**Yelena YERZNKYAN**
*Yerevan State University*
**Diana MOVSISYAN**
*Mesrop Mashtots University*

# ON THE RELATIONAL NATURE
# OF UNDERSTANDING

*Based on the assumption that understanding is a goal-directed abstract movement the paper argues that the process of understanding shares some deictic characteristics: it is relative to a reference point, the so-called deictic centre. We claim that understanding is projected at and determined by the intersection of the spatiotemporal, social and axiological dimensions which have as their reference points the truth, the participants of the communication process, as well as the generally accepted norms and standards.*

***Key words:*** *understanding, movement, deixis, deictic reference, cognitive metaphor, metaphorical creativity, meta-metaphor, social distance, attitude, emotion and evaluation, norm*

The study of understanding has recently become the subject of research for many disciplines, such as philosophy, epistemology, psychology, neurology and linguistics. Researching understanding in the light of cognitive linguistics may shed some light on the problem since the observations made and conclusions drawn may provide insights into the structure of the human mind as well as illustrate the ways human cognition undergoes embodiment. The proposition that *cognition is embodied* presents one of the most tenable hypotheses in the cognitive science nowadays and offers new perspectives on conceptualizing knowledge through mind-body relations.

 This research is an attempt to show the peculiarities of metaphorical mapping from the source domain of physical spatial orientation onto the target domain of understanding. The paper aims to reveal the metaphorical nature of the process of understanding and detect the key cognitive models of understanding on the basis of the following English verbs: vision verbs *(see, view, read, envision, make out, discern)*, tactile verbs *(comprehend, apprehend, grasp, seize, catch, take, accept, assume, presume, perceive)*, movement verbs *(empathize, fathom, bottom, reach, penetrate, dig, draw, get, follow).*

The present study views understanding from the perspective of the creative power of metaphor: it implies that linguistic representation of the process of understanding is regarded in terms of metaphorical creativity. The research is methodologically backed up by componential and contextual analyses based on an

extensive use of relevant explanatory dictionaries and numerous contextual examples driven from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

In our earlier works understanding is metaphorically defined as an abstract mental movement in the virtual space: the component of movement which indicates concrete spatial relations makes up the core content of the semantic structure of verbs of understanding. Understanding as well as the level of understanding are measured by the trajectory between the point of origin (the place where movement originates from) and the final point (the goal of the movement), that is, by the proximity to the TRUTH as the final destination of the mental movement, the latter being the deictic centre of the whole metaphorical process. The closer the agent is to the TRUTH, the deeper is the level of understanding, in the sense that we gain a more complete and full understanding of the phenomenon, event, idea, etc. /Երզնկյան, Մովսիսյան, 2016/.

In our study movement is reconsidered and viewed in its widest sense, from a broader perspective, presupposing any kind of "*change of state*" which may indicate any kind of move, including understanding. To put it in metaphorical terms any "change of state" is considered as a kind of movement, accordingly understanding is regarded as a kind of move in the state of mind /see Yerznkyan, 2018: 16/. Since movement, space, place and relativity make up the core of the semantic structure of the verbs of understanding, this enables us to view this mental process from the perspective of deixis. Thus, our working hypothesis could be formulated as follows: *understanding is deictic* as the pragmasemantic category of deixis mostly relies on the central concept of relativity. We think that such an approach can gain ground in this research as it promises to better capture how understanding as the mental process by which knowledge is acquired through perception and reasoning is unfolding.

As mentioned above, fair and proper understanding implies a movement towards the truth serving as a deictic centre. Hence, most of the dictionaries define understanding as *getting closer to the truth*. The same observation is made in regard to the contextual uses of the verbs under study. Consider some contexts to illustrate this point: *penetrate to the truth, reach out towards truth, dig for truth, see the truth, perceive the truth, digest the truth, get to the truth, get at the truth, get the truth, get closer to the truth, get as near the truth as possible* /BNC/. The contextual uses come to support the claim that the truth is the final goal of understanding; understanding can be defined as mental movement aimed at uncovering, revealing the truth in the spatiotemporal dimension.

