

## IN DEFENCE OF MILLENNIAL GENERATION: COMMUNICATIVE TACTICS OF TED SPEECHES

*The article addresses communicative tactics used in TED speeches within the image repair strategy in favour of the Millennial generation. To change the audience's negative stereotype, speakers tend to use the proof-by-contradiction method: they draw heavily on their own Millennial identity (self-presentation tactic) to support the negative stereotype (provocation tactic) and then refute it as fallacious (counterattack strategy).*

**Key words:** communicative tactic, communicative strategy, proof by contradiction, stereotype.

*У статті досліджуються комунікативні тактики, що застосовуються в промовах на платформі TED в межах стратегії відновлення іміджу так званого покоління Millennial. Щоб змінити негативний стереотип, доповідачі зазвичай застосовують метод доказу від протилежного: спираючись на свою приналежність до покоління Millennial (тактика самопрезентації), підтримують негативний стереотип (тактика провокації), а потім відкидають його (тактика контратаки).*

**Ключові слова:** комунікативна тактика, комунікативна стратегія, тактика доказу від протилежного, стереотип.

*В статье изучаются коммуникативные тактики, применяемые в речах на платформе TED в рамках стратегии восстановления имиджа так называемого поколения Millennial. В борьбе с негативным стереотипом докладчики обычно применяют метод доказательства от противного: опираясь на свою принадлежность к данному поколению (тактика самопрезентации), поддерживают отрицательный стереотип (тактика провокации), а потом опровергают его (тактика контратаки).*

**Ключевые слова:** коммуникативная тактика, коммуникативная стратегия, тактика доказательства от противного, стереотип.

Generation gap is often one of the causes of social conflict that arouses a range of feelings – from mild astonishment to open confrontation. The issues that set generations apart are multiple and diverse on the surface (clothes, jargon, hobbies etc.), yet they arise from profound differences, essential for worldviews, such as assumptions and values.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the industrialization of Western societies brought about overproduction and, as a result, the need to know potential consumers, their needs and preferences in order to manufacture sought-after goods and advertise them efficiently. New business environment was coupled with high competitiveness in politics, where politicians had to perform well to be appealing to their voters and to get elected. It is not surprising, then, that the 20<sup>th</sup> century sociology focused its attention on studying and classifying populations to distinguish those features that determined people's consumer tastes and political choices.

One of the influential sociological models to describe (USA) society is the generational theory suggested by William Strauss and Neil Howe (1991) in *Generations. The History of American Future, 1584 to 2069*. The term «generation» here stands for the smallest unit and is defined as the aggregate of all people born over

a span of roughly 20 years and sharing 1) location in history, 2) behaviours and beliefs, and 3) perceived membership. The sociologists distinguish four types of generations (Prophet, Nomad, Hero and Artist) that have been recurring throughout American history. (It should be noted that the authors claim the theory is applicable to 13 British colonies and their antecedents, since having examined generational trends in several developed countries, the authors have uncovered similar cycles.) For the time being, the theory has already become common knowledge: its notions often surface in all types of discourse and its basic principle (i. e. the claim that generations are classifiable because their members share essential features) is treated as axiom.

Within the framework of the generational theory, modern US society is an arena for three generations: Baby Boom Generation (Prophet) made up of people born between 1943–1960, Generation X (Nomad) born between 1961–1981 and Millennial Generation also called Generation Y (Hero) born between 1982–2004. The youngest generation, referred to as Generation Z or as Post-Millennials, is not yet active participants in the society, therefore has no significant impact on social processes.

The Western world is currently undergoing dramatic changes and there is obvious social divide exposed by the US presidential election and the British EU membership referendum in 2016. Among numerous factors that split the American and the British societies and led to the almost 50/50 voting results on both occasions, worldview differences that allegedly mark age groups (i. e. generations) are viewed as exceptionally significant. As it turns out, older people, i. e. baby-boomers and GenXers, supported Trump and Brexit, while younger ones tended to be ‘*Clintonites*’ and ‘*Remainiacs*’. Heated public debate that preceded the voting turned into a bitter conflict when almost 50 % of adult population was countervoted on the future-defining issue and experienced severe frustration.

The argument has produced a number of new coinages, ‘*Clintonites*’ and ‘*Remainiacs*’ being an example, as well as led to semantic modifications of well-established lexemes. The analysis of online newspaper articles, blogs and readers’ comments that follow reveals the overwhelming dominance of the lexeme *snowflake* (or *special snowflake*, which is much more evaluative and negatively connoted). These mass media are mainly controlled by Baby-Boom Generation and Generation X. Consequently, the texts express a biased view on the younger generation held by their parents and grandparents. The picture is not complete without the Millennials’ response.

Though comments on online written texts do contain young people’s feedback, yet they are not numerous and cannot be seen as sufficient. It seems appropriate to consider TED videos (there are ten of them in our sample) as texts that give insight into the intergenerational relations as seen by youngsters.

