Developing awareness of crosscultural pragmatics: The case of American/German sociable interaction

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Abstract

The elaboration of the theoretical notion of communicative competence reflects a growing awareness of the importance of pragmatic knowledge in achieving mastery of a second language. Such awareness includes the recognition that teaching language effectively includes teaching culture in the most fundamental sense. Using the framework of interactional sociolinguistics to link theoretical work on cultural ethos and research in crosscultural pragmatics with the interpretation of situated language use, this article draws teachers’ attention to three interrelated aspects of conversational style which are important in initial crosscultural encounters between Americans and Germans. The goal is to provide teachers of both English and German as second languages with conceptual frameworks for and ideas about classroom practice which will teach culture appropriately by fostering pragmatic awareness and interactional competence crossculturally.

The argument is made that language teachers should give pragmatic competence/awareness the highest priority in the classroom, from the beginning of language study.

Introduction

The theoretical elaboration of the notion of communicative competence (Canale 1983; Canale and Swain 1980; Hymes 1971; Savignon 1983) including its extension to ‘interactional competence’ (Hall 1995; Kramsch 1986), reflects a growing awareness of the importance of pragmatic knowledge in achieving mastery of a second language. Celce-Murcia (1995) expands Hymes’ original sociolinguistic component of communicative competence to five separate areas: strategic/procedural, socio-cultural, formulaic (language as lexical chunks and routines), para-
linguistic, and discourse competence. According to the broad definition of pragmatics as ‘a cognitive, social and cultural perspective on language and communication’, offered by the International Pragmatics Association, all of Celce-Murcia’s areas may be subsumed under ‘pragmatics’.

The elaboration of the construct of communicative competence as the theoretical framework behind language teaching carries with it the potential for both benefit and risk. It is valuable in that it directs our attention to pragmatics in the broadest sense, and forces us to recognize that trying to teach a language by organizing our syllabi around linguistic structures or isolated notions or functions is not acceptable. A related benefit is that the elaboration itself suggests that this broadly pragmatic aspect of competence has a greater importance than we have realized and should be given proportionately greater focus and weight in the classroom. Support for this shift in emphasis, following Bruner (1981, 1985), Ochs, Schieffelin and Platt (1979), and Slobin (1982), is that pragmatic competence may in fact compensate in significant ways for lack of development of grammatical skills, principally because the native speaker interlocutor will be able to use the appropriate cultural schema to infer communicative intent and, in effect, fill in as needed. Such cultural matching, by creating relative ease in the interaction, may also contribute to a relatively favorable attitude toward the language learner (Davies and Tyler 1994).

On the other hand, the elaboration is potentially dangerous in several ways: the first is that it may appear to separate ‘linguistic competence’ from the other aspects of communicative competence in an artificial way (indeed, to attempt to distinguish things which cannot be teased apart effectively), thereby perpetuating the belief that ‘culture’ can be taught separately from language. Secondly, it also apparently fails to provide a place within the scheme for a meta-level at which the learner has a conscious conceptual knowledge of patterns of the native culture in relation to the target culture. Indeed, Kasper (2001: 515) reviews classroom research on instruction in pragmatics and finds ‘a distinct advantage for explicit metapragmatic instruction’.

I remember the way English grammar was illuminated for me when I began, as a seventh-grader, to study another language; in my case it wasn’t that I finally learned grammatical terminology (which is what I usually hear in similar experiences reported by other Americans), but rather that I suddenly had a basis for comparison, another system which allowed me to examine such taken-for-granted things as word order and grammatical agreement. I believe it was pronouns in French and German that began to suggest to me that there was an entirely different frame of reference represented by ‘French’ or ‘German’, that I had to learn not only the different grammatical forms but also the kinds of
relationships that they were associated with, and that to make a mistake was to commit not a grammatical but a social error. I saw that politeness was linked to language in a very profound way, and that in effect I couldn’t even open my mouth to speak without calculating my relationship to the person I was speaking with. I don’t remember that I thought of this as ‘culture’; culture was taught to me as a combination of great achievements in civilization together with foods and quaint customs.