The study of the empirical data shows that different verbs of understanding actualize various degrees of understanding and accordingly vary in their pragmasemantic potential. Consider the verb *to empathize*.

Empathy is a rather complex notion and the length of its definition reflects the sophisticated nature of this process: *the action of understanding, being aware of, being **sensitive** to, and vicariously experiencing the **feelings, thoughts, and experience of another** of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.* The verb *to empathize* denoting the notion of empathy is defined as *engage in or **feel** empathy; understand and share the **feelings of another**; **feel** or experience empathy; understand **how someone feels** because you can imagine what it is like to be them; have the same **feelings as another person**; be able to understand **how someone else feels**; have the **feeling** or understanding of **what another person is thinking or feeling**; undergo or **feel empathy with another or others**; understand or **relate to someone else's emotional experience*** /CCALD, ODE, AHDEL, MED, MWCD, CACD, WNWCD/. These definitions imply that the abstract domain of empathizing undergoes a kind of embodiment by means of a strong appeal to the emotions and feelings of the other person. Contextual analysis shows that the embodiment is further strengthened when the abstract domain of empathizing derives from the physical concrete abilities of vision and tactile perception: *empathizing is seeing through our eyes, feeling with our fingertips* /COCA/.

In this regard empathy entails the deepest form of human understanding: our statistical analysis shows that understanding has 98% of realization probability when expressed by the verb *to empathize.* In order to determine the trajectory and the "limits" of the abstract mental movement we looked into the verb's colloc-ability with various adverbs: *empathize **completely, deeply, fully, totally, truly, emotionally, strongly, genuinely, really, definitely, too much, more, better*** /COCA/. The further analysis of the verb shows that more frequently it collocates with nouns denoting (a) human beings, (b) feelings and emotions, indicating that this specific type of understanding is directed towards the interlocutor, that is to say, understanding is "approaching" the feelings and emotions of the object of empathy.

Contextual markers introduced above imply that understanding is correlated with two reference points: the truth, on the one hand, and the interlocutor, on the other. Thus two cognitive metaphors UNDERSTANDING IS MOVEMENT TO-WARDS THE TRUTH and UNDERSTANDING IS MOVEMENT TOWARDS THE INTERLOCUTOR are being disclosed. It becomes evident that understanding and accordingly the close–distant dichotomy are explicated differently in the given metaphors claiming that the truth and the interlocutor are placed in different dimensions. That is why we can assert that the mental process under discussion is directly related to the (1) spatiotemporal and (2) social dimensions.

We will proceed with the discussion of understanding from the interlocutor's angle, namely from the perspective of social relations. As known, one of the main functions of language is that of communication, and the overall objective of any

type of communication is understanding. Understanding is a dialogical process, it is directed to at least one interlocutor and involves both parties of the communication, with at least two interacting agents. To put it into M. M. Bakhtin's words, "…understanding presupposes two individual consciences (сознание), two subjects; understanding is always dialogical" /Бахтин, 1995: 78/.

The analysis of the language material shows that understanding is a social phenomenon of human-centred and human-oriented nature. As the examples below suggest understanding is an interaction between **one's own self** and **others:** *empathize with others, empathize with what "the other" felt, empathize with the other side, empathize with outsider groups, understand other people's actions in terms of our own movements and goals – to empathize with them* /COCA/.

The claim that understanding is dialogic assumes that we deal with the dichotomy of one's own self and others revealing the EGO–ALTER correlation which in its turn entails close–distant interaction and presumes that *understanding* indicates close location to one's own self, while *not understanding* implies distant location from one's own self.

The interaction between one's own self and others takes place through mental movement implying conceptual metaphoric mapping from the concrete source domain of physical motion onto the abstract target domain of empathizing.

To take a broader view on this argument let us turn to authentic language material:

*Empathy means both understanding others on their own terms and bringing them within the orbit of one's own experience* /COCA/.

*… Biden tried to empathize with struggling parents, and he probably went a little too far* /COCA/.

*… the best leaders know how to empathize and make themselves approachable to those who need attention* /COCA/.

*True empathy requires that you step outside your own emotions to view things entirely from the perspective of the other person* /COCA/.

