

The Transfer of Native Language Speech Behavior into a Second Language: A Basis for Cultural Stereotypes?

Andrea DeCapua

Lynn University, Boca Raton, Florida

This paper examines the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer as a possible basis for cultural stereotypes. In this study data from L2 German learners of English are compared with data from native speakers of American English. The results suggest that the German English L2 speakers produced responses more in keeping with German rules of speaking and conventions of use than with American ones. L2 learners from a particular culture tend to follow the (often tacit) sociocultural norms of their L1, thus behaving more similarly to each other than to L1 native speakers. However, in communicative situations with native speakers, these L2 learners are judged by the norms of the target language culture, not by the norms of their L1. Target language native speakers rarely attribute misunderstandings or misinterpretations of illocutionary force and intent to L2 learners' adherence to different rules of speaking. This paper posits that recurrent transfer of different rules of speaking by L2 language groups may play a role in the formation of cultural stereotypes.

Cultural stereotypes, the tendency for people of one culture to characterize the members of different cultures in overly simplified or inappropriate terms, are widespread. Americans, for instance, often stereotype Germans as rude and aggressive and Japanese as meek and deferential. This paper argues that these cultural stereotypes arise in part from differences in sociocultural norms of communicative interaction. Cultures vary in the types of communicative strategies, the type of language, the functions of various speech acts, and all the other dimensions of interpersonal communication that are considered appropriate in given contexts (See e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Boxer, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993; House, 1979; White, 1989). When speakers of different languages interact, they are quite aware of the fact that their native languages differ in terms of sounds and structures; at the same time, however, these speakers are usually unaware that sociocultural norms covering interpersonal communication often differ also. Unaware of these differences, native speakers are likely to misinterpret the intentions of nonnative speakers. Such behavior can then give rise to 'mutual negative stereotyping' (Tannen, 1989).

Second language learners do not automatically learn the sociocultural norms of speech behavior of the target language for a variety of reasons. One important reason is that most speakers of any language are not really consciously aware of

the rules of speaking, much less that these rules are very much culture-specific (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Hall, 1977; Loveday, 1982; S. Takahashi, 1996; Thomas, 1983; Wolfson, 1983). Part of the growing up process within any culture is learning the conventions of language use, that is, learning the appropriate sociocultural norms governing communication in that society; likewise part of learning a new language is learning new and different cultural norms—i.e., developing pragmatic competence (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Gass & Neu, 1996; Lakoff, 1979; Schmidt & Richards, 1981).

Seelye (1997, p. 64) suggests that stereotypes pose an interesting paradox in that while stereotypes are often terribly out-of-date or dangerously derogatory, they often do capture characteristics that are common to a particular culture. As Hall and Hall (1990, p. xiv) point out, members of the same culture not only share information, but they share methods of coding, storing and retrieving that information. Since members of one culture will not generally share all these same methods, cross-cultural interactions can lead to stereotyping, both negative and positive.

When nonnative speakers participate in communicative situations with native speakers, they are judged by the norms of the target language culture; native speakers rarely realize that misunderstandings may be due to nonnative speakers' adherence to different rules of speaking. Just as our cultural knowledge influences what we do, what we say and how we say it, so does our cultural knowledge act as a lens through which we interpret the behavior of others. And as nonnative speakers from another culture tend to adhere to the (often tacit) sociocultural norms of their native language, they will behave more similarly to each other than to native speakers of the target language—which behavior can then give rise to cultural stereotypes. In the same way that native speakers will recognize the accent of groups of speakers (e.g., she speaks with a French accent, or he has a Chinese accent), so too do native speakers come to identify certain behavior as 'Latino-like' or 'Arab-like' (Friday, 1989; Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the phenomenon of sociocultural or pragmatic transfer and the role this type of transfer may play in cultural stereotyping. Specifically, I address the question of pragmatic transfer into English by native speakers of German within the speech act of complaints. In this study I compare how native speakers of German complain in service settings in German, their native language, and in English, their second language, and how both these sets of data compare to data produced by native speakers of American English in the same situations.

PRAGMATIC TRANSFER

Interpersonal communication is as rule-governed as is our linguistic behavior (Gass & Neu, 1996; Gumperz, 1982; Lakoff, 1979; Schiefflin & Ochs, 1986). Lakoff (1979) suggests that interpersonal communication among all human be-

ings is controlled by universal deep structures, similar to those postulated by the theory of transformational grammar. The surface manifestations of interpersonal communication strategies, like individual languages, vary from culture to culture and person to person and result in culture-specific rules of communicative behavior. Speakers choose appropriate strategies by sizing up a communicative situation—the topic, status variables, relationship among interlocutors, etc. and then select the strategy judged culturally correct for the type of interaction the speakers believe themselves to be taking part in. In learning one's native language one also learns the acceptable ways of speaking in one's culture. Part of growing up is the socialization of individuals into their culture (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). When L2 learners speak another language, they will tend to behave according to the sociocultural appropriate norms of their native language rather than those of the target language, often regardless of their level of proficiency (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; T. Takahashi & Beebe, 1989).

