

Reading Between the Lines

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ABSTRACT

Reading between the lines is very important if you want to excel in successfully dealing with people. Often, sentences uttered by people mean something which is totally at variance from their real intent and in such a situation, if one takes them at face value, he reads the person wrongly. This happens frequently and if you are not observant and Skilful, you do not get at the real issues and respond wrongly. The skill of reading between the lines keeps you one up as you can act wisely because you have grasped the real facts by reaching the hidden meanings. This paper brings out different facets of reading between the lines. The paper explores what is meant by the phrase “Reading Between the lines”, what situations give rise to the necessity for reading between the lines, what is its importance and, finally how to excel in the ability to read between the lines.

Keywords: *Reading between the lines, hidden meanings, ulterior motives*

The other day I was with my friend at his house where I was staying with him for about a week. He asked me, “So, writer, what are you up to now”. I was onto this paper of mine so I just said I am toying with the idea of researching this topic. Hearing this he had a big smile on his face and he exclaimed, “What a coincidence, Naresh, I had been telling my daughter-in-law that she should develop the habit of reading between the lines.” My friend is a great reader between the lines himself and he was prompted to narrate his experience with his family.

He said he had been often telling his daughter-in-law that she must learn to read between the lines if she wants to be a better parent. He said he was amused to see a startled look on her face upon hearing this comment. The reason for her surprise was the fact that she knew she had been a good parent and she also knew that she is more intelligent than him but maybe not as mature as him. She is forty and my friend is seventy-two, but that does not ensure maturity; maturity is not in numbers but this is achieved skillfully as you gain experience while ageing. Maybe these attributes are God-gifted and she as a person is more aware of worldly things but the area where he scores better is his ability to see through the real self of people. It may not be that she was less endowed but it is the fact that he was more fortunate that he got an opportunity to deal with a wide variety of people as he was in the lead role of GM for most of his career whereas as an IT professional, she did not get that opportunity.

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Received: January 9, 2023; Revision Received: January 27, 2023; Accepted: January 30, 2023

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People develop their inherent traits as they grow. She developed as a straightforward reacting person and in that process, her reflex actions were reactions to what was presented to her in terms of simple communication. She never paused to read between the lines and many a time, she could not understand the real hidden meaning. She, many a time, fails to understand body language and is unable to grasp what the person really means which is at variance from the received communication.

Her son (aged 8 years) is a manipulative little professor as is referenced in transactional analysis which talks about the child ego (Parent, Adult and Child ego states). Several times she is unable to read his mind whereas my friend never missed the facts brewing in his little mind because his body language and expressions on his face evidently revealed his mind whereas his words did not. The little boy is very adept at winning over other people due to his manipulative and observational skills. My friend's son was very concerned about my friend's health. He was after him to ensure that he did have his morning and evening walks and that he did at least 8000 steps daily. One day my friend was surprised when the little man (his grandson) came and asked him, "Dadu, have you completed your steps?". Obviously, he had not done it because it was only noon at that time and so he replied negatively. The boy immediately shot back-"Why don't we walk down to the skating area which is only a kilometre away!" He was deeply amused to observe myself being cleverly manipulated!!

Mind is wonderful and people use it in the strangest ways to surprise others.

It is not that his daughter-in-law is not a good parent. My friend's son and she both are good parents and their daughter (12 years old) and son (8 years old) have both grown well and have excelled moderately well in all spheres of growth. While the daughter has picked up the mother's traits of being straightforward, the son is built up differently and one requires great observational skills and the ability to read between the lines to understand his mind. This fact when observed led my friend to make the statement to her as mentioned in the opening paragraph. Her reaction was of utter disbelief and she took it with pinch of salt and had given him a stare revealing her disagreement and displeasure. He was sure that she will one day realize that there is some lacking in her parenting and that she needs to mentor her son differently.

Soon it did happen as one day the little one was overheard talking to one of his friends about his proud achievement of fooling a shopkeeper by taking away one toy from the shelf and having come out of the shop without paying for it!!!

The incident shook her!!