*Empathy is the ability to step outside of your own bubble and into the bubbles of other people* /COCA/.

*If you empathize with someone, you can be at arm's length* /COCA/.

As these excerpts suggest, empathy is bringing two selves together. It is making the two selves "approachable" through a kind of metaphorical movement, even if the selves "are situated on different orbits". As a result, they share the orbit, approach each other and "happen to meet" in the same location. The conception of understanding in terms of a dialogue indicates quite definite deictic relations. To continue this point of argument, the close–distant dichotomy covers such concepts as *movement, space, place* and *relativity* which make the basis of deictic perception of the process of understanding.

When account is taken of the social dimension the relational value of understanding acquires a greater importance in the context of the attitudinal approach. This socio-relational component constitutes one of the principal axes of understanding: it is determined by the attitude of the speaker (the agent of understanding) towards the interlocutor or the situation in question. Being attitudinal by definition understanding is regarded as the metaphorical location/position of the agent in the social dimension. We refer to such kind of metaphorical creativity as *meta-metaphor* since understanding here undergoes *double metaphorization*.

Thus, understanding is not only shaped by the virtual distance the agent of understanding covers in the abstract spatiotemporal reality, it is also framed by the social distance, that is, by the attitude, implying the relations between interlocutors. The term *social distance* is used as an umbrella term to refer to both close and remote distance between interlocutors, highlighting that understanding can be regarded in the light of proximal–distal dichotomy and may undergo a double metaphorization process. We deal with primary metaphorization of the notion of movement when verbs of movement are used metaphorically to denote understanding. The notion of movement undergoes secondary metaphorization when explicating positive or negative attitude. That is why the attitude of the speaker is metaphorically defined as his/her location in the abstract space of the social dimension. Consider the following examples:

*Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying everything is right about it* /BNC/.

*Don't get me wrong – I'm very fond of them both...* /BNC/.

In these sentences understanding realizes definite attitudinal meaning. The illocutionary force of the utterances consists in warning and justification of the speaker's attitude; it can be regarded as an indirect excuse or display of courtesy. The speaker cooperates with the interlocutor since the interlocutor's opinion, proper and adequate understanding and interpretation of what s/he has said are important for the speaker. The speaker expresses his/her attitude both towards the information communicated and the interlocutor, as well as expects a positive feedback from the latter.

Thus, the two parties of the communication act form a certain attitude (towards each other, the message conveyed and the whole situation) which, in its turn, after all ensures understanding. On the whole, the attitude will be the reflection of the social distance between the interlocutors (the participants of the communication act).

So, by positioning one's attitude on the negative–positive scale the agent specifies his/her understanding. Positive attitude implies that the agent of understanding is at a short distance from the interlocutor (deictic centre), while negative attitude entails that the agent of the action is located far away from the

deictic centre. This means that the two parties of the communication have either a close or a remote location in relation to one another. For this kind of metaphorization process we suggest the term *meta-understanding*, which refers to the understanding of someone's conception of the situation. By describing attitude as the metaphorical location of the agent in virtual social reality, we identify the length of the social distance between the interlocutors. Understanding depends on this distance: the closer the social distance, the more complete and full understanding is. We termed this type of metaphorical creativity *meta-metaphor* to indicate the multilevel nature of the figurative potential of understanding.

As was mentioned, above understanding can be construed as a marker of loyal attitude towards the interlocutor, this loyal attitude indicates how social distance is actualized in terms of social closeness.

Empathy is closely associated with ethical and moral virtues. Being empathetic is being polite, while being impolite (angry) shows lack of empathy as indicated in the examples below:

*The outward expression of **empathy** is **courtesy*** /COCA/.

*The opposite of **anger** is not calmness, it's **empathy*** /COCA/.

Thus, by social distance we mean the emotional and psychological relationship between people to indicate that understanding is being emotionally and psychologically closer to the interlocutor: via empathizing interlocutors better understand each other's feelings and experiences, they become closer psycho-logically.