Pragmatic transfer occurs when second language learners apply the socially appropriate rules and formulas of their native language to target language situations either because they are unaware of target language norms and routines, or because they are psychologically unable to do so because the L2 norms and routines violate their L1 internalized and culturally conditioned acceptable norms of speech behavior. As a result of such pragmatic transfer, misinterpretation of the message, the content or the intent of the message is possible. Such misinterpretations or misunderstandings when they occur consistently among same-language nonnative speakers, may give rise to cultural stereotypes.

One stereotype many Americans hold is that of the arrogant and brusque German (Hall, 1977; 1983; Hall & Hall 1990; Lakoff, 1979). Considered from a sociolinguistic perspective, I suggest that this stereotype arises at least in part from differences between culturally conditioned interactional routines preferred by Germans and Americans. In Lakoff's words:

Rather than saying to ourselves (unconsciously, of course), "Although he presents the appearance of arrogance, I don't consider him arrogant because that is normal behavior within the context of being a German, which he is," we say, "He's arrogant, but that's what I expect from someone who speaks with a German accent; they don't know any better . . . (1979, p. 69)

When second language learners participate in L2 communicative situations, they are judged by the norms of the target language culture and not according to the standards of their own native language culture.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The instrument used in this study to collect the data was the written discourse completion questionnaire. Such an instrument is an efficient means of

collecting information in that discourse completion questionnaires allow researchers to gather a large amount of data quickly, as well as allowing them to obtain important background data such as socioeconomic status, educational background, and geographic place of residence. It also permits researchers to gather more data on specific speech acts in specific settings than might be possible in an ethnographic approach (Cohen, 1996). This type of data collection instrument also allows nonnative speakers to prepare a good response. As noted by Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), L2 learners often become nervous and unsure of themselves when tested orally; thus a written method of data collection removes that element of anxiety and may therefore more closely reflect what the nonnative speakers would produce in spoken interactions. (See, e.g., Bergman & Kasper, 1993; Cohen, 1996; Rose, 1992; Wolfson et al., 1989 for further discussions on the use of discourse completion questionnaires).

Materials and Procedures

The data collection instrument used in this study was a discourse completion questionnaire with five situations. These five situations were designed so as to elicit complaints from respondents without actually using the word "complain." In order to control status and familiarity variables to some degree, all the situations involved service relationships, that is, an interaction between a customer or client and a "server." The same situations were used in both the English and in the German versions of the questionnaires.

The first situation involves a customer in a restaurant finding a hair in her/his soup. In the second situation a customer goes to pick up a coat s/he had brought to a dry cleaner for removal of a spot and discovers that not only is the spot gone, but also the color. In the third situation a patient is kept waiting in a doctor's office for over two hours. The fourth situation consists of a customer receiving a bill from a major department store with items on it that s/he had not purchased. And in the last situation a tenant whose oven is not working calls the building superintendent for the third time. Subjects were provided with a brief description of the situation, a brief introductory turn by the subjects' imaginary hearer, and then blank lines for the subjects' written responses:

You had a doctor's appointment at 3:00. It is now 5:15 and you are still waiting. You are very annoyed and you go to the receptionist.

Receptionist: "Yes?"

You: _____

The first conversational turn which is taken by the subjects' imaginary interlocutor was purposely kept brief. In the example above the reader will note that the receptionist says only "yes" as the initial turn. All of the initial conversational turns by the imaginary interlocutor are identical ("yes") except in the situation where the tenant calls the superintendent about the broken oven. In this situation the imaginary hearer, that is, the superintendent, says "hello" rather than "yes." The purpose of keeping the imaginary interlocutors' responses brief and nearly identical was to avoid unduly influencing subjects' responses. As is evident from the example, at no time are subjects actually instructed to complain; rather, subjects are forced to produce this speech act by the nature of the situation.

SUBJECTS

Data for this study were gathered from 100 subjects: 50 native speakers of American English and 50 native speakers of German. The subjects ranged in age from 16 to 22. The German subjects provided two sets of data: responses in English and responses in German. These subjects were asked first to complete the written discourse completion questionnaires in English, and then to complete another set in German. The subjects were purposely asked to complete the questionnaires in this order to minimize covert encouragement of transfer from their native language into their second language.

