

COMMUNICATING ACROSS DISCIPLINES AND CONTEXTUAL DIVERSITY: THE EXAMPE OF RUSSIAN COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATION

Irina Rozina, PhD

Institute of Management, Business and Law, Russia

Victoria Tuzlukova, PhD

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Abstract

This paper presents a pilot study aimed at streamlining and systematizing information on the development of the communicative trends in Russia. To achieve this goal the authors utilize the results of the examination of the most significant long-term projects of the Russian Communication Association (RCA) in relation to their dynamics and quantitative indicators across disciplines and contextual diversity of its members' profiles, activities and partnerships with academic schools, other professional organizations, specialized departments, faculties and universities in Russia and worldwide. The data sources included the archives of documents and publications, including the archive on the RCA public website (russcomm.ru), journals, monographs and books collected during the implementation of the association's book project, and internet resources. In addition, the examination was supported by the results of the survey (open-ended questions) of a representative sample of the RCA members and participants of the RCA's social groups, and by the results of direct observations of the behavior of the participants of the scientific communication. These observations mostly focused on the behavior of the participants during preparatory and implementation stages of the RCA's most significant events and in events of interpersonal communication: e-mail correspondence, mailing lists, answers and comments to messages in social groups, etc. The results of the examination can provide insights for further development of studies in the domain of theory and practice of communication.

Keywords: Russian Communication Association, contextual diversity, theory and practice of communication

Introduction

Documenting any organization's history is an important element of its image and self-awareness; it can also promote the awareness of its members about the place of the organization they belong to in a bigger context or domain. Usually historical essays are initiated by the leadership for publication purposes or media coverage. This often coincides with some important event or anniversary. In this case the authors have set an urgent task to collect, compile and reflect on some basic facts that refer to the Russian Communication Association (RCA), relatively young professional association. Indeed, there is a quite established body of research on some aspects of the RCA's activities (Rozina, 2002; Rozina, 2003(a); Rozina, 2003(b); Rozina, 2003(c); Rozina, 2004; Rozina & Tuzlukova, 2007(a); Rozina & Tuzlukova, 2007(b); Rozina, 2009(a); Tuzlukova & Rozina, 2009; Rozina, 2009(b); Rozina, 2010; Leontovich, 2011, etc.). In addition, some positive evaluation of the RCA can be traced in the studies by such prominent scholars as Tolstikova-Mast and Caton, 2002; Wasylyk, 2004; Sharkov 2012; Rubin et al., 2010. Moreover, links to the RCA website

can be found on various popular international communication projects, official websites and in digital libraries (see: educational portal “Economy. Sociology. Management” [<http://ecsocman.hse.ru/text/16081934/>]; helpdesk of the Russian National Library [<http://www.vss.nlr.ru/>]; social network for academic collaboration [<http://www.academia.edu/>] for more information). The evaluation of any organization, including non-profit ones, can be determined by its content and contribution to the subject area (Trammell, 2008). In case of RCA, its content and contribution are determined by its impact on communication studies, or theory and practice of communication.

This paper is aimed at examining RCA’s most significant long-term projects in relation to their dynamics and quantitative indicators across disciplines and contextual diversity, participants’ profiles, partnerships with academic schools, other professional organizations, specialized departments, faculties and universities in Russia. These national level perspectives are added by international ones and include success stories based on RCA participation in global academic events e.g. international schools, conferences, and publications.

The examination was conducted as a pilot study to help streamline and systematize information on the development of the communicative trends in Russia available due to the efforts of RCA.

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History of Russian Communication Association

The intense exploration of communication problems in the world, in Europe and partially in Russia started in the second half of the 20th century, for example, study of methods of formalizing posts in cybernetics and informatics in 1950s-1960s; investigation of psychological characteristics of communication, speech acts in 1960s-1970s; sociological, cultural and interdisciplinary studies in 1980s (Kadirov, 2011; Sharkov, 2002:9). Later at the end of the 20th century, some significant changes in the academic community formed the ground for creating a professional association that would unite specialists in a new for Russia interdisciplinary scientific field. Some of these events can be attributed to the formation of precursors of communication studies in the social sciences from virtually "zero", and, later, to the positioning of communication disciplines in humanities. To exemplify, in 1970s the researchers of the psycholinguistics and communication theory sector at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Science released collections of articles, which reflected the problems of intercultural communication. In 1996 “Linguistics and Intercultural Communication” appeared as a new specialty recognizing the importance of learning a foreign language in relation to culture, traditions and mentality of the people who speak this language (Ter-Minasova, 2000). This period also featured a number of textbooks, monographs and dissertations rooted in comparison and contrast of different languages and cultures; significant theoretical studies in the field of intercultural communication (see, for example, Klyukanov; Leontovich, Roth and Kopteltseva), and launching of a wide range of

journals on communication issues, e.g. "Linguistics and Intercultural Communication" series ("Vestnik of Moscow State University").