This is the reason why the social distance is usually shorter between partners, family members, friends, that is to say, among those, who have positive attitude towards one another. Hence, not surprisingly mutual understanding is the essential characteristic of love and friendship, as the latter point out relations of affinity and harmony between people, while misunderstanding implies that interlocutors are at some considerable distance from one another:

***Love** is that enviable state that knows no envy or vanity, only **empathy** and longing to be greater that oneself* /COCA/.

*One challenge, Dwyer and others said, is that abstinent singles can struggle to find **close friends** who **empathize** with their situation* /COCA/.

*Here we should infer that **not empathizing with someone is being at some distance or being far away from the interlocutor*** /COCA/.

*This time around, while I **empathized** with the crestfallen Fenway faithful, I felt **a long way away from** those die-hard fans* /COCA/.

Following this point of argument, we claim that the psychological distance between interlocutors reduces whenever one of them tries to connect with the other party. Drawing on the authentic language material collected from the corpuses we can conclude that empathy is structured through the cognitive metaphor

**understanding is making connections**: *he can never truly **connect** or **empathize** with anyone, which frustrated any efforts **to empathize** or **connect**, improve the ability **to empathize** and **connect socially*** /COCA/. This intersubjective connection ensures intersubjective understanding.

The further analysis of language data shows that psychological and emotional closeness is measured by "being in other's shoes". Putting yourself in other person's shoes is a marker of connection: ***put yourself in the shoes of the other person** and **empathize** with what **they are going through**, capacity to **empathize** or to **put oneself in customer's shoes**, **walk in someone else's shoes** and really **empathize**, **empathize** and **put oneself in other peoples' shoes*** /COCA/. The collected data once again evinces that the highly abstract notion of understanding is embodied on the basis of the concrete notions of movement and tactile perception. Thus, metaphorical *movement towards the interlocutor, making connections with the emotions and feelings of the interlocutor* and *being in his/her shoes* assures us that the participants of the communication act have achieved mutual understanding as they were located close to one another.

At this point it is worth turning to the third dimension of the process of understanding, where the horizontal close–distant dichotomy is specified by a vertical opposition and comprises another dichotomy with its deep–surface distinction, thus showing that understanding is organized on the basis of orientational metaphor too: *understanding is deep* (downward orientation)*, not understanding is surface* (upward orientation). If understanding is deep *(e.g. empathize more deeply, penetrate the depth, dig deep and then dig deeper, reach deep within us, fathom the depth of human stupidity, bottom the depth of love, see its deeper meaning, read it in depth, view at a deeper level* /BNC/*),* then the truth has an in-depth location and is somewhat hidden: it is in the dark, obscured, secret or concealed. This component of obscurity is clearly observed in the dictionary definitions of verbs of understanding as well: *penetrate – see through, perceive, understand (something hidden or complicated)*; *bottom – discover the real but sometimes hidden reason that something exists or happens*; *dig – bring to light or out of hiding*; *see – discover or realize a usually obscured truth*; *read – perceive or deduce a meaning that is hidden or implied rather than being openly stated* /WEDT, CACD, MWCD, RHWUD/.

Reconsideration and reassessment of the orientational metaphor UNDER-STANDING IS DEEP makes it possible to define the notion of depth in relation to some psychological zero point not necessarily coinciding with the truth. In such cases the deictic centre is designated by the commonly accepted norm or the so-called "normal state of being" /Yerznkyan, 2018: 16/. Above this *norm* we deal with surface understanding, whereas below it we have a deeper level of understanding. It follows that the depth/level of understanding (or any other

subjective evaluation of this cognitive process) may be defined on the basis of a metaphorical scale, inherent in people's cognition as shown in Figure 1 below. This indicates how understanding "behaves" in the axiological dimension.