I may be doing my teachers an injustice, but I don’t remember discussions about comparative grammatical structures, or about cultural patterns. I remember being given a list of usages, for example that we use the familiar pronouns with our brothers and sisters, with our pets, and with God. I remember wondering about how God got into that list, since the address term I had heard used in prayers seemed to be the formal ‘Lord’, but I don’t remember asking about it, and I don’t remember any discussions initiated by the teachers.

My seventh grade French class was taught all in French, so perhaps that explains the lack of discussion about these issues. But it also suggests that methodologies such as the ‘natural approach’ might have a similar lack of discussions or lack of explicit formulations in relation to the grammatical system (either in and of itself or in contrastive analysis) or of pragmatics in the broadest sense. If teachers interpret a communicative approach to mean that they should put all of their energy into stimulating interaction, participation and ‘communication’ — without discussion or reflection — and if they are relatively cross-culturally unaware themselves, then it would seem inevitable that they would foster ‘communication’ within their own unconscious native pragmatic framework, and would never create opportunities for discussion, analysis, comparison, and reflection. The worst case result would be that learners would end up with some level of undeveloped proficiency (with major areas of interference and fossilization), without any conceptual understanding of any aspect of communicative competence. Thus learners would have no conceptual tools for developing their proficiency or for understanding that the language they have been studying is in fact a potential window on a new way of looking at and being in the world.

The intended audience for this article are teachers who are interested in developing creative ways in their classrooms to promote awareness of crosscultural pragmatics. My purpose is to provide teachers with theoretical perspectives on culture and useful examples which they can employ as heuristics in generating class discussion of cultural differences, and in developing metapragmatic awareness through engagement with their students in the analysis of interaction.
**Pedagogical perspectives**

Approaches to the teaching of culture such as Seelye (1975), Robinson (1985), Valdes (1986), Damen (1987), and Scarcella and Oxford (1992), while useful in developing general awareness of cultural differences, do not necessarily lead to an understanding of the links between cultural differences and situated interaction. Linking theoretical work on cultural ethos and research in crosscultural pragmatics (including the author’s own findings from ethnographic interviews4) with the interpretation of situated language use, within the framework of interactional sociolinguistics, this article draws teachers’ attention to three interrelated aspects of conversational style which are important in sociable interaction, in particular in initial crosscultural encounters between Americans and Germans. The goal is to provide teachers of both English and German as second languages with conceptual frameworks for and ideas about classroom practice which will teach culture appropriately by fostering pragmatic awareness and interactional competence crossculturally. The argument is made that language teachers should give pragmatic competence/awareness the highest priority in the classroom, from the beginning of language study.

The main pedagogical points I would like to make in this paper are the following. The first is that we need to organize teaching around speech activities as discourse rather than around isolated speech acts. Thus, for example, in the classroom rather than designing lessons on ‘information questions’ or ‘requests,’ we would organize teaching around ‘small talk’ as a social practice. The discourse of ‘small talk’ as a form of sociable interaction can be explored not only in terms of typical speech acts and typical grammatical and lexical characteristics, but also in terms of prosodic and paralinguistic dimensions. Most importantly, a focus on a practice such as ‘small talk’ provides an opportunity to explore cultural differences in how interlocutors create conversational involvement in initial encounters. Such a teaching focus fosters a particular habit of mind, which is the second pedagogical point. We need to develop in learners the ability to look for patterns, through discourse analysis and a certain critical distance, rather than ‘facts’ or ‘rules’ about language and culture. In effect we need to inspire their interest in language and culture, and give them the tools to become ethnographers of their own communication.

The third pedagogical point is that we need to present cultural themes (e.g., the public versus the private self: what is the boundary between an acceptable and unacceptable degree of self-disclosure in small talk?) as opportunities to explore diversity within the home and target cultures. In this way, learners come to realize that what at first glance may seem
very ‘foreign’ is also part of a familiar repertoire, but only in a particular context. This raises students’ awareness of the complexity of situated interpretation, and also prepares them to explore cultural stereotypes (both positive and negative) as potentially linked to specific behaviors with different cultural meanings. The final pedagogical point is that we need to highlight the idea that each crosscultural encounter is a new context. Understanding typical cultural patterns and interpretations of the target culture does not mean that one can predict the behavior of interlocutors; human beings are not cultural robots. To each new situation participants bring their own cultural patterns and expectations, but interpret interaction from moment-to-moment as an emergent process. Such a perspective also emphasizes a range of possibilities rather than simply warning learners about possible negative effects in crosscultural encounters.