The above family episode made me think about the importance of reading between the lines and prompted me to hasten the research on this topic and here I am with this paper.

Reading between the lines is very important if you want to excel in successfully dealing with people. To me, instances appear in absolute clarity when a person is praising me profusely while in reality, in his mind he is abusing me in the foulest language. This observation is natural for me because of my ability to see through things. Most often things are not as they appear. Body language and other subtle signs pierce through the veil and lead you to real facts as they are; not as they are made to look. People are built differently because they grow up in different environments and not all possess the ability to read between the lines, nor do they realize its importance, the above-mentioned extremely intelligent daughter-in-law was such an example. Through this paper, I wish to uncover some facts pertaining to "Reading Between the Lines".

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In this paper, we shall find out what is meant by the phrase “Reading Between the lines”, what situations give rise to the necessity for reading between the lines, what is its importance and, finally how to excel in the ability to read between the lines.

Meaning of “Reading Between the Lines”

Simply put it means not to take things at face value. Many a time, things are not the way they appear to be. Many a time, a person’s action camouflages his real intent. Sometimes a person apparently totally loyal to you is, in fact, your dreaded enemy. The human mind is very complex and makes each person different from others and often they speak something but have some other ulterior motive. Reading between lines is the process of bypassing what appears and reaching the real ulterior motive. T F Hodge is right when he says, *“Quite Often It's Not About What Is Said, But What Isn't. And Even When It's Spoken, Read Between the Lines. Listening With the Heart Is Just as Important as Hearing with the Mind.”*

The following gives different meanings to this phrase:

Collins dictionary defines the phrase as follows:

If you read between the lines, you understand what someone really means, or what is really happening in a situation, even though it is not said openly.

As per vocabulary.com

Reading between the lines means understanding what is implied but not expressed on the surface

As per the free dictionary, the phrase means

To infer or understand the real or hidden meaning behind the superficial appearance of some thing. "Lines" refers to lines of text on a printed page.

(<https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/read+between+the+lines>)

Definition for reading between the lines: “look for or discover a meaning that is hidden or implied rather than explicitly stated.”-- The New Oxford American Dictionary.

Different people define the phrase in the following different ways

*If you 'read between the lines' it means you are able to understand the real message in what you are reading or hearing, a meaning that is not available from a literal interpretation of the words. You understand more than is actually said or written.-- **Sonam Mehra***

*Reading between the lines is simply understanding the meaning intended not given. —**Danny Chin***

David Diamond elaborates the meaning with a befitting example

To read between the lines” means to understand something that is not clearly stated but is implied by what is written.

For example, I might say, "When Sarah saw her husband in close conversation with her best friend, Jocelyn, she became very, very angry." We "read between the lines" here to understand that, for some reason, Sarah is insecure in her marriage and does not trust her husband and/or Jocelyn to be faithful to her. Perhaps her husband has a history of cheating on her. Perhaps Jocelyn is flirtatious so Sarah does not trust her either. Perhaps her husband and Jocelyn had an earlier romantic relationship. None of this is plainly written, but any or all of it may be implied. As we understand what is implied, we are "reading between the lines” (<https://www.quora.com/What-does-read-between-the-lines-mean>)

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The best meaning to the phrase is brought out by Jon Hainer (resident of USA) What he defines is subtle and gives a very pertinent example:

Reading between the lines means that you should read a document very carefully before agreeing to it. In addition to understanding what the document says, also think about what the document doesn't say. Think about what the document implies.

For example, an airline ticket might say, "Tickets are non-refundable. Additional service charges may apply if you need to reschedule to a different flight." On its surface, it simply seems like you may be charged a fee to re-book your flight. If you read it carefully, however, it could mean that you will not get your money back for your existing ticket, you will need to purchase new tickets for the new flight, AND you will be charged to re-book the flight. The fact that you have to purchase the replacement tickets is not explicitly stated in the agreement, but it might be implied by the fact that the original tickets are non-refundable.

