own wellbeing status. We are apt to presuppose that the verbal design of the text within the scope of its parameters is generally more indicative of wellbeing attitude in comparison with the other components of the text psychological structure. At least, it especially refers to the aspects of verbal behaviour which are not fully reflected and controlled by a person.

The second essential result of our research is related to the analysis of numerous examples of verbal behaviour of the university professors and tutors recorded mainly during the department meetings. They revealed peculiarities in each component of the text as the product of speech activity. It is worth mentioning that the subject matter of the text does not generally depend on the wellbeing perception of the personnel. No matter whether the employees have a positive or a negative perception of their own wellbeing, they produce texts of approximately the same volume, depth and adequacy of reflection and the same number of links. These parameters are only related to the type of issue discussed and to how detailed the utterance is expected to be.

As far as the semantic content is concerned, all the parameters revealed different diagnostic power. The total number of predication does not actually depend on the wellbeing status perception, whereas the other parameters gave different results some of which were quite predictable. First of all, communicative orientation of the text tended to be rather diverse with a significantly increased number of explanations, persuasions and utterances of informative type. Most texts which are aimed

at describing wellbeing status perception contain a considerable number of phrases expressing cause-and-effect relationships, statements aimed at evaluating phenomena and events, and a slightly higher number of phrases with implicit ideas.

The most interesting results concern the verbal design of the text in which some parameters, such as the text volume, the complexity of the text and the level of cohesion remain unchanged, while the text modality, cause-and-effect lexis, as well as words and expressions which give additional emotional colouring of the text increase significantly. Besides, utterances related to the wellbeing status perception contain a great number of adjectives, modal verbs and words which express modality, numerals and certain grammatical structures, such as subjunctive mood, for example.

The third category of result turns out to be of interest for people working in the areas of HR management and foreign language training. This is the result of questioning the university professors and tutors responsible for teaching foreign languages. This group was chosen not only because the authors are involved in this type of educational activity, but also because the objective situation related to the wellbeing of this group of university community has changed recently. It refers to the working conditions, in particular to the fact that the academic load has increased significantly, the scope of responsibilities has enlarged and the administrative pressure has grown, which has a negative impact on the wellbeing status perception. It was very important for us to find out whether this assumption is true and the university staff wellbeing has really worsened, and to understand what measures could be taken to motivate people and improve their wellbeing status. Besides, it was important to understand whether there is any correlation between personnel wellbeing perception and verbal behaviour.

The survey was conducted in May 2021, and the respondents were made up of foreign language teachers and professors from various Russian and Kazakhstan Universities of various levels of hierarchy, similar level of salary, aged from 25 to 75. The questions asked concerned the essence of the concept of employee wellbeing, the attitude of the university staff to the perception of their own wellbeing, and the way they express this attitude. Three questions dealt with speech and language tools of expressing attitude to wellbeing perception, in particular verbal forms and language structures, as well as the communicative effect to be produced.

In their attempt to define the concept of wellbeing the majority of the respondents (92.5 %) underlined the importance of "appropriate salary", "career growth" and "psychological comfort" (67.5 % each), "good working conditions" (62.5 %), "good relationships with colleagues" (60 %), "friendly atmosphere" and "professional involvement" (57.5 % each). Most people emphasized that "friendly atmosphere" is as important for them as "appropriate

salary", whereas "professional involvement" is as valuable as "technical support". It is noteworthy that most respondents turned out to be dissatisfied with the level of "salary" (almost 40 %), "management style" (17.5 %), "social welfare support" (15 %), "administration pressure" (12.5 %) and "technical support" (10 %).

The majority of the respondents assessed their own wellbeing status as "not very high" (45 %) and "rather high" (40 %), but 10 % called it "rather low", whereas 5 % of colleagues failed to assess their wellbeing level whatsoever. A rather worrying observation is that a lot of respondents experience stress in the workplace although with different regularity, i. e. "from time to time" (40 %), "rather seldom" (35 %), "rather often" (15 %) and "very often" (10 %), which depends on the psychological type of an employee, his qualification and level of competence, on the one hand, and the management system and corporate climate of an organisation, which make up its environment, on the other hand.

Irrespective of certain dissatisfaction most employees try not to give way to their emotions and express them explicitly, which can bring about additional instances of stress. The majority of respondents (55 %) express their feelings "rather seldom", 32.5 % show them "from time to time", only 7.5 % never give way to their emotions and 5 % do it rather often.

Among the results obtained the most interesting findings are related to forms of expressing dissatisfaction. The vast majority of respondents (62.5 %) use the so-called "neutral" forms, 25 % apply "friendly and polite" forms and only 5 % use either "sarcastic and trolling" forms or prefer not to express negative feelings verbally. One of the questions concerned verbal forms and language means of expressing dissatisfaction teachers usually make use of. 30 % mentioned "neutral phrases with a lot of implications", whereas 27.5 % prefer "emotionally coloured statements" or "non-addressed phrases", 20 % often use "long argumentative explanations" and only 15 % prefer "short and abrupt phrases".

Among the most widely used language structures the respondents mentioned "words expressing modality", "words expressing emotional colouring", adjectives with positive and negative connotation and the most common "formal structures". Another interesting finding concerns communicative types of phrases most frequently used in the discussion of wellbeing status perception. Teachers usually turn to "explaining" and "expressing opinion" (67.5 %), "informing" (62.5 %), "describing the surrounding reality" (32 %), "persuading" (25 %) and "proving" (22.5 %), all of which produce different communicative effect on the partner. These are the communicative types of verbal activities most frequently applied in their educational activities, which almost fully coincide.