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries also witnessed a proliferation of the contacts amongst different cultures; the number of economic, political and informational links in the world also increased (Rot & Kopteltseva, 2001:7). The Russian scientists got access to textbooks and monographs on communication issues by foreign authors (mostly American and in English), to journals and articles, international conferences and projects, including those supported by exchange programs and foundations. Moreover, Russian professors and scholars started to develop communication courses, establish relations with foreign experts and work together to explore similar research problems and challenges. These included, for example, managing uncertainty, features of verbal and nonverbal communication, taxonomy of culture, communication research methods, etc. However, due to the huge backlog of the humanities in Russia from the world knowledge base in the field, especially in its applied aspects, sufficient knowledge of English was of pivotal importance, especially for presenting Russian schools' research achievements in publishing and in scientific communication. Therefore, as revealed in the studies by Rot and Kopteltseva (2001); Golub and Tikhonova (2006), the research focus was on the linguistic component of communication as well as issues of psycholinguistics, ethno-cultural specificity of language consciousness, discursive approach, and foreign language teaching and learning. This was followed by understanding of the need for teaching materials on intercultural communication and on communicative competence that was required in various areas of the national economy and society (e.g. politics, economics, public administration, education, international tourism, etc.). Many institutes, departments and university's faculties were renamed to fit the communication "trend" in higher education, e.g. Institute of Philology and Arts at Kazan Federal University was renamed in 2011 to the Department of Translation Studies and Intercultural communication (see: [http://kpfu.ru/main_page?p_sub=6553] for more information).

The Russian Communication Association was officially established in December, 2000. However, it was registered as an independent professional organization only two years later, on October 18, 2002 and received the registration number 102610004259. The association aimed at further promoting research in communication and communication studies in Russia, and developing practice of communication in the Russian society, which, according to the founders of the association, "particularly needs help from its communication scholars, since our numerous problems are often the result of communication incompetence or lack of desire to communicate constructively with others" (see: RCA website [http://www.russcomm.ru/eng/rca_office/inf_letter.shtml] for more information).

If there was anything special about RCA, it was definitely a proposed type of interaction, namely symbolic interaction (Voyskunsky, 2000:106) or computer-mediated communication (Wood and Smith, 2001). This type of interaction required communication skills and skills to manage interactions in virtual (internet-based) communities and to contribute to its functioning (Voyskunsky, 2000). The founders of RCA were scholars with international experience. Moreover, the association's first inspiring leader and the first president was Olga I. Matyash, Professor of Indiana University – Purdue University, Indianapolis, USA. The contemporary coordination committee of the association mostly consists of the members representing Russian scholars from different regions and cities of the country, namely Rostov-on-Don, Moscow, Voronezh, Volgograd, St. Petersburg, Krasnoyarsk. Nevertheless, one member is currently working in the Eastern Washington University, Cheney, WA (see more detailed information: [http://russcomm.ru/eng/rca_office/sovet_eng.shtml] and [http://russcomm.ru/rca_office/sovet.shtml]). As for the association' members they represent

multicultural and multilingual research community that is open to everybody. Leontovich (2010) observes that all members of RCA “... have grown out of different disciplines, such as Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology, Computer Science, and others”. She further notes that they “are still torn between those fields” (see: [http://www.icahdq.org/pubs/publicnewsletter/2008/9/SEP08_RUSSIA.asp] for more information). However, for most of them, RCA and communication studies have turned out to be their common territory and the territory of productive intersection of interests of different disciplines, languages and cultures, and further professional growth. Quite interestingly, some of the members of the association also represent international communication associations and organizations, e.g., ECANA (Eurasian Communication Association of North America, ECANA), ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association).

RCA is, therefore, based on the community of interests, which members share common goals, values, research, professional, and sometimes personal interests, and are motivated by the need to share their research and to communicate them to the community and to the public. For communication purposes the members of the association use interactive computer-mediated tools that provide free, voluntary and spontaneous communication in space and time, worldwide accessibility, flexibility of time, place and projects using such applications as web-site, e-mail, mailing list, forum, discussion; stimulate interactions; connect researchers, who are increasingly distributed across countries and even continents; eliminate “time-outs”; contribute to rapid distribution of information, exchange of the results of research and practice; reduce travel costs and time spent away from home and classroom activities; support intra- and intercultural contacts with peers and support a wide range of autonomous contributions by the association members and diversity of its activities (Rozina & Tuzlukova, 2007b).