The phrase read between the lines comes from the concept that legal documents are usually double-spaced specifically so that someone can make hand-written notes between the lines. These notes clarify the agreement when it is ambiguous or remind people to ask questions as to the wording of the agreement. (<https://www.quora.com/What-does-read-between-the-lines-mean>)

John Spacey¹ brings out the meaning more clearly as follows:

Reading between the lines is the ability to comprehend the true meaning and context of communication. This can be contrasted with a purely literal interpretation of words that may miss the complexity of communication and social situations.

The phrase could be well understood with the following definitions and the example given below

Definition (1)	The ability to comprehend the true meaning and context of communication.
Definition (2)	The ability to understand language and social situations beyond mere literal interpretations.
Definition (3)	The ability not to take all speech literally to understand its true intent and meaning.

Example: Face-saving situations result in resorting to sentences with hidden meaning -- For example, telling a salesperson that "you will consider their offer" may actually mean "no."

Normally saying 'no' appears to be rude and when we want to say 'no' and do not want to appear rude we communicate in a way which reveals our 'no' only when a person reads between the lines. The above face-saving example is a way of saying no without offending but what is intended can be known only by reading between the lines.

If we summarize the different definitions as presented above, we can say that reading between the lines means that you understand what someone really means, or what is really happening in a situation, even though it is not said openly. It is the ability to comprehend the true meaning and context of communication. It means you are able to understand the real message in what you are reading or hearing, a meaning that is not available from a literal interpretation of the words. You understand more than is actually said or written. In fact, reading between the

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lines is a process of looking for or discovering a meaning that is hidden or implied rather than explicitly stated.

Let us now look at some examples which are pregnant with intents but worded differently i.e., you have to read between the lines to get at the real meaning. (These are Adapted from a blog by Rajan Parulekar²)

- 1) *You may have had occasions to watch someone shouting at the top of his voice and saying, "I am not boasting but, in my humble opinion etc.?"* --- Rest assured these phrases are pregnant with a meaning that they are simply bragging about themselves.
- 2) *Patient, " Doctor, what are my chances?" Dr "I'll do my best."* ----Reading between the lines you learn that there is no hope.
- 3) *Manager: "You have reached hardly 50% of your target. I want you to meet your targets come what may." Executive: "I'll do my best."* ----This may mean the executive cannot do anything better. When he says I'll try, it indicates que sera sera. (Whatever will be, will be)
- 4) *A slick salesman selling a beautiful dress may say, "Ma'am, it costs only Rs. 2,995,"* --- The underlying meaning is that it is not expensive.

One more example of pregnant statements which need reading between the lines

- 5) *Customer- I really couldn't spend that much on such a product like that right now.* – At face value, it means that the sale is lost but the hidden meaning is that the salesman could get the sale provided he gave a discount.

Now we have a fair idea about the meaning of the phrase under discussion. It is intriguing to know why people form such sentences which have a hidden meaning. Let us explore this aspect.

Why does a situation arise that makes reading between the lines a necessity?

Why do people say something while at heart they mean differently? It is the result of conflict between mind and heart. The heart wants to say the real thing but the mind prevents it as it works on logic that saying so would be detrimental to one's own interest so it camouflages the real intent and expresses the emotion in an altogether different way. It is not that mind and heart are always clashing. When they are in sync, the expression or communication is straightforward and has no latent meanings. Some people mostly have minds in sync with hearts and are simple and straightforward. Since they speak what they mean, they do not look for hidden meanings in the pregnant sentences. My friend's daughter-in-law was such a person who, often, could not read between the lines and hence his advice to her (see the first paragraph).

You can find examples of such communications in your day-to-day life when what is said is not what was really intended and the reason behind is mind-heart conflict.

Some examples:

"Wife to husband--- It is my ill fate that I got wedded to you." Simply stated it means that the wife is cursing herself but in reality, she wants to tell him that he is useless and no good! In her heart, she feels that the husband is hopeless but her mind tells her telling this affront will be too rude so a midway is chosen and the above sentence gets framed.