These pedagogical principles are grounded in the theoretical framework of interactional sociolinguistics (Davies and Tyler 1994; Gumperz 1982; Gumperz and Roberts 1980; Tyler and Davies 1990) and contribute to the notion of an ‘explanatory’ pragmatics (Meier 1998; Verschueren 1996; Richards and Schmidt 1983; Thomas 1983), rather than simply a ‘descriptive’ one. It could, indeed, be argued that the only ultimately important impact we might have as educators is our success in creating this conceptual meta-effect. In the elementary and secondary schools, and perhaps even at the tertiary level, foreign language classes may be the only opportunity for students to have an experience where they can begin to acquire a new habit of mind, a cognitive perspective which might persist long after any competence in the target language has faded away. This habit of mind may be initiated through non-judgmental comparison. Contrastive analysis of linguistic structures can be of value as a first step, because they are relatively neutral compared with discourse patterns which are linked to heavily value-laden attitudes about politeness, for example. The goal is learning to see that the learner exists, unreflectively, in a particular culture which is articulated through language; and that the language being learned is another culture which represents a whole different frame of reference. Recognizing this fact brings the learner to a conceptual meta-level. This meta-level of conceptualization is essential for effective citizenship in a democracy in which differing points of view need to be understood and taken into account with respect, and for enlightened participation as a citizen of the world.

Developing crosscultural awareness

I will now refer to this habit of mind and its fruits as crosscultural awareness. Kramsch (1991: 229) refers to it as ‘cultural competence’, and as-
asserts that it can best be developed in a structured learning environment, where conscious parallels can be drawn, where language can be explicitly linked to its meaning in a particular sociocultural and historical context, where disparate linguistic or cultural phenomena can be brought together and attached to more abstract principles of both base (C1) and target (C2) language and culture. Teachers should continually deepen their understanding of both C1 and C2 by reading studies from a variety of sources that help identify and analyze cultural patterns in the series of isolated cultural facts which they experience or teach about.

In fact, whereas we are concerned with ‘cultural competence’, in the sense that we want to develop awareness of each cultural/linguistic system as a system unto itself, we are also addressing ‘crosscultural competence’ as the understanding of the potential interfaces between the systems. These interfaces are what Kramsch (1993) calls ‘third places’.

The ‘problem’ of stereotypes

A basic dilemma in developing crosscultural awareness is how to work effectively with generalizations. It is important, on the one hand, to avoid presenting decontextualized characteristics of cultural groups, and on the other hand to provide effective links between cultural generalizations and specific situations of language use. Too often we find teaching organized around categories of language use at very low levels of abstraction, which are often not only inconsistent (e.g., asking and answering questions [grammatical] and disagreeing [functional]) but also decontextualized. The learner is not given the means of generalizing appropriately about broader cultural patterns of language use. A tradition in the area of intercultural communication (Hofstede 1986; Troyanovich 1972) provides formulations of value systems at a very abstract level (e.g., Americans value ‘individualism’) which are potentially valuable, but not linked to the use of language in situated interaction. Sometimes we find cultural stereotypes presented in the form of generalizations, a relatively benign example of which is the idea that Americans are ‘direct’ when compared with, for example, the Japanese, who are characterized as ‘indirect’; problems arise here immediately if the learner notices that the favored strategy which his/her textbook is presenting in American English for the function of disagreement is the highly indirect ‘yes, but …’ Blum-Kulka and House (1989) offer a descriptive critique of the direct/indirect formulation. Too often we also find an avoidance of cultural generalizations.

