

## Ethically or diplomatically? Broadening the boundaries of the acceptable in the modern diplomatic discourse<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:** modern/contemporary diplomatic discourse, diplomatic documents, diplomatic notes; changes, established norms, (in)admissible and (in)acceptable style

**Ключевые слова:** современный дипломатический дискурс, дипломатические документы, дипломатические ноты, личная нота, структура документа, нарушения; изменения, устоявшиеся нормы, (не)допустимый и (не)приемлемый стиль

Traditions and common beliefs are strong, moral and ethical norms are even stronger. Thus, for centuries diplomacy itself, as well as diplomatic discourse it uses and produces, were justifiably associated with secrecy, rigidity of forms, adherence to the norms, some vagueness, ambiguity, aristocracy, sophisticated manners, correct behavior, tastes, and, of course, extreme politeness, which was taken for granted. It *was* but seems no longer to *be*.

The modern world has already got used to the inevitable notion of rapid changes occurring uninterruptedly in all spheres of human activity. The processes of globalization and mediatization – understood as the growing influence of the media on different spheres of human life and activities (Mediatization) – have contributed a great deal to such changes. The increasing power of global mediatization to shape and frame the society in general and different processes taking place in it, communication included, has made an impact on political and, consequently, diplomatic discourse, in particular, changing their traditional canon. Another factor that has influenced the habitual patterns in the diplomatic discourse is the quick development of new forms of information spread and exchange (referring to the rise of digital means of communication).

There are no doubts regarding the positive effects of these transformations as far as rapidness, big audience involvement, diversity of thoughts and points of view, equality, openness, transparency, democracy, publicity, accessibility to information and similar factors are concerned. Still, researching linguists are trying to define the limits and extent to which openness and democracy are admissible in the modern diplomatic discourse. The issue is of professional interest, too. Thus, the **goal** of this paper is to demonstrate and testify (using concrete examples) the changes already verified in the contemporary diplomatic discourse canon, and to show new limits of the admissible in diplomatic communication.

Diplomatic discourse was singled out as an independent type of discourse at the end of the 20th century and definitely established as such at the beginning of the 21st century (Dardano – Trifone, 1985), having been previously classified as part of the political discourse (Denton – Woodward, 1985; Ponomarenko, 2015; Arakelyan – Avetyan, 2017;) or, in any case, labelled as one of the institutional discourses (Kozheteva, 2012; Larkina, 2010; Shepitko, 2010). Most **existing linguistic investigations** dedicated to the diplomatic

<sup>1</sup> UDC 81'139+811.11-112+327.8+172+177.1+808

discourse – the above quoted ones and many others – concentrated on proving its coherence to highly protocolled patterns.

Since then, however, linguists started to treat it separately. This became a unanimous position at the beginning of the 21st century (Veber, 2004; Volkova, 2007; Metelytsya, 2002).

A closer look at the latest **data samples** reveals a number of striking examples, registered prevalently in modern technologically-mediated forms of diplomatic communication, such as tweets, Facebook posts, some open personal letters and similar communiqués. Actually, several examples of such “non-protocolled” changes be traced in one open letter by the USA President, Donald Trump, to his Turkish homologue, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, written on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and made public primarily by the New York Times on the October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019 (Trump) and consequently reprinted by other daily press and many more sources of printed or digital information, though sometimes accompanied by questionable translation (Ne bud’ durnem, 17.10.2019, 11:30). The single letter in question constitutes a rich **data-source** of expressions and utterances non-typical and unexpected for diplomatic discourse.

10/17/2019

Трамп Эрдогану.вебр (698x878)



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Picture 1 Mr. Donald Trump’s letter to his Turkish homologue, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

The investigation was carried out applying the elements of discourse and using cognitive, structural, comparative and descriptive **methods of analysis**. The investigated sample of the diplomatic was analysed, primarily utterance by utterance in order to compare with template documents of the kind, as well as to find coincidences and discrepancies with what is believed to be a typical personal letter (diplomatic note), in terms of its logical and structural organization, choice of appropriate lexical units, collocations and set phrases. Further, the text was broken down into separate elements and groups of elements. Thus, each case of lexico-grammatical, stylistically or notional inadequacy was documented and described. Finally, the material under scrutiny was investigated from the point of view of the communicative strategies and tactics applied.