The Germans

The subjects were in their last or penultimate year of German college preparatory school (Gymnasium). They came from all different parts of what was formerly known as West Germany, and they had all studied English in school for 5-6 years, 2-5 hours per week. None of the subjects had ever lived abroad, although many had traveled to an English-speaking country, usually England, on vacation. All were participants in a year abroad program through AFS, an international exchange organization. The data collection took place during the subjects' second day in the US at an orientation prior to their departure to their host families around the country.

The Americans

The Americans were white college students at a small private liberal arts college in Westchester County, a suburb of New York City. The subjects came primarily from the greater metropolitan New York area, although a small number came from upstate New York and northwestern Pennsylvania. None of the participants had ever lived overseas and none spoke any language other than English.

DATA ANALYSIS

The tabulated data from all the respondents essentially fit into thirteen semantic categories, which was consistent with studies a colleague and I had under-

taken previously (DeCapua & El-Dib 1987; 1986; 1985). Of these I will discuss four categories that have the most relevance to our investigation into pragmatic transfer and cultural stereotypes: requests for repair, demands for repair, justifications, and criticisms. I focus on only these four of the thirteen total categories in that the results of the other nine categories are either not relevant to this particular discussion or had a very low frequency of occurrence (See DeCapua, 1989 for a complete discussion.)

Requests for repair and demands for repair

Requests for repairs are questions (and at times statements) that ask the hearer to remediate or redress the problem in some way. In the data from the American respondents, requests for repair were frequently questions or pleas incorporating modal verbs such as 'can,' 'could' or 'would.' Note that these forms are standard forms used in both English and German to make requests, requests which indirectly function as directives but yet appear polite by virtue of the verb form which is marked for indirectness and hence politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as in: (1a) Can you either get me in to see the doctor or make me another appointment? (1b) Could I get another bowl of soup?

The German respondents produced questions or pleas incorporating modals primarily in the restaurant situation where the diner finds a hair in the soup. This was true in both their English and their German responses. More common in the two sets of data produced by the Germans across all the situations was the use of a structure not found at all in the American English data, namely *bitte* 'please' plus the command form of the verb:

(2) *Bitte schauen Sie, daß Sie das so schnell wie möglich in Ordnung bringen.*

Please see to it that you fix this as soon as possible.

Table 1 shows that the Germans responding in German produced the most requests for repair (61%). The Germans responding in English and the American subjects produced almost the same percent of requests for repair, in 49% and 48% of the situations respectively.

Table 1: Incidences as % of Total Subjects/Situations

	Requests for Repair	Demands for Repair
German NSs	61	12
German ESL	49	20
American NSs	48	20

NS=Native Speaker ESL= English as a second language

In this table we see that demands for repair, in contrast to requests for repair, were relatively few across the data. Interestingly the German subjects produced more demands for repair in their English responses than they did in their German responses. When they did make their demands for repair in English, the German respondents generally made much stronger or direct demands for repair than they did when responding in German or than did the American English speakers.

I suggest two reasons for this; first what the Germans may have intended to convey in English and what they actually conveyed may well not have been the same. Second language learners simply do not have the same ability to manipulate the target language that native speakers do. As such these learners are likely to err in the actual intended pragmatic force of their utterances (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Beebe, et al. 1990; Blum-Kulka, 1982; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Olshtain & Weinbach, 1993).

A second reason for the difference in directness lies, I maintain, in pragmatic transfer; namely the German modal *müssen*, which technically compares to the English modal 'must' or 'have to,' encompasses a somewhat different semantic field and hence carries a different illocutionary or pragmatic force than does either English counterpart. As these German and English modals are not exactly interchangeable in all situations, Germans speaking in English and using 'must' or 'have to' where Americans expect 'should' or some other, less direct means of expression may unintentionally come across as sounding unusually demanding or even commanding to native speakers.

Let me elaborate on this point. In several instances the German respondents used *müssen* 'must/have to' where American English speakers prefer 'should.' This at times had the effect that the German subjects conveyed much stronger or more direct demands for repair than they probably intended to in their English responses. Consider for instance:

(3a) . . . You *must* pay for a new one.

(3b) . . . I think you *have to* give me a new appointment

In both (3a) and (3b) American speakers would have phrased their demands somewhat differently; e.g., substituting 'should' where the Germans used 'must' or 'have to:'

(3c) . . . You *should* pay for a new one.

(3d) . . . I think you *should* give me a new appointment.