Since its inception the major activities of RCA have included but have not been limited to information exchange and research support and to integration of communication curricula in academic institutions. Other activities, involving a substantial number of the association’s members included organizing of professional events, e.g. conferences, seminars and workshops, publishing, and enhancing cooperation with other communication associations worldwide, e.g., NCA, ICA, and ECREA. For example, in 2010 RCA member, professor of Wake Forest University Michael Hazen organized and presided over sponsored sessions of RCA on the ICA conference in Boston. Here it is worth noting that in 2006 American scholars, members of RCA, united into a separate professional association aimed at assisting it. At this time the Russian government adopted the law according to which the foreigners were banned to participate in the Russian NGOs’ activities. Originally this organization got the name of North-American Russian Communication Association (NA RCA). Later in 2010 it was renamed as Eurasian Communication Association of North America (ECANA). The representatives of ECANA are not the members of the RCA Coordination Committee; meanwhile they help to organize the sponsored sections of RCA on the ICA and NCA conferences.

RCA’s partnerships currently involve National Communication Association (USA), International Communication Association (USA), Communication Research and Education Organization (Europe), etc. These organizations have considerable professional experience, and actively support RCA and its projects, e.g. RCA library project. This project was initiated by Professor Nancy Jackson at Clemson University. The idea behind the project was to supply Russian educational centers with books and teaching materials on communication studies. The project resulted in a collection of 85 books on various types of communication for Volgograd universities (see: [http://russcomm.ru/rca_projects/bookproj/index.shtml] for more information). Another project was aimed at encouraging scholarly and academic

publications on theory and practice of communication through organizing the biennial contest “The Best Book in Communication Studies and Education in Communication”. The contest is focused mainly on Russian authors and groups of authors; however submissions in other European languages are also welcome. The only requirement is that submissions should fit one of the following categories: practical manuals, teaching guides, scientific or theoretical monographs. Within ten years, there have already been six contests with more than three hundred participants in various thematic fields (categories) including such areas as: Communication Theory; Mass-Media Communication; Political Communication, Intercultural, Cross-Cultural, International Communication; Organizational, Professional, Business Communication, Public Relations; Computer-Mediated Communication; Human-Computer Interaction, Distance Education /E-Learning and others.

RCA has also launched several publications that provide forums for the communication scholars: Vestnik of RCA and Russian Journal of Communication. Russian Journal of Communication, peer-reviewed scientific journal, was a result of an agreement between RCA and Marquette Books LLC SPOKANE, WA USA (www.MarquetteBooks.com) signed in 2008. The journal’s issues has welcomed “...the theoretical and empirical papers and essays and books reviews that advance an understanding of communication in, with and about Russia” (retrieved from the site: http://www.russcomm.ru/eng/rca_projects/rjoc/), and has been very successful in providing a venue for open discussions in empirical, comparative and historical studies in the field of communication. Since January 2013 Russian Journal of Communication has been hosted by Routledge Publishing House (<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rrjc20/current>).

As for now, RCA is engaged in a number of research projects that cover recent trends and research programs on communication studies, namely Communication Theory; Mass-Media Communication; Political Communication; Intercultural, Cross-Cultural, International Communication; Organizational, Professional, Business Communication, Public Relations; Interpersonal Communication; Rhetoric, Speech Communication, Public Speaking; Communication and Culture, Language and Social Interactions; Computer-Mediated Communication, Human-Computer Interaction, Distance Education /E-Learning; Instructional Communication; Media Education; Communication problems in translation and interpretation. The research topics suggested for the future studies include some new intriguing areas of communication expansion: communication aspects in psychotherapy and communication competence. Internationalizing development of Theory and Practice of Communication as a discipline at tertiary level education in different countries might also be significant for RCA and for facilitating cooperation with researchers worldwide.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the results of a pilot study that examined, streamlined and systematized the existing information about Russian Communication Association that has mirrored in its structure, content, activities, disciplinary and contextual diversity recent developments of the communicative trends in Russia. The results clearly demonstrated that the association significantly contributed to the “study of communication as a category of practice” (Klyukanov, 2008:6) through its publications, projects and publications by introducing “more and more Russian voices in the conversation of socio-cultural traditions as an important discursive resource in the study of communication” (Klyukanov, 2008:6).

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