Mohan to Sohan---"Can I Borrow 2000 rupees from you?" Sohan—"I am passing through very hard times." On the face of it, Sohan is just revealing his difficult financial position but in reality, he is saying "No". His mind says he will not lend money but, in his heart, he feels

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he should not say “No” as it would amount to being rude to a friend —so a midway is the above sentence.

Many a time, *fear of conflict* also results in pregnant sentences which need reading between the lines. People become diplomatic and since they do not want to hurt others, they use pregnant sentences.

Example --*Imagine a guest arrives at late night hours and the host welcomes, “What a pleasant surprise to have you here at this late hour!”* Apparently, the host is welcoming, but in his heart, he is displeased to have intrusion at late night hours. The Mind frames the sentence to avoid hurting him.

The necessity to frame sentences that would need reading between the lines, as was stated, is basically caused due to mind-heart conflict. It may lead to fear of conflict or may avoid causing hurting others’ sentiments or appearing rude or inability to directly say, ‘No’. Mind is logical but devoid of emotions and conversely, the heart is emotional but devoid of logic, hence, frequently they conflict with each other resulting in a midway path of pregnant sentences. These sentences necessitate reading between the lines. In our day-to-day life, we do come across situations where we have to read between the lines. The ability to read between the lines helps us in many ways. There are several benefits arising out of reading between the lines and hence the process becomes important.

Importance of reading between the lines

It is of utmost importance to learn what is really being communicated to you so that your response is balanced and mature. Reading between the lines makes this clear to you.

As per Atmaj Vyas³, reading between the lines can greatly help you expand your perspective and knowledge base. When you start to look into things with more detail, you begin to understand the emotions and the real meaning behind what people are trying to say. This allows you to look beyond what is being said and also helps you analyze it.

Not only this, but it makes you distinct from the crowd as you tend to become more imaginative because you are able to see things clearly and can think from all perspectives.

Also, not everyone can communicate as freely or as well as others. A person who can read between the lines has the ability to move past barriers and understand others better. This, in turn, allows you to have a smoother and more understanding conversation.

Another advantage is that this ability makes you more attentive and observant. Most times, there are little things in people’s words that we tend to miss. Whether it was an emotion, or someone stressing about a particular word, it can get lost in the conversation. When you read between the lines, picking up on these things becomes easier. You pay more attention to not just the conversation but also, the body language, tone and facial expressions of a person. The more you start paying attention, the more you begin to observe the subtleties and perception is crystal clear to you to enable you to take vital right actions/decisions.

In the episode discussed in the first paragraph, it was absolutely necessary to be observant and read between the lines for controlling and guiding the little boy for parenting him properly. It is not only in parenting, but also, in all aspects of life you will do better if you are more aware

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in the respective field and reading between the lines does this vital thing—makes you aware of real facts!!

The benefits accruing out of reading between the lines can be found in all spheres of life wherever there is an interaction between people. You cannot be a successful manager if you can't read between the lines, a lawyer or criminal investigator must be well adept in understanding the underlying currents, and a psychiatrist must be able to penetrate the outer shield to know what really is going in the patient's mind, marriage counsellors have to pick up cues from clients while counselling and these cues would come through reading between the lines and so on... By reading between the lines you avoid being caught in a false trap and can act appropriately. Knowing the real intent of the communicating person is vital for dealing with him/her effectively.

Surely this ability makes you better than your contemporaries. The question is how do we acquire this ability?

How to be adept at reading between the lines

Being critically observant

The most vital requirement is being exceedingly observant. We all observe things but many of us miss out on finer details. To excel in reading between the lines, one cannot afford to miss out on finer details which lead to the real intent of the person with whom one is dealing or the matter one is engaged in. If we are not observant, we tend to overlook vital details and cannot really penetrate the outer shield and reach out to the real meanings or real state of affairs. The process of reading between the lines requires the skill of being minute observant. This ability makes you see things which others tend to miss out on.