For Americans 'should' softens the pragmatic force of a demand whereas 'must/have to' act as intensifiers that increase demands to command status. Although all the examples in (3) are demands for repair, there is a difference in the pragmatic force; the intensity or directness of the semantic content of the phrases is not identical. In American English 'must' when used in the sense of obligation (and to a somewhat lesser extent 'have to'), is a very strong modal auxiliary which conveys the idea of law or order. It implies that there is no possible or permissible alternative (Frank, 1972). In German *müssen* 'must' also carries this meaning of

obligation; in addition, however, it encompasses the notion of a milder obligation, that is, one in which there are other alternatives possible. This latter sense of German *müssen* is in English conveyed more appropriately by 'should' (Standwell, 1979).

Thus in American English when native speakers wish to express the idea of obligation with reference to responsibility or duty, they prefer to use 'should,' and when they wish to express the idea of obligation with reference to an order to law, they use 'must,' with 'have to' functioning as a sort of halfway point between 'should' and 'must' in terms of pragmatic force. When native speakers use 'should' they are allowing for the possibility of a rejection, but when they use 'must' they are exercising their authority vis á vis the hearer (Quirk et al., 1985). In short, in English a demand phrased with 'must' is significantly stronger and direct than one phrased with 'should.'

In German both of these meanings are part of the semantic field encompassed by *müssen*. L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge or understanding of the functional equivalence of target language and native language norms is often incomplete (Blum-Kulka, 1983; S. Takahashi, 1996). It is therefore not surprising that Germans, when speaking in English, will often use 'must' incorrectly and thereby impart a greater sense of directness or bluntness than they actually intended. As these speakers unintentionally violate American rules of speaking, their verbal actions provide impetus for cultural stereotyping of Germans as aggressive and commandeering.

Justifications

Justifications I define here as statements or phrases produced by respondents to defend, vindicate or lend support to their statement of problem and/or request or demand for repair. Overall, the German respondents produced more justifications in both their English and German responses than did the American respondents as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Incidence of Justifications as % of Subjects¹

	Sit#1	Sit#2	Sit#3	Sit#4	Sit#5
German NSs	10%	16%	44%	16%	44%
German ESL	17%	18%	34%	12%	40%
American NSs	0%	0%	20%	10%	30%

NS=Native Speaker ESL=English as a second language

of respondents illustrates another instance where pragmatic transfer may act in the creation and maintenance of cultural stereotyping. Since American speakers do not expect justifications, and certainly not justifications that appeal to duty or responsibility in these types of complaint situations, their reaction is most likely to be negative when speakers of Germans do furnish such justifications in such settings in English. Indeed an informal survey of native speakers of American English indicated to me that they almost uniformly interpreted such justifications as criticism, and inappropriately strong criticism at that. It seems that here we see again an example of how pragmatic transfer underlies native speaker perceptions that German speakers are more accusatory than is appropriate.

Criticisms

The last category I will discuss is criticisms, namely sentences or phrases that offer an evaluation of the problem or situation, as in:

(5a) **You've ruined my coat!**

(5b) I've been sitting here for two hours now. **You should have told me if there was going to be a problem** and I would have come back another time.
(criticism bolded)

The important element for a sentence or phrase to be labeled as 'criticism' is the element of reprobation or disapproval. A criticism is intrinsically a subjective (and negative) statement about the topic at hand. By its very nature a criticism is a face-threatening act, and in social interaction is expressed in a variety of ways depending upon the sociocultural norms governing criticism, as well as the goals and temperament of the speaker.

Table 3: Incidence of Criticisms as % of Subjects

	Sit#1	Sit#2	Sit#3	Sit#4	Sit#5
German NS	10	36.	32	26	30
German ESL	8	48	28	22	34
American NSs	5	34	30	10	30

#1=customer finds hair in soup

#2=customer's coat is ruined at cleaner's

#3=patient has been waiting over 2 hours at doctor's office

#4=customer has received incorrect bill from store

#5=tenant has a broken oven that superindendent has not fixed.

In comparing the German and English data from the German respondents with the English data from the Americans, we find a qualitative difference in the tone and style of the criticisms. Compare for instance:

(6.1) Native speakers of German responding in German (criticisms bolded)

(a) *Sagen Sie mal, wie konnte denn das passieren? Sie sollten ja eigentlich mit dem Reinigen auskommen.*

How could this have happened? **After all, you're supposed to know how to handle the cleaning.**

(b) *Auf Sie kann man sich aber auch nicht verlassen.*

One really cannot depend on you.

