

Proxemic Distance as A Paralinguistic Category: Spatial Encoding of Social Hierarchy and Intimacy in Uzbek And English Communicative Discourse

Azimjon Melikuziev

Researcher of Fergana State University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: Proxemic distance – the physical space maintained between interlocutors during communication – constitutes one of the most culturally variable yet systematically structured paralinguistic categories, encoding social hierarchy, intimacy, and politeness independently of verbal content. This article examines proxemic distance as a paralinguistic parameter within the broader semantic-pragmatic reclassification of nonverbal means in Uzbek and English, situating it alongside the holonymic-meronymic, axiological-gender, and affirmation-negation axes already identified within this research programme. Drawing on Edward Hall's foundational proxemic zone model together with subsequent cross-cultural measurements of interpersonal distance, and on qualitative evidence from Uzbek literary prose, corpus sources, and prior Uzbek-language pragmalinguistic scholarship, the study classifies the four Hallian proxemic zones – intimate, personal, social, and public – according to how each is culturally realised in Uzbek and English communicative practice. The analysis indicates that while the formal zone architecture is shared across the two cultures, Uzbek communicative norms compress the personal and social zones relative to the Anglo-American baseline in contexts governed by kinship, age, and gender hierarchy, while simultaneously enforcing markedly wider intimate-zone restrictions between unrelated adults of the opposite sex. These findings extend proxemic theory into a contrastive Uzbek-English framework and carry implications for intercultural pragmatics, translation, and language pedagogy.

Keywords: Proxemics; paralinguistics; interpersonal distance; nonverbal communication; social hierarchy; intimacy; contrastive linguistics; Uzbek-English; kinesics.

Introduction: Since Edward Hall coined the term "proxemics" to designate the study of how human beings structure and interpret the physical space that separates them during interaction, interpersonal distance has been recognised as a paralinguistic category in its own right, capable of conveying intimacy, dominance, respect, or hostility without recourse to a single spoken word (Hall, 1963). Hall's subsequent work formalised this category into a four-part zone model – the intimate, personal, social, and public zones – each associated with a characteristic distance range and a characteristic set of permissible

communicative acts, and argued that the boundaries of these zones, although grounded in shared human perceptual apparatus, are culturally calibrated rather than biologically fixed (Hall, 1966, 1968). This claim was given empirical support by Watson and Graves (1966), whose controlled observation of Arab and American students demonstrated that so-called "contact cultures" maintain measurably closer interactional distances than "non-contact cultures", and it has since been corroborated on a much larger scale by Sorokowska et al. (2017), whose analysis of preferred interpersonal distances among nearly nine thousand participants from forty-two countries confirmed

systematic, temperature- and culture-linked variation in the radius of the personal and social zones, while Remland, Jones, and Brinkman (1995) further showed that such variation persists even among geographically proximate European cultures. Robert Sommer's parallel work on "personal space" extended the proxemic framework beyond dyadic conversational distance to the broader spatial and territorial behaviour of individuals in institutional settings, reinforcing the view that spatial positioning is a rule-governed communicative resource rather than an incidental by-product of physical necessity (Sommer, 1969). Within the broader dissertation programme on the semantic-pragmatic reclassification of paralinguistic means in Uzbek and English, of which the present study forms a part, proxemic distance has not yet been examined as a systematic category in its own right, even though earlier comparative work on Uzbek, Russian, and English kinesic behaviour registered, in passing, that norms of physical closeness and etiquette differ markedly across the three communicative traditions without situating these differences within a formal proxemic-zone framework (Abduazizova, 2021); nor has Uzbek communicative space been examined within the large cross-cultural distance surveys that have periodically sampled Western, Middle Eastern, and East Asian populations, leaving a gap in the available comparative record that the present study seeks, in a preliminary and qualitative fashion, to begin addressing. This article accordingly asks, first, whether Hall's four-zone model, developed principally from Anglo-American observation, can be meaningfully applied to the description of Uzbek proxemic behaviour, and second, whether the two communicative traditions differ systematically in the social variables – kinship, age, gender, and status – that govern the compression or expansion of each zone. The remainder of the article is organised as follows: the Materials and Methods section describes the sources and classificatory procedure; the Results section presents the resulting comparative classification of proxemic zones in Uzbek and English communicative discourse, together with a summary table and a diagram of the zone model; the Discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing proxemic theory and to the broader dichotomic-classificatory model developed elsewhere in this research programme; and

the Conclusion summarises the study's contribution and outlines directions for further, quantitatively validated research.