Most results obtained at all the three stages of research turn out to be rather predictable and generally prove our

hypothesis. But they have to be discussed and analysed in a more detailed way.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the course of our research allow us to draw certain conclusions related to three areas: creating a verbal model of speech analysis, examining written and oral speech samples used by the university staff and recorded mainly during department meetings, and analysing the university staff responses concerning their wellbeing status perception.

1. The verbal model created for analytical purposes turns out to be a very effective tool of examining personnel wellbeing status perception. But the parameters revealed different diagnostic power, some of them being hardly indicative of wellbeing reflection. The parameters which turned out to be most diagnostic allow a researcher to give an objective and adequate description of one's wellbeing perception. Some parameters, such as phrases containing implicit ideas, word combinations giving emotional colouring, lexis responsible for cause-and-effect relationships, language structures expressing modality, and intonation patterns, of course, are even able to reveal certain hidden attitudes which are not evident or consciousness-controlled. Other parameters which we previously considered to be highly indicative of wellbeing perception, such as the use of adjectives, for example, have rather low diagnostic power because of their highly explicit meaning. This means that employees try to avoid straightforward assessments, especially if they are negative, and tend to select more implicit language means.

2. Analysis of speech samples of university staff taken from minutes and recordings of department meetings mainly give similar results. It is noteworthy that people tend to use phrases of definite functional communicative types, such as descriptions, explanations and persuasions, which is due to their willingness to be adequately understood by the colleagues in order to get their support. It generally concerns the discussion of professional and organisational issues, but does not always refer to interpersonal relationships, especially in case there is a risk of conflict. This observation results from the fact that professional discussion usually tends to be constructive, allows to solve various professional problems and does not necessarily bring about conflicts [Vorozheikin et al, 2004].

Verbal behaviour analysis seems to be a very effective mode of personnel management and candidate selection because speech is indicative of personality features and psychological types [Poroykov, 2018; Alaverdov, 2019; Alaverdov and Alaverdova, 2020]. Certain psychological types are represented by the people whose activities could be harmful for an organisation and lead to conflicts and other types of risk. This research area is of great theoretical and practical interest, the latter

being regarded as the basis of university security. All the qualities pointed out by the authors have close correlation with characteristics of verbal behaviour. For example, extraverted people tend to express somebody else's point of view and set up informal relationships with colleagues, and as a result their speech is most often too informal for professional communication.

The psychological types discussed above are to a certain extent related to types of verbal behaviour coordination, i. e. consent- or agreement-based, conformity-based, conflict-based, polemical (discussion-based) [Borisova, 2005]. For example, a conflict-based type is considered to oppose the partner's point of view and to disagree with it as much as possible. For this reason, the expectations concerning the verbal behaviour of this type are a comparatively high level of aggression and a trend towards being too argumentative. It is worth pointing out that individual types of verbal behaviour can be different, but speakers tend to share one and the same discourse corporate code based on communicative tolerance, as well as rules and stereotypes of socio-cultural discourse organization [Mogilevich, 2016].

3. The university professors and tutors involved in teaching foreign languages are generally quite objective about assessing their own wellbeing status, which finds manifestation in their understanding of the concept itself, in the way they describe their wellbeing perception, and in the attitude towards verbal ways and means they usually make use of in professional discussions. This analytical approach results from the fact that verbal ways and means of communication are the subject matter of their educational activities.

4. The responses of the university staff which we acquired as a result of questioning our colleagues allow us to describe a typical university language teacher or professor who is not satisfied with his salary, opportunities of career growth and constantly growing administration pressure. His psychological comfort depends on interpersonal relations, friendly relationships with the staff and the administration, and absence of stress in the workplace which he has to experience daily. A typical language teacher is concerned about the level of professional involvement and requires highly technological support in the workplace, especially now, in the post-pandemic period mainly as a result of a comparatively long period of distance teaching and using modern online technologies.

This typical language trainer for whom dissatisfaction with poor financial and social support has become an overwhelming trend experiences great stress in the workplace but tries to hide and suppress the negative feelings and prefers neutral verbal means of assessing his own wellbeing status perception. He prefers neutral phrases with implicit ideas, tends to avoid explicit forms of expressing dissatisfaction, but sometimes uses emotionally coloured statements to express negative feelings,

which is necessary to cool down the tension among the colleagues but can cause unwanted tension and misunderstandings. He makes use of a wide scope of verbal means and communicative types of phrases, is very analytical, reflective and experienced in applying various language forms and structures.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the results of our research, which consisted of three stages, we can conclude that this work is the first in the series of investigations in the area of personnel verbal behaviour and opens up wide perspectives for further more detailed and wide-scope research. The present work is very important for us as the evidence that verbal behaviour can be used as a reliable indicator of employee wellbeing. We managed to work out a model of verbal behaviour using the theory of speech activity, and selected the most diagnostic parameters of this model to be used in practical research. We analysed nu-

merous examples of verbal behaviour taken from real life communication in order to understand how well these parameters can be used to indicate the psychological state of a person and his perception of professional wellbeing.

The fact that we interviewed a group of university staff involved in teaching foreign languages in different higher educational institutions of Russia and Kazakhstan gave us a lot of material and food for thought. It allowed us to understand the real wellbeing perception of this category of employees, to describe a typical higher educational language trainer and understand his present wellbeing status and its subjective perception, and to analyse different verbal ways and means he makes use of to describe his wellbeing status perception. Taking into account numerous research which show the impact of cultural diversity on effective communication and discovery [Smith-Keiling et al., 2020] it seems interesting to look at specific features of wellbeing perception and verbal means of expressing it in multicultural groups.

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