The objective of the article is to study the image repair strategy, namely its tactics and means to actualize them employed by speakers in ten TED presentations on Generation Y. The topicality of the research stems from the attention paid by modern sociologists, psychologists and linguists to issues of intergroup communication (see, for example (Bucholz & Hall, 2005; Ehala, Giles, & Harwood, 2016; Jaspal, 2012)).

Firstly, unlike the articles and readers' comments where the term *snowflake* abounds, the search has yielded no videos with this lexeme. Yet, there are a number of videos with the term *Millennial* in their titles and most of them (8 out of 10) are delivered by speakers who belong to this generation.

The function of any title is to focus the audience's attention and to plant certain anticipation. Even a look at some of the video titles reveals that the subject-matter here is evaluation, bias and stereotyping: *Millennials – why are they the worst?* (Brown, 2014) *Millennials: who they are and why we hate them* (Hess, 2011); *The Millennial Myth* (Hadeed, 2015). It should be noted that the first two titles arouse the audience's curiosity, since they categorically label the generation as *the worst* and the attitude to them as *hated*, which is hardly acceptable in the pc-dominated mass media discourse and, thus, violates social norms. In other words, the categorical titles actualize the *tactic of provocation*.

Unlike the previous set, other titles explicate the speaker's willingness to destroy the prejudice and stereotypes (*Millennials... you've got us all wrong* (Abston, 2016), *Why half of what you hear about millennials is wrong* (Shaw, 2016); *Everything you think you know about millennials is wrong* (Rotman, 2014); *How to destroy the millennial stereotype* (Randazzo, 2016)) or to give instructions how to deal with this generation (*How to make millennials want to work for you* (O'Rourke, 2015)). Here the degree of categorical meaning varies from totality and generalization, verbalized by *all*, *everything*, *destroy*, to the symbolic *half* and the manual-like *how to make*.

The second feature of the presentations is *image-building*. The speakers exploit extensively their millennial identity: they introduce themselves as *millennials* and, which is noteworthy, list all the millennials' stereotypical (negative) traits attributing them all to themselves:

(1) Hi! I'm a millennial. And I'm a monster. No one really knows how or why I got this way. There are a lot of different theories what could have gone so terribly wrong with me. It could be... I sang a lot of songs meant to build up my self-esteem and now that's why I'm an unrepentant narcissist with no sense of human empathy. That's one theory. It could be also the fact that I get some trophies for participation when I was in elementary school which is why I would kill my own grandmother if she got in my way on the Instagram link. (Brown, 2014).

(2) Hello. I'm Keevin O'Rourke. I'm a selfish, uninvolved, unmotivated, pampered narcissist who depends on his parent to do pretty much everything for him. More simply put, I'm a millennial. (O'Rourke, 2015).

(3) I'm a millennial so you would expect me to have PowerPoint and all these visuals and digital... We don't need any of that. A lot what we believe about generations, isn't true. (Dorsey, 2015).

In (1)–(3), we may observe self-depreciation and as soon as it is highly unnatural to cause one's own loss of face in public, the tactic helps the speakers to grab attention and is, in the long run, provocative. Here the provocation is based on the breach of the speaker's 'positive face', i. e. human need to be liked and evaluated positively.

In fact, the speakers who do not belong to the Millennial Generation also prefer the provocative negative start and their introductory phrases may retell the negative stereotype, either as a quotation or as a question:

(4) Gallup suggests they [millennials – I. A.] are the least engaged generation in the work place. (Shaw, 2016).

(5) Millennials, you are entitled, and lazy, and just not fit to live, right? (Hess, 2011).

Kelly Williams Brown, who begins her speech with the provocative confession of being a millennial and, consequently, a monster (see (1) above), proceeds by suggesting a list of answers to the question *What is a millennial?*

A: A narcissistic a\_\_ hole.

B: An Instagram/Facebook/Self-branding-obsessed manchild.

C: Someone who 'rejects the system' opting instead for parental subsidies.

D: Someone born between 1981 and 2000. (Brown, 2014).

In her list, only D option is of objective nature. The other three answers are evaluative to a varying degree: A is explicitly offensive, B contains negatively connoted vocabulary (*obsessed, manchild*), C is ironic and implies turning a cowardly escape from real-life struggle into a challenge to the unfair and retarded system.

In (7), the speaker introduces the topic by talking about the features of the average millennial's lifestyle. The usage of *we* and *our* points out his belonging to this *notorious* (i. e. of disrepute) generation, while such words as *most, constantly* and *largely* help to turn the statement into a general rule. Other means (*even* and *only*) emphasize the discrepancy between the expected norm and the average millennial: *even* activates the audience's background knowledge by implying that the bathroom is not an appropriate place for texting, just like exams are not the appropriate time; *only* evokes presuppositions of a well-read individual whose reading is extensive and diverse. Netflix and chilling are not respectable occupations either. It is only the question about accuracy of this all, the restricting implication of the *to a certain extent* phrase and the switch from *we* to *I* and *them* in the end of the phrase that reveal the speaker's genuine objective – to wreck the universality of the stereotype:

(7) We are notorious for spending most of our time exchanging pics of our latest drunken blowouts on snapshot Instagram. We talk constantly on the phone even in the bathroom and text back and forth even during exams. The only books we have ever read completely are the Harry Potter novels and our definition of a fulfilled lifestyle consists largely of Netflix and chilling. Is this stereotype a 100 % accurate? Yeah, pretty much. To a certain extent I'm one of them... (Randazzo, 2016)

It should be noted that there are speeches that claim exactly the opposite: 1) millennials have *low self-esteem* and *no self-confidence*, they *lack independence, feel insecure* and *can't make decisions* (Hadeed, 2015). The speech delivered by Scott Hess proclaims millennials to be *inclusive, diversity positive, tolerant, leaning forward, engaged*, and *electing Barack Obama* (the choice interpreted as a marker of progressive thinking) (Hess, 2011). (It should be noted in passing that Scott Hess' reference to Obama is the only reference to political life registered in the ten speeches.) However, these singular speeches only emphasize the regularity of traits, stereotypically ascribed to *millennials*: they are *self-centered, self-focused, entitled, play interactive games* (Brown, 2014); ... *too lazy to get real jobs* (O'Rourke, 2015). Thus, the provocative tactic of self-depreciation carried out with the help of listing negative qualities is a remarkable feature of the videos.

Having declared their identity and outlined millennials' stereotypical traits, the speakers proceed with the switch to an image-repair tactic, namely that of *counterattack*. In (8), the speaker accuses public figures and mass media (*thought leader*, *New York Times*, *the Washington Post*) of constructing the negative stereotype and imposing it on large audiences. Though the stereotype may not be totally wrong, yet *your virtual reality millennial* differs greatly from *the Oregon Trail millennials*:

(8) ... Some new thought leader claiming to be a millennial expert gets his hands in New York Times or the Washington Post and writes an expose on millennials saying we're lazy, can't find a job. We have parents that are overprotective. We live in our parents' basements and the only hope we have of getting out of it is if a pokemon is spotted in a park nearby. Standard millennials. (...) Yes, we might have tried on skinny jeans but none of us bought them. I have a responsibility now. I water my plant every Tuesday. I have a weekend subscription to the New York Times... But there is a big difference between the Oregon Trail millennials where I'm coming from and your virtual reality millennials... (Dorsey, 2015)

The counterattack tactic may also be based on implied comparison. The statement in (9) cannot be viewed as a pure attack on the older generations, yet the declared millennials' values (low value of formal education, low value of social status, appreciation of enjoyable work and autonomy at workplace as well as importance attached to group membership and pursuit of the social good) are opposite to the older generations' materialism and worship of scientific degrees, titles and excessive individualism:

(9) ...we don't associate success with our education. We don't care about a corner office. It's very simple. We wanna love the work we do. We wanna love who we do it with... We want to know if we are committing ourselves to something and how it is affecting the bigger picture... We also care about freedom, give us freedom. Let us choose our work schedule, treat us like adults... So we don't care about money, we care about making a difference. We care about having a voice. (Hadeed, 2015).

In other words, the speakers argue that *millennials* are either misunderstood or not given a chance to succeed. If the latter is the case, some speakers suggest ways to help young people to mature, e. g.:

(10) ...many of you in the audience may be wondering is there a cure for this character malady that's plagued my entire generation. Well, today I'm gonna talk about a four-step plan to inoculate the millennial stereotype and replace it with a generation that evokes positive change. (Randazzo, 2016).

To restore the generations' image, some speakers use comparison and attack the accusers by making the opposite claim: *millennials* are overall no different from other generations:

(11) I think we are just exactly the same as every other generation before us. We have some new tools [e. g. Facebook]... But we do what every other generation has had to do. We are struggling with a sometimes messy, almost always complicated process of growing up. (Brown, 2014).

The speeches are concluded in a number of ways, the main being an antithesis, i. e. the negative stereotype is wrecked and, consequently, turned to the opposite.

In (12), for example, the speaker uses the syntactic constructions of the introductory part but fills them in with positively-connoted lexical items:

(12) I'm a creative, independent, motivated free-thinker who just wants to be happy or, more simply put, I'm a millennial. (O'Rourke, 2015) (Cf.: I'm a selfish, uninvolved, unmotivated, pampered narcissist who depends on his parent to do pretty much everything for him. More simply put, I'm a millennial.)

All in all, the study has revealed that TED videos on the Millennial Generation issue are mainly delivered by the young and their primary aim is to develop an alternative narrative to the mass-media constructed millennial stereotype. Since the speakers' objective is to influence the audience's stereotypes, i. e. cognitive structures, they employ the image repair strategy. To maximize the efficiency of their presentation, they structure the speeches to follow the proof-by-contradiction pattern: the speakers introduce themselves as materialized stereotype, i. e. employ the tactic of provocation, then compare millennials with older generations, i. e. make use of the counterattack tactic, and conclude by stating explicitly their own idea of the Millennial Generation.

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### Illustrative material

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