One legitimate reason for this avoidance among teachers is a lack of definitive or accessible theoretical work on cultural patterns. A. J. Meier (1988) has nicely documented the lack of consistency in research on
speech acts in relation to various cultures, and also the lack of linking between cultural themes and their manifestations linguistically. Kasper (1990) discusses challenges of Western ethnocentricity to theoretical work on politeness. Another legitimate reason for avoiding cultural generalizations is a fear of promoting stereotypes, a fear which is shared by students. It seems that there is an interpretive bias toward hearing such statements, preceded by no matter how many qualifications or hedges, as categorical, deterministic statements rather than probabilistic ones which are designed to serve as interpretive heuristics. My experience has been that the utterance of any such statement is immediately challenged by the presentation of an individual counterexample, and that the single counterexample is assumed to invalidate the generalization. Such a reaction may be a sign of the times of extreme sensitivity to any statement which could be hardened somehow into a stereotype, whether apparently negative or positive. I believe that there is also an ideological resistance among many Americans to cultural generalizations (especially about ‘Americans’) which they typically interpret as culturally deterministic in flavor and then reject (from the ideological position of extreme individualism). In effect, many Americans don’t want to become aware of the fact that they are actors in a socio-culturally constituted world which shapes their actions and interpretations to a significant extent. The irony here is that their lack of cultural constraint, i.e., their individual freedom/self-determination, increases to the degree that they are aware of their own cultural socialization.

The challenge for language teachers is to present information about culture in such a way that learners come to recognize, through nonjudgmental comparison, both the existence of their own system and that of the other language/culture. To fail at this challenge is to perpetuate the dangerous assumption that ‘people are all basically the same, i.e., like me’, and that speaking another language is simply speaking English using words and structures of the other language. It is also important to prepare learners for potential crosscultural pragmatic failure, as examined in this paper between German and American conversational style. In developing such awareness, broad generalizations about culture can be of value as heuristics (e.g., Byrne’s [1986] critique, to be discussed below, of the claim that Americans tend to use ‘positive’ politeness, her refinement being that when compared with Germans, Americans are actually more deferential than positive). These abstractions, however, must be constantly linked in the classroom with specific instances of language use. Cultural styles have to be differentiated in relation to the kind of action being performed. There is no such thing as the German or American conversational style.
Thus stereotypes can potentially be turned to pedagogical advantage, as we help students to explore and understand their possible bases in differential cultural interpretation of interaction. Our responsibility as language teachers is to prepare students to be aware of potential cross-cultural difficulties arising out of cultural patterns and interpretive preferences, so that they will have strategies for dealing with them cross-culturally.

**Communicative/interactional competence**

*The views from ESL and GSL*

From the perspective presented here, it could be argued that language teachers should give pragmatic competence the highest priority in the classroom, from the very beginning of instruction, rather than the lowest priority, represented by supplementary and often miscellaneous materials presented as ‘culture’. Research findings within the general area of interactional sociolinguistics, in the ethnography of speaking tradition, in crosscultural and interlanguage pragmatics, and in crosscultural studies in general, are gradually finding their way into texts and classroom materials. Selected resources for teachers of ESL to Germans and GSL to Americans will now be discussed briefly.

Beginning with the ESL perspective, a teacher resource book, *Learner English: A Teacher’s Guide to Interference and Other Problems* (Swan and Smith 1987), containing a chapter on German speakers learning English (Swan 1987), covers the following categories: phonology, orthography and punctuation, grammar, and vocabulary. The only information given which could be categorized as relating to pragmatics is:

1. under ‘intonation’ there is simply the comment that ‘certain features of German intonation transferred to English can make speakers sound peremptory; it is worth giving special practice in requests and *wh*-questions’ (p. 33);
2. under ‘juncture’ the comment that the glottal stops that German speakers insert before words beginning with vowels leads to a ‘very foreign-sounding staccato effect’, and
3. under ‘vocabulary — other confusions’, the statement that ‘the German word for ‘please’ (*bitte*) is used when offering something, and also as a formulaic reply to thanks (rather like ‘not at all’). This leads students to misuse ‘please’ in English’ (p. 40).

Potentially useful as this information may be, it is minimal, and Swan gives the teacher no guidance in how to approach these crosscultural pragmatic issues in the classroom.
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At the other end of a continuum in ESL is work by Davies and Tyler (1994) on the development of interactional competence between international teaching assistants and American undergraduates in American universities. In this work, inspired by Gumperz and Roberts (1980), explicit pragmatic feedback is provided by interlocutors to each other on their own crosscultural situated language use in the form of videotaped roleplays of typical contexts of language use between university students and teachers. The development of aspects of interactional competence has been addressed by, among others, Davies, Tyler, and Koran (1989), Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, and Reynolds (1991), and Hall (1995).