You indeed miss out on important facts if you are not critically observant. I had a hand on experience with this fact when I was working as GM of a group of companies manufacturing plastic containers and closures. I narrate the incident:

"My professional development was greatly influenced by the MD of a company with whom I worked. He used to, often, say that the problem with most of us is that we see but hardly perceive. We see things but are not observant. On joining the company, MD took me on a factory round. He would stop at a machine and tell me to see what I could observe. I am not a bad observer and I told him about the good physical condition of the machine, the attention of the engineers who were working on the machine, orderliness maintained, etc... Then he asked me what are good and what are bad things which I am seeing? I told him that the machine appears to be working well, the operator is attentive and the engineers are alert on the job i.e., no one is wasting time, the product coming out is of good quality, and these are all good things and I do not see any bad thing. He did not comment on the good things that I pointed out but on the bad side, the things which he showed me simply stunned me as to how could I miss seeing them: He showed me that there was no lid on the hopper containing the fed raw material which stored raw material before feeding the barrel, thus, contamination was possible which will affect product quality; he put his hand on the floor inside the machine and showed me oil littering the floor inside the machine—it was spick and span outside the machine. He asked me to touch the machine to feel the huge vibration, indicating that something was wrong with the fitment inside the machine; even the loud noise coming out of the machine was indicative of poor maintenance; the barrel movement was jerky indicative of some obstruction in its

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path, the product getting automatic ejected was not getting ejected 100% i.e., some pieces remained stuck and had to be manually removed by the operator. He ordered the engineer to stop the machine and take it for maintenance and when the machine was opened, we found that we were heading for a major breakdown had we not stopped the machine.”

Thus, we see that if we are not critically observant, we tend to miss vital information. Reading between the lines needs to get at vital information which could come out as words not in sync with other contents of the narrative or in the form of body gestures deviating from the essence of narration etc. We shall miss these cues if we are not critically observant and shall not be able to read between the lines.

Many times, our eyes see but do not observe and perceive; important things simply do not register in our minds because we had cursorily looked at the things. I remember here the famous experiment narrating "Invisible Gorilla" narrated in a book by Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons⁴ where observers are asked to watch a video in which men and women are passing a ball between them and you have to count the number of passes. Most of the observers while engrossed in counting the passes miss a chest-beating gorilla who happens to enter and exit the scene. This signifies how poor observers we could be.

My boss, with extreme observational capacity, would, never, have missed the chest-beating Gorilla if he was a candidate in the experiment.

Since he practiced intent observance, his advice for becoming alert and observant registered deeply in my mind and prompted me to leave cursory observation and go for keen and critical observation of all day-to-day happenings. My perceptive ability got so conditioned that now I capture fine details in all things which I observe. It has become a habit and believe me when I say that my subordinates in subsequent companies where I worked, were greatly surprised by my unmatched power of observation. The seeds sowed by my MD had grown.

This ability of critical observation helped me greatly in acquiring the skill of reading between the lines.

So, first and foremost, we need to be critically observant for becoming successful in reading between the lines. Critical observations only can catch subtle cues, and signals which help in correctly reading between the lines.

Becoming critically observant requires patience and practice and eventually, it gets conditioned in you over a period of time. So, if you want to excel in reading between the lines, you must cultivate this habit.

But only being observant is not sufficient, one has to carefully and critically analyze what is observed.

Analyzing what you observe

Observation must be followed by critical analysis. Dan Klein⁵ outlines the steps for analyzing

1) ***Listen carefully.*** Listening closely to what people say is essential to read between the lines. Develop your listening skills and practice them regularly.

Some good listening techniques include:

- Smiling and nodding to show you are paying attention.

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Use neutral statements to encourage the person to keep talking, such as "yes," "I see," and "go on."