After the conclusions were made, the potential direction of the diplomatic discourse evolution was suggested, and the prospect of its obvious changing was stated. Here below the obtained **results are presented**, followed by a careful description of traditionally inadmissible issues for diplomatic discourse.

In terms of the established diplomatic correspondence classification (Ponomarenko, 2012, p. 82–85) the analysed sample represents a (diplomatic) note. Actually, the President of any country – by the mere fact of occupying such position – is considered to be the chief diplomat, without belonging to career diplomats. The President enjoys some diplomatic powers, which are those powers that allow the person holding the office to form and/or maintain relationships with foreign states (Johnson, p. 81). These circumstances allow us to qualify and classify the letter of Mr. Trump as a diplomatic document and example of a personal note. This enables us to analyse the document in question within our linguistic research dedicated to the contemporary diplomatic discourse.

This direction in philological **investigation is particularly up-to-date** and demanded because there are no academic papers containing in-depth analysis of beyond-the-norms and out-of-rules usage of the diplomatic intercourse (as most diplomats, servants of the Protocol or linguists concentrate mainly on elaborating, establishing and introducing sophisticated, polite, respectful, even somewhat artificial patterns for diplomatic correspondence).

So, being part of diplomatic discourse, the written form of communication in diplomacy, which leave some analysable, arguable and provable material “testimony”, includes many types of documents (Ponomarenko, 2015, p. 38–40). However, no more than a couple of them occur frequently. It is worth mentioning that within some classifications and in certain books on diplomatic writing only four types of the most commonly used diplomatic documents are distinguished: (diplomatic) note, memorandum, official letter, and aide-mémoire (Satow, 2011, p. 58–65).

Still, in the current diplomatic practice, there can be observed a clear tendency to add a fifth (Johnson, p. 81) basic but important type subdividing diplomatic one-man/individual notes into two groups: personal and verbal. While the latter is an impersonal document, the former – gaining a particular importance nowadays more than ever – is written in the first person singular on the letterhead of the person signing it. Such a note is drawn following a fixed pattern in terms of its composition. It contains no number, and only its original is sent to the addressee (Ponomarenko, 2015, p. 38–40).

The most important issues in the diplomatic discourse are announced and discussed in personal notes. They are also used for sensitive matters of great or general concern. Thus, it is expected that this kind of correspondence should be of the utmost correctness and politeness, in all senses, and that the protocol norms should be carefully observed.

The personal note is one of the traditional and highly peculiar genres and types of the diplomatic documents; it constitutes the core of official letters in the professional diplomatic communication style. It has developed its commonly recognized pattern, which is, however,

attained, observed and kept in the analysed letter of Mr. Trump's. In particular, the message on the letterhead drawn up in the first person singular on behalf of its signatory consists of and bears the following essential components:

1) *centred and placed in the middle of the page, in its very upper part* – the National Coat of Arms (the symbolic emblem in the middle), it also states the sender (*The White House*), the place (*Washington*), the date (*October 9, 2019*) under the Coat of Arms;

2) *on the left-hand side in the upper part of the page* – the address to the addressee; a salutation written according to the protocol requirements and, thus, including appropriate honorable titles, all the necessary capitalization and the correct order of presentation, as it is exactly shown here below:

*His Excellency  
Recep Tayyip Erdogan  
President of the Republic of Turkey  
Ankara,*

Finally, always on the left-hand side in the upper part of the page, the greeting comes, formulated in one of several ethically and diplomatically admissible ways (*Dear Mr. President*). It is worth mentioning that the word “*dear*” theoretically and formally stresses the friendly and respectful attitude of the sender [which is immediately disproved by what is contained in the next couple of lines];

3) then – *in between* – goes the letter itself and,

4) *at the bottom of the page, in the middle of it*, the due and, again, quite admissible and absolutely acceptable complimentary phrase as the closing formula of the personal note (*sincerely*), followed by Mr. Trump's personal signature, which is a standard expression of polite respect, courtesy and habitual formalities of the diplomatic discourse.