Shifting to the GSL perspective, Kramsch (1981, 1983) presents an approach involving two steps: first, students learn to recognize and analyze pragmatic devices in authentic texts; then they are provided with opportunities for their own production through dialogs, role plays, and oral chaining techniques. Lovik (1987) is a programmatic statement concerning contrastive pragmatics, with valuable examples of form/function mismatches with bitte and greetings, responses to offers, and in nonverbal signals of listerliness. Rings (1989) presents an analysis of a simulated telephone conversation in terms of speech act sequencing, register, and cultural events and politeness, together with suggested first-year classroom activities. Rings (1992) sets out a range of areas which were revealed by her research using ethnographic interviews as potential sources of crosscultural misunderstanding, from single lexical items to ‘longer linguistic strings and culture-specific concepts’. Rings (1994) nicely links her interview data on crosscultural reactions to routine formulae and small talk, but does not make a theoretical connection to ethos, beyond formulations about ‘friendliness’ and ‘directness’.

Kramsch (1993), Context and Culture in Language Teaching, represents a culmination of sophistication and recognition of complexity in this area, and is addressed to all language teachers, even though many examples are drawn from the teaching of German. In examining critically the approaches taken by four different teachers to a short story in German, Kramsch leads us to see how the typical ‘communicative’ approaches taken by the teachers, while achieving other valuable goals, allowed the learners to continue to interpret the German story within their own American cultural framework. The learners were able to come away from the experience of reading and ‘discussing’ the story in various ways with no real understanding of its meaning within a German context. A deeper and comparative discussion, led by a crossculturally aware teacher, could have led to the examination of a core value in German culture, that of ‘order’, as it was expressed in the situated literary context. Kramsch
points to this higher level of abstraction as the crucial step to recognizing that the German text represented a different system of meaning.

In the next section, drawing on work in social and cultural anthropology, sociolinguistics, and social psychology, I will discuss some broad perspectives on German and American culture (e.g., the abstract notion of cultural ethos), and then link these perspectives to specific interrelated aspects of language use in informal interaction (small talk, joking, and the expressive function of prosody as aspects of solidarity or ‘positive’ politeness). I will conclude with recommendations for some classroom applications of this research.

Kramsch (1991: 234) describes a significant obstacle to teaching effectively about culture as follows:

Lack of a theoretical framework for the discussion of culture and for contrastive cultural analyses: Whereas the teaching of language draws on some descriptive nomenclature based on a theory of language, the teaching of culture is left with its anecdotal experiential base, or is forced into the theoretical framework of other disciplines like history, sociology, anthropology, semiotics, etc. In itself this might not be a drawback, but it does mean that teachers of culture must consciously straddle multiple disciplines and integrate their respective insights for themselves before they can teach such an integration to their students.

My purpose is to provide teachers with theoretical perspectives on culture which they can use as heuristics in generating class discussion of cultural differences, and in developing metapragmatic awareness.

**Cultural ethos and conversational style**

Brown and Levinson (1987), Scollon and Scollon (1983), and Tannen (1984) offer a universal framework for conceptualizing rapport strategies, identifying their manifestations, and predicting crosscultural miscommunication. Arising out of the constant tension in the human condition between needing to be included and needing to be free from interference from others, two primary styles are identified as solidarity and deference. The claim is that a society can be identified in terms of a unique ‘ethos’ which is manifested in the strategies and patterns which constitute a conversational style that can be thought of as ‘a summation of the social norms tied to a linguistic and cultural framework’ (Byrnes 1986: 191). The formulation has been critiqued, as discussed in Kasper (1990) as potentially ethnocentric in that their preoccupation with the individual’s need for autonomy doesn’t recognize that different cultures may place different values on individualism as opposed to collectivism.
The teacher’s awareness of such critiques is important for pedagogical purposes, because it encourages a tentative, exploratory and critical approach to the proposed framework. The teacher also needs to be constantly aware that even though we may try to generalize at this abstract level, substantial diversity exists among Americans and Germans.

American ethos and style

Brown and Levinson (1987) characterize American ethos as solidarity-based, thus emphasizing the common ground on which individuals may build relationships. Their framework links an ethos to a set of strategies. Individual strategies are (1987: 102):

- notice, attend to Hearer;
- exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with Hearer);
- claim in-group membership with Hearer;
- claim common point of view, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, empathy;
- be optimistic;
- joke;
- indicate that Speaker knows Hearer’s wants and is taking them into account;
- assume or assert reciprocity.