METHODS

The study adopts the same qualitative, corpus-informed contrastive design used throughout this research programme, treating Hall's proxemic zone model (Hall, 1963, 1966) as an etic classificatory framework against which culturally specific, emic evidence from Uzbek and English communicative sources is compared. English-language material and normative distance figures were drawn from the established proxemic literature itself – principally Hall's original notation system, Sommer's (1969) observational work on personal space, and the large-scale comparative distance surveys of Watson and Graves (1966), Remland et al. (1995), and Sorokowska et al. (2017) – supplemented by descriptions of interpersonal spacing in English-language prose and everyday communicative scenarios. Uzbek-language material was drawn from descriptions of spatial and postural behaviour in Uzbek literary prose and from prior Uzbek-language and Uzbek-focused scholarship on nonverbal and kinesic communication, in particular the comparative observations on Uzbek, Russian, and English etiquette-related behaviour reported by Abduazizova (2021). From these sources, descriptions of interpersonal distance, seating and standing arrangements, and culturally marked spatial avoidance or approach behaviour were extracted and classified according to which of Hall's four zones – intimate, personal, social, or public – each instance most closely corresponded to, and according to the social relationship (kin versus non-kin, same-generation versus cross-generation, same-sex versus mixed-sex, superior versus subordinate status) obtaining between the interactants. Each zone was then characterised, for each language, along two dimensions: (a) its approximate distance range, following the published Hallian and cross-cultural figures where a direct empirical measurement for Uzbek communicative behaviour was not available; and (b) the principal social variable reported to govern access to that zone in the source material. As in the companion studies in this programme, the present analysis is qualitative and classificatory rather than statistically inferential: no original distance measurements were collected, and

the study does not claim to establish precise, independently verified figures for Uzbek proxemic behaviour, a limitation that is discussed further below and that defines the principal task for the quantitative, field-based research recommended in the Conclusion.

RESULTS

The classification indicates that the four-zone architecture of Hall's model is recognisable in both Uzbek and English communicative behaviour, while the social variables governing the width and permeability of each zone differ in systematic ways between the two traditions. In English-language sources, zone boundaries correspond closely to the widely cited Anglo-American figures established in the classical proxemic literature, with the intimate zone reserved for spouses, very close family, and established romantic partners; the personal zone extended relatively readily to friends and to acquaintances in informal settings; the social zone governing most transactional and professional encounters; and the public zone reserved for formal address, public speaking, and interaction between strangers (Hall, 1966; Sommer, 1969). In the Uzbek material, by contrast, the personal and social zones are systematically compressed among kin and same-generation, same-sex interactants – siblings, age-mates, and members of an extended household

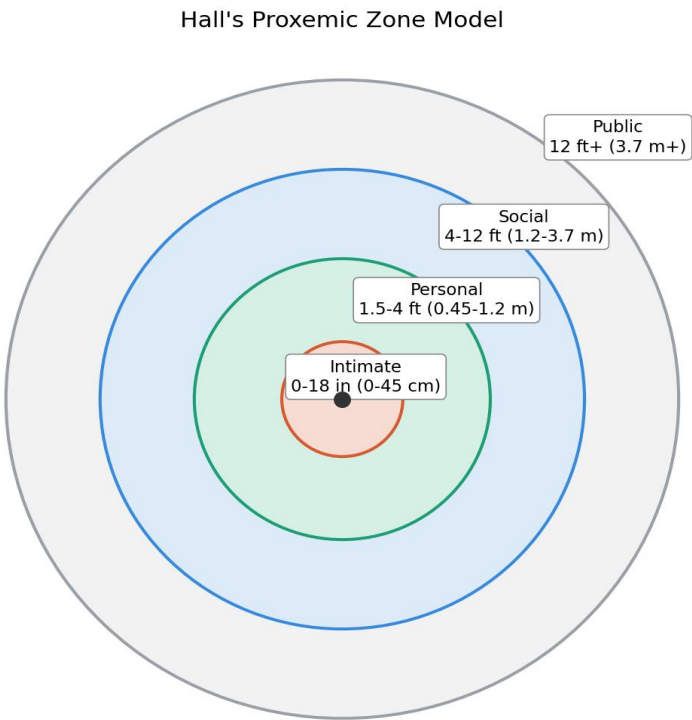
routinely occupy distances that would fall within the Anglo-American personal or even intimate range without this proximity being interpreted as intimate in the Western sense – while the boundary separating the personal from the social zone is instead reorganised principally around generational and status hierarchy: a marked increase in distance, together with restricted eye contact and a lowered or averted gaze, is required of a younger or lower-status interactant addressing an elder or a person of higher social standing, a pattern that recurs across the descriptions of formal greeting and address examined in the source material and that is consistent with the etiquette-governed distancing reported by Abduazizova (2021). At the same time, the intimate zone itself is subject to a considerably stricter closure rule in Uzbek communicative norms than in the corresponding English pattern, since physical proximity within this range between unrelated adults of the opposite sex outside the immediate family is normatively restricted regardless of the degree of personal acquaintance, a constraint with no comparably strict counterpart in the English material examined. These patterns are summarised comparatively in Table 1, and the underlying zone architecture on which the comparison is built is illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Comparative realisation of Hall's proxemic zones in Uzbek and English communicative discourse.