Nevertheless, there are expressions in Mr. Trump's letter under linguistic analysis that are completely at odds with and run contrary to the generally accepted image or assumption of what the diplomatic discourse should be (Ponomarenko, 2015, c. 39–44). Thus, what can hardly be seen as ethically and diplomatically admissible is what comes between the opening and closing polite formulas, i.e., where the essence of the letter is. Its form and style of presentation obviously denies and violates the established tradition, both, written and unwritten mandatory rules of observing tact and politeness, avoiding rude and harsh expressions which can be wounding to the dignity of the person or the country (state) to which the diplomatic document is addressed. Even more, the wording of the letter under analysis goes far beyond that and runs absolutely counter to stylistic conventions.

In fact, the style of writing and the letter's general mood aroused the attention not only of linguists, who are chronically attentive to words, vagueness, ambiguity or hidden meanings, but also of professional career diplomats as well. It proves our supposition about the remarkably unusual, unexpected “out-of-place” wording for the diplomatic environment. We can also refer here to a tweet of the ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs (ex-State Secretary) of Ukraine, Mr. Pavlo Klimkin. His on-line reaction appeared immediately on his Twitter account no sooner than Mr. Trump's letter had been published. The Ukrainian diplomat literally wrote (@KlimkinPavlo): “...*стиль розбиває шаблон. Стиль соціальних мереж, що підсилює емоції, а не сенс та зміст. Завтра це стане нормою ;), набагато швидше, ніж всі думають. Готуйтеся*”). Here we decided to reproduce the quote faithfully preserving the on-line signs of “smiles”, which add emotions to the message. In our translation (*by O.P.*), Mr. Klimkin's tweet would sound like this: “... the style breaks the template. The style of the social networks, the one that emphasizes and boosts the emotions, but neither meaning, nor content. Tomorrow this will become the norm ;), and much quicker than all might think. Get ready”.

The most striking and controversial examples of the above mentioned discrepancies, violations of ethical and diplomatic norms, discovered in course of the linguistic analysis of the letter in question, are the following:

Prevalently on the level of lexis, grammar and stylistics (words, word combinations, set phrases or expressions, rhetorical and stylistic figures):

- applying high-sounding words (*Don't let the world down. History will look upon you favorably...*);
- choosing expressions typical to other, not always adjacent types of discourse, e.g., borrowed from economic, business or gaming discourse (*You can make a great deal.*);
- usage of expressions typical for the colloquial style with a shadow of disrespect contained "between" or "under" the lines of what is literally written (*Let's work out a good deal! Don't be a tough guy.*);
- inserting derogatory and humiliating lexical units (*It will look upon you forever as a devil... Don't be a fool!*).

Prevalently on the level of pragmatics (communicative strategies and tactics):

- resorting to promises (...and I will) bordering with threats and menaces, both, direct and indirect (*You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy – and I will.*);
- hinting at and alluding to important, often awkward, undesirable or crucial events and circumstances for the addressee (*I have already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson...*);
- self-boosting on the part of the sender with simultaneous hinting (*I have worked hard to solve some of your problems.*);
- bargaining and imposing conditions (*History will look upon you favorably if you get this done the right and humane way. It will look upon you forever as a devil if good things don't happen.*).

All the issues analysed above – but in particularly those revealed on the pragmatic level – indicate that all the essential requirements for fruitful communication (Ponomarenko, 2004) are violated, too, and, thus forbidden rhetorical methods are applied (Gamova et al., 2002). The conventions which are broken include Levinson's universal principles of politeness (Brown – Levinson, 1987) and Gricean maxims together with his Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1957; 1975) and so on.

It results from the analysis provided above that generally recognized and traditionally accepted standards of what diplomatic discourse is believed to be (Stanko), are too often violated in such a [relatively] short message. As was shown with the examples taken from the letter under investigation, this phenomenon, actually, occurs on all language levels introducing ambiguity, vagueness and, thus multiple possibilities for the addressee to understand and interpret what is expressed in an attempt to guess what was meant, either judging from separate words and expressions (*make a great deal, make concessions, the right and human way, good things*) or the whole sentences (*I will call you later*).