Byrnes (1986), using the methodology of starting from stereotypes which have developed within each group about the other, suggests that, compared to German strategies, American conversational style (in particular with reference to the experience of university students engaged in cross-cultural conversations) ‘is weighted toward deference strategies’ (1986: 198), i.e., toward more indirect approaches which highlight avoiding imposition by providing options for the addressee. She suggests, interestingly, that the solidarity that is usually thought to characterize American style is actually subtly ‘negative’, i.e., deferential. She hypothesizes that such subtle deference is the result of the absence of a clearly delineated class and power structure, rather than the result of a particularly strong group feeling. Such a conversational style in fact allows the individualism which Americans favor ideologically, in that respect for the individuality of others protects one’s own by maintaining reciprocal respect. A significant consequence in interaction, according to Byrnes, is that ‘a topic [of conversation] is more a vehicle for personal bonding than an issue whose truth is to be ascertained’ (1986: 200).
German ethos and style

German society, with its traditional concern with hierarchy, can be characterized as having a deference ethos in which power and social distance are marked explicitly, for example through titles and differential use of pronouns. Byrnes departs from Brown and Levinson’s framework, however, in characterizing conversational style among German university students not in terms of solidarity or deference politeness strategies, but rather as placing greater emphasis on the ‘information-conveying function of language, as compared with the social bonding function’ (1986: 200–201). She suggests further that this emphasis leads naturally to more direct strategies. Hall and Hall (1990: 50), in a crosscultural comparison of Americans, Germans, and French, also assert that the German speakers as a group ‘value honesty and directness’. Byrnes draws on the findings of House and Kasper (1981) as supporting her claim, pointing out that the behavior of British speakers in their study matches her experience with Americans: that in role-played individual speech acts, in particular complaints, German speakers were more direct than English speakers. Directness is here defined in terms of a set of conditions, yielding 8 levels ranging from a very indirect implication to a direct assertion of the badness of the perpetrator: the example given is that Y — who, as is well-known to X, often borrows X’s things — has stained X’s new blouse. The most indirect complaint would be:

(1) Odd, my blouse was perfectly clean last night

Seltsam, gestern war meine Bluse doch noch ganz sauber.

The most direct complaint would be:

(2) You are really mean

Du bist wirklich unverschämt.

Almost all of the complaint scenarios cited in the paper involve violations of social norms, and the Germans were much more willing to pass judgment on the violators, exercising a more overt social control function than the English speakers. Byrnes appears to argue that Germans are able to focus on the information content (i.e., the complaint itself) because they can be sure of a shared set of norms. Their certainty arises partly because norms are constantly being discussed and negotiated overtly.

An alternative explanation might be that Germans have more of a sense of homogeneity with a shared set of norms which they can enforce, whereas Americans are more aware of their heterogeneity. For Ameri-
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It would make sense that there is more of a need to be reinforcing and negotiating a very general sense of the negative solidarity that Byrnes posits, and more of a presumption that different people will do things in different ways and that such differences must be tolerated. In discussing his recent book about middle-class Americans, One Nation, After All (1998), sociologist Alan Wolfe told his interviewer that people tend to be very self-critical and judgmental about themselves. They believe in right and wrong. They know what right and wrong is for themselves, but they simply are enormously reluctant to ever say what’s right and wrong for anybody else.

A further explanation of the Germans’ more ‘direct’ complaints can be found within Brown and Levinson’s framework. It requires us to conceptualize the complaint scenario as a cultural context in which participants of otherwise relatively equal power and social distance are situationally redefined. The person who has violated the social norm has been demoted, as it were, and the person who has witnessed the violation is allowed to assume the greater power of the moral high ground. In this situation Brown and Levinson’s model would predict the most direct sort of communication, with no attempt at social lubrication, from the person in the situationally higher power position (just as we find in House and Kasper’s study).

I want to emphasize that this discussion is not intended to convey the ‘truth’ about Americans or Germans. It has been offered as an example of the potential uses of these ideas and theoretical frameworks in classroom discussion, through which language learners can begin to become aware of their own uses of language. We turn now to some seminal work in social psychology which is never cited in the crosscultural pragmatics literature; this approach has been pursued within crosscultural studies in speech communication (e.g., Barnlund 1989).