(6.2.) Native speakers of German responding in English

(c) I'm waiting now for two hours and I think **that's not correct.**

(d) I'm sorry, but there is a hair in my soup. I think **this is not very good restaurant practice.**

(6.3.) Native speakers of American English

(e) I asked you to remove the spot and **now the coat is ruined.**

(f) I've asked you to fix it (the oven) several times and **you still haven't fixed it.**

From an American perspective the German subjects' English responses feel more blunt and/or make references to matters in a different way than Americans usually expect under such circumstances. Once again, cultural misunderstandings as to the intensity of the complaint, as well as to the intent, often arise. As I alluded to earlier, Germany is a society that places great emphasis upon doing what is 'right' and 'expected' of one (Ardagh, 1987; Clyne, 1984; Hall, 1983; Hall & Hall, 1990; Friday, 1989). Consequently German criticisms, like their justifications, often make reference to societal roles and expectations. To Americans, in contrast, such types of criticisms seem to be rather strong censure; there is not the same perceived need to adhere to strongly defined and felt societal norms of behavior (Althen, 1988; Stewart & Bennett, 1986). In fact, one of the things that strikes Americans when they are in Germany or working in the United States with Germans is the Germans' frequent use of such expressions as *Man tut das nicht* 'one doesn't do that/that isn't done' and *so wird es gemacht* 'that's the way it's done'/ 'that's the German way' (Hall & Hall, 1990; Friday, 1989). In Germany, a relatively homogeneous culture, it is quite acceptable and common to point out breaches in socially acceptable behavior by appealing to shared norms and expectations; in the United States, on the other hand, a much more heterogeneous culture, it is generally not acceptable to do so (Althen, 1988; Hall & Hall, 1990; Stewart & Bennett, 1984).

In sum, the question is not whether Germans are more critical, more commandeering, or more brusque than Americans. At issue is that German rules of

speaking accept, allow for, and indeed expect more and different types of criticisms and justifications than do the American norms. By the same token, different semantic fields encompassing modal choices and ways of expressing oneself in German can also prompt German learners of English to sound more direct, more accusatory or more blunt than is usually acceptable to Americans. Thus in communicative interactions between Americans and German speakers of English, Americans are likely to misinterpret German verbal behavior at times because each group of speakers is operating under different (and at times conflicting) rules of discourse. As such at least some of cultural stereotyping has its origins in pragmatic transfer.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to explore whether the source of at least some cultural stereotyping lies in pragmatic transfer. In other words, do differing socio-cultural norms of communicative interaction between native speakers and same-language groups of nonnative speakers influence cultural misunderstandings that then give rise to stereotypes? Specifically I examined how native speakers of German complain in service settings in English and in German, and compared these data with data from native speakers of American English. I focused on four semantic categories: requests and demands for repair, justifications and criticisms. The preliminary results indicate that the type and tone of the German responses differed from those of the American responses, such that cultural misunderstandings as to the directness and intent of the speakers are likely to result. As I have attempted to illustrate here, these cultural misunderstandings, when they occur consistently among groups of same-language nonnative speakers, can give rise to cultural stereotypes.

The data in this study indicate that Germans in English are generally more direct, that is, more aggressive and blunt than are Americans in similar situations. Some of the specific semantic response categories that they are likely to transfer are the more frequent use of strong criticisms, more justifications, and more direct requests. In considering the complaint response set, the data produced by the Germans in German indicate that they tend to prefer more direct and stronger types of utterances than do American speakers.

Many of these differences in directness may be due to different cultural perceptions as to the roles of speaker and hearer in service situations in German and American society. In German society, more emphasis is placed upon fulfilling one's obligations, doing what is "right," and in general adhering to well-defined societal expectations of behavior (Condon & Yousef, 1975; Hall & Hall, 1990). The type of complaints produced by the German subjects in the five service situations investigated here reaffirm these German societal attitudes. It is not only the fact that there is a problem that requires remedy, but it is as though the speaker is morally offended and morally obligated to point out to the hearer that that person has failed in doing his/her duty.

In American society, by contrast, there is more emphasis on the individual and appeal to the individual rather than to societal norms (Althen, 1988; Glenn, 1981; Sarles, 1988). A problem is not an offense against one's societal role or duty, but rather an offense against a person's individual rights; e.g., of property, or of time.

Further research, however, is needed to confirm these findings; the subjects were within a limited age group, and only five controlled complaint situations and only written data were examined. Further studies should combine a variety of elicited and ethnographic data collection methods in order to probe the role of pragmatic transfer in cultural stereotyping.

NOTES

¹E.g., in the German NS data 5 of 50 subjects used justifications in Situation #1. Therefore, the incidence is reported as $5/50 = 10\%$

²Note that in this cleaner situation the Americans produced no justifications at all.

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