The researchers have at their disposal the very last sentence only in its written ("silent") presentation. Thus, the intonation pattern of the message – if the latter had been pronounced by the President himself as a "live" speech – can only be imagined or guessed. Sometimes it is good and to the general benefit that much of the communication in diplomacy is conducted in written form. At the same time such method leaves much space for further interpretation and little possibility to blame the author of the utterance. Any attempt to interpret any message is always a highly personal affair: it depends on various knowledge, skills and abilities of the interlocutors, be they concrete persons or impersonal huge audiences of all kinds, like electronic or printed matters' readers, conferences' participants, talk show attendees and so on.

We consider it necessary to provide the information we managed to recover from the Internet regarding what Mr. Erdogan did with the letter, though we have to add that there is no material proof of that in open public sources of information. Still, the already mentioned newspapers (Erdogan vy'ky'nuv ly'st Trampa, 17.10.2019, 14:01), redirecting the readers to the BBC's sources close to Mr. Erdogan (Tramp u lysti zaklykav Erdogana), sustain that the Turkish President threw it away, into the garbage bin.

Finally, before concluding, one more remark should be made. The quotation of the Ukrainian diplomat, inserted at the beginning of this very article, was important for the author as a specialist in Linguistics, not in International Relations or Politics. Actually, it was obvious that the architectonics of the diplomatic discourse is varied. There exist many types of it, including coercive diplomacy as one of the final stages of diplomatic discourse in action, before war is declared. Coercive diplomacy is rather "non-diplomatic" in its expressions, though is aimed at solving international conflicts, eliminating threats and sorting out any other extremely dangerous situation. Anyway, there are limits regarding what can be said and done, and what cannot. Thus, for the sake of scientific accuracy, the words of the Ukrainian Minister helped us to clarify how the linguists should qualify and classify such unusual wording of the President Trump.

Now we are sure to argue the following conclusion: no matter how liberal and permissive the discourse of coercive diplomacy might be and whatever might be allowed in it, the newly-coined template of the diplomatic discourse, achieved by changing drastically the long established pattern of its main document – diplomatic (personal, what is more!) note to that extent was neither expected, nor welcomed. It is hardly acceptable and much disagreed for the moment, both, in diplomatic and linguistic circles.

No doubt, that Washington is one of – if not THE – world's greatest power in politics and diplomacy. So, taking into account the quoted here above predictions, and provided this is considered to be politically, ethically, diplomatically acceptable and admissible by the USA, then the linguists will have grounds to reconsider their classic studies and prevailing theories. Further they will need to make the appropriate modifications in the lists of main characteristics of what they long ago defined as, referring to or describing the diplomatic discourse.

The obtained **results** are striking, if regarded within the traditional image of diplomacy and the language it used to use. But the **value of these results** is in documenting and describing the real contemporary diplomatic discourse in all its realizations, without concealing or decorating anything. The **final conclusion** is clear: languages are constantly evolving, and the diplomatic discourse being part of a natural language, is evolving along with it. Its evolution is coherent to the development of the society in which the particular discourse is functioning. The increased use of social media and the significant broadening of the auditorium interacting with diplomats influenced their speech. Diplomatic discourse adjusted its previously high level to that of the majority of its recipients. Diplomats let into their speeches words and expressions from lower registers, pretending implying that they are ethically and diplomatically admissible. So the reconsideration of protocolled norms and the elaboration of new patterns for the diplomatic discourse of the contemporary technologically mediated globalized world seem to be inevitable.

The researchers of the field of linguistics, in their turn, are also to evaluate the relevance, draw conclusions and insist on diplomats adhering to the old-patterned protocol or, if required, to introduce respectful changes broadening the boundaries of the admissible in the diplomatic communication.

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## Summary

### **Ethically or diplomatically? Broadening the boundaries of the acceptable in the modern diplomatic discourse**

The paper contains reflections of what is, might and should be considered ethically and diplomatically admissible with regard to the changes due to globalization and mediatization, which has lately reshaped the world society. The philological research is carried out on the material of the recently published and not yet linguistically analysed personal letter (considered as an example of the first person diplomatic note, one of the five most frequently used types of diplomatic writings) of the USA President. The written matter in question violates the established norms and breaks the style in the diplomatic interactions. And, as the proofs are multiple and easily traced on all the language levels, the threat of broadening the boundaries of the acceptable in the diplomatic discourse is obvious. Such circumstances urge diplomats and linguists to research and conclude on the justifiability of modifications in the traditional patterns of oral and written forms of communication in diplomacy.