- Rephrasing what the person has just said to ensure that you have understood them. For example, you might say something like, "It sounds like you are saying that you don't think I am a very good listener. Is that right?"
- 2) **Take notes so that you can analyze them later.** Taking notes on what someone says will allow you to return to the information later and analyze it. Write down anything that seems important or that you'd like to come back to. However, taking notes might not be practical for every situation.
 - For example, taking notes during a job interview is acceptable, but taking notes during a conversation with a friend may seem strange to the other person.
 - 3) **Notice what the person does not say.** What the person leaves out may be as important as what they include. After the conversation, consider whether they left out anything that you think is important.
 - For example, if a coworker avoided talking about their progress on a special project, then they might be struggling with the project.
 - If a friend changes the subject when you attempt to talk to them about a recent fight you had, then they might not be ready to talk about it.
 - 4) **Ask for clarity.** After the conversation, it is fine to ask the person about anything that was unclear to you. Be honest if you don't understand something or if you want more information about something they said.
 - Try saying something like, "I am interested in the way you described your process for this piece of art. Could you tell me more about that?"
 - You can also simply say, "I didn't understand what you said about the homework. Can you please explain that again?"
 - 5) **Reflect on the things the person said.** After the conversation, reflect on what was said. Ask yourself some questions to identify things that seemed important or that might have a hidden meaning. Some good questions to ask yourself include:
 - What stood out about the conversation? Was there anything about it that was bizarre or uncomfortable?
 - What was the main focus of the conversation?
 - What seemed to be the most important subject for the other person?
 - Did we arrive at a solution or compromise? If not, did the other person suggest a way for us to do that?

While analyzing it is vitally important to take cognizance of body language.

Analyzing Body Language

- a) **Note the person's facial expressions.** The way that someone looks at you can say a lot about what they are thinking. Pay close attention to the person's facial expressions while they are talking and listening to you.

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- For example, if the person is smiling and making eye contact, then they are likely interested in you and what you are saying. However, if the person is looking away or around the room and not smiling, then they are probably not interested.
- b) **Look at how they're sitting or standing.** The way someone positions themselves in relation to you can also give you clues about their attitude. Check the position of their body while you are talking to them.
- For example, if the person is facing you and leaning in towards you while you are speaking, then they are likely interested in what you're saying. However, if they're turned away from you and/or leaning back, then they might not be interested.
- c) **Watch their hands and arms.** Hand and arm position is another good way to read between the lines as well. Note where the person places their hands and arms to determine how interested they are in the conversation.
- For example, if the person has their arms crossed, then this is a good indication that they are not interested.
 - If their hands are on their hips, then they might be feeling impatient.
 - If their hands are resting on their lap or on their sides, then they are likely feeling relaxed and content.

Apart from observing, analyzing and interpreting body language, it is equally important to keep the reference to the context in mind. The situations must also be considered to have better insight into the process of reading between the lines.

Consider the situation or reference to the context

As per Dan Klein⁵, along with the things that the person says and the way they use body language, the circumstances of a conversation may also provide helpful clues about the person's feelings. Consider the circumstances of the conversation to decide if any of their words or body language might be due to that.

Timing of communication also is important. Choosing the best time to have a conversation can also make a big difference in how the person responds to you. Reflect on how well you timed the conversation as well.

There can be a more situational factor that needs to be considered. Before you decide what the person's reaction to you might have meant, make sure to consider other possible factors in how they responded to you. Some questions you might ask yourself include:

- Is it possible that they were having a bad day?
- Does this person react to other people the same way?
- Could the person's body language mean anything else?

While undergoing all the above processes, we must always be on the lookout for aspects which are not in sync with the content of communication and any word, body language or situational factors out of sync, if noticed will alert you to look for hidden ulterior meanings and it would not be difficult to get at the real ulterior meaning.

All the above steps i.e., critical observation, analysis, interpretation of body language and collaborating with reference to the context will certainly lead to the real ulterior intent of the person and with great ease you shall be able to read between the lines.

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We have explored different facets of “Reading Between the lines”. Starting from understanding the meaning of the phrase, we explored why people say something when they mean differently. We also explored the importance and benefits accruing out of reading between the lines. In the end, the paper gives tips as to how you can acquire this ability. I am sure the contents will benefit you.

We have had a serious deliberation, but I conclude on a lighter note with a comical video which gives a satirical meaning to reading between the lines. You will enjoy the video and you will not be able to suppress laughter!! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9Tk-M0FcuI&feature=youtu.be>

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Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kumar, N. (2023). Reading Between the Lines. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(1), 212-222. DIP:18.01.023.20231101, DOI:10.25215/1101.023