surface understanding

norm as a zero reference point

deep understanding
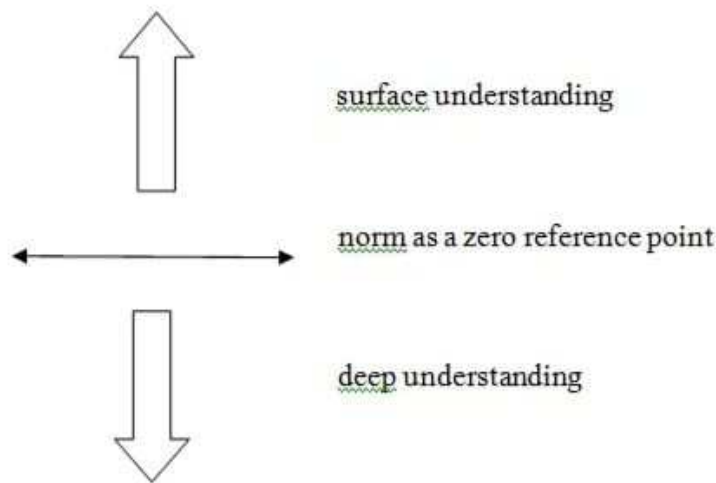
**Figure 1. Norm as a deictic centre of the understanding process**

Understanding is also determined by the intensity of evaluations and emotions: it requires evaluation of the communicated information and is emotionally coloured. Taking into account the fact that we deal with positive and negative evaluations as well as positive and negative emotions, we can claim that the information to be perceived is placed on an axiological scale. Understanding takes place whenever this kind of relative positioning is being realized. The categories of evaluation and emotion correlate with a certain reference point, the relatively objective norm, as accepted in the community or culture. Thus, the deictic nature of understanding addressed in the light of axiology may contribute to the further development of the theory of indexicality and metaphorical creativity.

To illustrate the above mentioned thesis here are some negative and positive evaluations: *view as **attractive**, view as **dismal**, accept that something is **anomalous**, accept that something is **artificial**, conceive **brilliantly**, draw **exaggerated** conclusions* /BNC/. Consider some negative and positive emotions as well: *view more **sympathetically**, view with considerable **anger**, view with **much interest, satisfaction**, view with great **disdain, with alarm*** /BNC/. The analysis of the dictionary definitions also reveals a series of indicators *(worry, dread, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, something unpleasant or undesired, unpleasant conditions, impatient, angry, not very happy, annoyed, unwillingness, vague affirmation,*

*assent, reluctant)* validating that sensitivity (evaluation and emotion) is directly associated with understanding, hence, it is being affirmed that sensitivity is deeply rooted in the process of understanding /AHDEL, MWCD, ODE, MED, CCALD, CALD, FDI, AHDI/.

The collected lexicographical and corpora data show that verbs of understanding, being explicitly based on the sensual perceptions of vision and tactility, undergo further metaphorical extension and tend to explicate evaluative-emotive understanding. It is observed that evaluations and emotions as markers of understanding ensure the realization of the cognitive process. On the whole, we deal with *sensual perception–understanding–sensitivity* inseparable unity. Understanding is preconditioned by sensual perception, while sensitivity is a marker of understanding; in their turn both sensual perception and sensitivity in fact have bodily basis which once again confirms that understanding is embodied. It should be also noted that the degree of understanding is measured not only by the length/depth of the mental movement trajectory but also by the intensity of sensitivity (evaluation, emotion) measured by its closeness/remoteness to/from the negative or the positive poles of the scale with reference to the social and cultural norm, that is to say, in accordance with the standardized beliefs, practices and behavioural rules of a certain social group.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the abstract domain of understanding undergoes embodiment mostly relying on the notion of movement, the latter being reconsidered in the present paper from a wider perspective. The traditional framework of deixis is expanded in terms of metaphoric and meta-metaphoric conception of movement. Hence, the deicticality of understanding is grounded by a complex series of arguments. Accordingly, the relational nature of the process of understanding is projected on three intersectional dimensions: the spatiotemporal dimension, the social dimension and the axiological dimension. The multidimensional approach to the issue under study links the communicative function of understanding to the social interactions, cultural beliefs and norms, intersubjective evaluations and emotions. The categories of movement, relativity, deixis, metaphor, attitude and sensitivity prove to be interdependent and intertwined in the realm of understanding. The study of the metaphorization process of understanding is one more attempt to confirm that the embodied cognition is a pervasive phenomenon in the human mind.