Proxemic zone	Approximate distance	English communicative norm	Uzbek communicative norm
Intimate	0–18 in (0–45 cm)	Reserved for spouses, close family, romantic partners	Reserved for immediate family; strict closure between unrelated opposite-sex adults
Personal	1.5–4 ft (0.45–1.2 m)	Extended to friends and informal acquaintances	Compressed among kin, age-mates, and same-sex peers
Social	4–12 ft (1.2–3.7 m)	Governs most transactional and professional contact	Widened toward elders and higher-status interactants

Public	12 ft+ (3.7 m+)	Formal address, public speaking, strangers	Formal address; reinforced by lowered gaze toward superiors
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Figure 1. Hall's proxemic zone model, illustrating the four concentric distance zones referenced in Table 1.



DISCUSSION

These findings are broadly consistent with Hall's own caution that the absolute distances associated with each proxemic zone are not universal constants but culturally calibrated defaults built upon a shared perceptual substrate (Hall, 1966, 1968), and they extend the general "contact culture" versus "non-contact culture" distinction established by Watson and Graves (1966) and further quantified by Sorokowska et al. (2017) by suggesting that Uzbek proxemic behaviour cannot be placed at a single point on a simple contact/non-contact continuum: the compression of the personal and social zones among kin and status-equal interactants points toward a contact-oriented pattern reminiscent of the Arab and southern European samples examined in earlier cross-cultural work, whereas the markedly stricter closure of the intimate zone between unrelated adults of the opposite sex points in the opposite direction, toward a

non-contact, high-restriction pattern with no clear equivalent among the culture groups sampled by Remland et al. (1995) or Sorokowska et al. (2017). This apparent asymmetry suggests that a single-continuum contact/non-contact model, however useful for comparing the culture groups on which it was originally built, may need to be supplemented, for Uzbek and structurally similar communicative traditions, by a second, independent parameter tracking the degree to which zone access is regulated by kinship and gender rather than by simple physical closeness per se; this refinement is offered here as a hypothesis arising from the qualitative classification rather than as an established quantitative finding, and it would require dedicated field measurement of the kind pioneered by Watson and Graves (1966) to confirm. The status-governed widening of distance identified in the Uzbek material further connects to the broader dichotomic-classificatory model developed elsewhere in this research programme: where the affirmation-negation

axis was found to carry an asymmetric pragmatic load concentrated at its negative pole, and the androcentric-feminist axis was found to encode a gendered asymmetry in the evaluation of otherwise identical nonverbal signals, the proxemic axis examined here appears to encode a distinct, status-and-kinship-based asymmetry that is largely orthogonal to the individual-affect distinctions foregrounded in Hall's original Anglo-American model, indicating that a fully adequate contrastive account of Uzbek and English paralinguistic systems will need to treat social hierarchy as an independent organising parameter alongside affect, gender, and part-whole structure. As with the companion studies in this programme, the principal limitation of the present analysis is that it is based on qualitative literary and secondary-source evidence rather than on original field measurement of interactional distance, so that the specific distance figures proposed for Uzbek communicative zones should be read as provisional estimates grounded in descriptive and comparative literature rather than as independently verified empirical values; a further limitation is the reliance on a relatively small set of previously published Uzbek-focused sources, which may not capture regional, urban-rural, or generational variation within Uzbek communicative practice itself.

CONCLUSION

This article has extended Hall's proxemic zone model (Hall, 1963, 1966, 1968) into a contrastive qualitative analysis of Uzbek and English communicative discourse, showing that the four-part zone architecture is recognisable in both traditions while the social variables that regulate access to each zone differ in structurally significant ways: Uzbek communicative norms compress the personal and social zones among kin and status-equal interactants relative to the Anglo-American baseline, reorganise the personal-social boundary chiefly around generational and status hierarchy rather than simple acquaintanceship, and simultaneously impose a stricter closure rule on the intimate zone between unrelated adults of the opposite sex than has been reported for English-language communicative norms. These results indicate that a single contact/non-contact continuum, of the kind established in the classical cross-cultural proxemics literature (Watson & Graves, 1966; Sorokowska et al., 2017), does not fully capture the

Uzbek pattern, and that kinship- and status-based regulation of spatial access should be treated as an analytically distinct parameter within the broader dichotomic model of paralinguistic classification developed in this research programme, alongside the holonymic-meronymic, axiological-gender, and affirmation-negation axes already examined. The findings carry practical implications for intercultural pragmatics and for literary and audiovisual translation, where spatial staging and distancing cues in a source text may need to be reinterpreted rather than transposed literally to preserve their intended social meaning for a target audience, and for English for Specific Purposes instruction, where explicit attention to the status- and kinship-governed character of Uzbek proxemic behaviour may help learners avoid misreading culturally appropriate closeness or distance as, respectively, intrusive or cold. Future research should move from the present qualitative, literature-based classification to field-based observational or video-recorded measurement of interactional distance across a systematically sampled range of Uzbek social relationships and settings, apply the same quantitative and statistical methods used elsewhere in this research programme to test whether the zone compressions and expansions identified here hold at scale, and situate the resulting Uzbek figures within the existing global comparative datasets, such as that of Sorokowska et al. (2017), from which Central Asian populations have so far been largely absent.

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