## REFERENCE

1. Bailey B. Misunderstanding // *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004.
2. Kövecses Z. Metaphor: A Practical Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

3. Lakoff G., Johnson M. Metaphors We Live by. London: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
4. Yerznkyan Y. On the Metaphoric Development of Deictic Verbs // *Foreign Languages in Higher Education*, v. 2 (25). Yerevan: YSU, 2018.
5. British National Corpus (BNC) // URL: https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/
6. Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) // URL: https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/
7. Бахтин М. М. Человек и мир слова. Москва: Изд. Российского открытого университета, 1995.
8. Երզնկյան Ե., Մովսիսյան Դ. Հասկացումը որպես ճշմարտության բացահայտում // *Օտար լեզուները բարձրագույն դպրոցում, № 1-2 (20)*, Երևան, ԵՊՀ հրատ., 2016:

## LIST OF DICTIONARIES

1. American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms (AHDI). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2003
2. American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (AHDEL). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2015 // URL: https://www.ahdictionary. com/
3. Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary (CACD). Cambridge University Press, 2008 // URL: http://dictionary.cambridge.org/
4. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 3$^{rd}$ edition (CALD). Cambridge University Press, 2008 // URL: http://dictionary.cambridge.org/
5. Collins Cobuild Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CCALD). Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014 // URL: http:/www.collinsdictionary.com/
6. Farlex Dictionary of Idioms (FDI). Farlex, Inc. // URL: http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/
7. Macmillan English Dictionary (MED) // URL: http://www.macmillan dictionary.com/
8. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (MWCD). Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003 // URL: http://www.merriam-webster.com/
9. Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE). Oxford University Press, 2009 // URL: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/
10. Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (RHWUD). Random House, Inc., 1997 // URL:  http://www.dictionary.reference.com/
11. Webster's New World College Dictionary, 5$^{th}$ edition (WNWCD). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2014 // URL: http://www. yourdictionary.com/
12. Wordsmyth English Dictionary-Thesaurus (WEDT) // URL: http://www. wordsmyth.net/

**Ե.ԵՐԶՆԿՅԱՆ, Դ.ՄՈՎՍԻՍՅԱՆ –** *Հասկացման հարաբերական բնույթի մասին.* – Սույն հոդվածը փորձ է հասկացման գործընթացը հետազոտելու ճանաչողական փոխաբերության դիտանկյունից: Որպես փոխաբերական մտավոր շարժում՝ հասկացումը քննության է առնվում ցուցայնության լույսի ներքո: Հասկացում արտահայտող բայերի իմաստագործաբանական ներուժի ուսումնասիրությունից հետևում է, որ բայերին հատուկ է ցուցում որևէ ելակետի՝ ցուցայնության կենտրոնի: Լեզվական նյութի վերլուծության միջոցով ցույց է տրվում, որ հասկացման գործընթացը տեղի է ունենում տարածաժամանակային, սոցիալական և արժեքանական հարթությունների հատման արդյունքում: Ճշմարտությունը, հաղորդակցության մասնակիցները և հանրայնորեն ընդունված նորմը, համապատասխանաբար, ծառայում են որպես հասկացման գործընթացի ցուցայնության կենտրոններ նշված հարթություններում:

***Բանալի բառեր.*** հասկացում, շարժում, ցուցայնություն, ցուցայնության կենտրոն, ճանաչողական փոխաբերություն, մետա-փոխաբերություն, սոցիալական հեռավորություն, վերաբերմունք, հույզ և գնահատում, նորմ

**Е. ЕРЗИНКЯН, Д. МОВСЕСЯН –** *О реляционной природе понимания.* – Статья посвящена изучению процесса понимания в свете когнитивной метафоры. Понимание рассматривается через призму метафорического структурирования движения. Анализ языкового материала выявляет дейктичность понимания: исследуемый когнитивный процесс имеет место относительно некоторой точки отсчёта – центра дейктической ориентации. Результаты исследования показывают, что понимание проецируется через пересечение пространственно-временного, социального и аксиологического измерений. Следовательно, истина, участники коммуникации и общепринятая норма, соответственно, являются дейктическими центрами процесса понимания в указанных измерениях.

*Ключевые слова:* понимание, движение, дейксис, дейктическое указание, когнитивная метафора, мета-метафора, социальная дистанция, отношение, эмоции и оценка, норма