A contribution from social psychology

Kurt Lewin’s ground-breaking crosscultural work (1948) took as a starting point the ‘differences between the American and German person as a social being’. He conceptualized the individual social being as having a personality which was layered, involving a surface or ‘peripheral region’ and a core or central region. The peripheral region involves those areas which the culture ascribes to the open, common, ‘public’ life of the individual, and the central region involves those areas which are considered private and personal. Lewin’s findings were that among Americans the average ‘social distance’ between different individuals seems to be
smaller than among Germans, but only in regard to the peripheral regions. The examples Lewin gives are of ‘small talk’: ‘People waiting for the bus may start to discuss the weather, and in the train, conversation between strangers starts more easily than in Germany. The American seems to be more friendly and more ready to help a stranger’ (1948: 24). Lewin’s claim is that Americans, in effect, have a thicker peripheral layer than Germans do; more regions of the person are considered of public interest in the United States than in Germany. Thus it may appear to Germans that Americans move too quickly toward friendly relations, but then stop. Lewin’s claim about the central, private and intimate regions of personality is that they are equally difficult to get access to in Germans and Americans. Barnlund (1989) found a similar pattern for Americans in contrast to the Japanese.

I must emphasize again that these ideas are not being presented as ‘truth’, but rather for their pedagogical value in stimulating students to reflect on these important dimensions of crosscultural interaction.

Cross-cultural awareness in the classroom: Linking the abstract and the situated

This abstract level of speculation, concerning ethos, is an important part of the pragmatic component in language teaching, because it develops metapragmatic awareness and sensitizes the student to important issues crossculturally. If presented as an intellectual adventure in which variability is discovered and explored within students’ own culture, theoretical frameworks are studied and critiqued, and theory is constantly checked against the data of interaction, then such an approach can foster a habit of mind which is analytical, exploratory, and flexible in its approach to the world and its complexity.

An explanatory pragmatics seeks to link cultural ethos to patterns of conversational style. The learner needs to be aware that there may be significant differences concerning, for example, the culturally-defined purposes of conversation, the relative responsibilities of the speaker and hearer, the focuses that are possible in interaction (e.g., social bonding versus information content), and the boundaries of acceptable self-disclosure in particular contexts. The next step for an explanatory pragmatics is to link principles of conversational style to the interpretation of situated language use. For this purpose, we will draw upon work by Clyne (1979), Ventola (1979), Kotthoff (1989), Agar (1991), Rings (1992 1994), Meier (1997), and the author’s ethnographic findings in three interrelated areas which are important in the kinds of impressions that are formed when Americans and Germans try to talk with each other
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informally, and that relate particularly to American solidarity politeness behavior: small talk, joking, and the expression of emotional attitude through intonation.

Crosscultural interactional competence:
Establishing crosscultural rapport

Initial sociable crosscultural interaction is very important, largely because it either inhibits or facilitates future possibilities for interaction. It can rigidify existing stereotypes, or plant the germs of new ones. At a more benign level, it can make interlocutors uncomfortable enough that they will choose to avoid future interaction. Cultural awareness is the key to crosscultural interactional competence. It may not guarantee a comfortable experience, but it empowers interlocutors with understanding of principles and a set of possible strategies for participating in the emergent conversation, as they attempt to achieve ‘conversational involvement’ (Gumperz 1982).

(1) SMALL TALK:

The existence of the expression ‘small talk’ in English suggests that it is a cultural category; in contrast, German simply describes the practice as ‘zwanglose Unterhaltung’ (unconstrained, unrestricted, easy interaction). Even though it has status in English as a recognized speech activity, the name still serves to trivialize it; it is ‘small’ in presumed contrast to ‘big’ talk, i.e., important talk. Its name is also potentially trivializing as the German designation, especially if viewed within a cultural framework that values ‘purpose.’ One of my German consultants stated that conversation in German ‘must be goal-oriented; you must have a purpose’. In neither culture is appropriate recognition given to the important social work accomplished by this mode of interaction (Coupland 2001): it maintains sociability, the social lubrication of everyday life, in which the meaning is the relationship between the speakers (Goffman 1959, 1963, 1974; Malinowski 1923; Simmel 1950; Ventola 1979). It flows into the interstices between other ‘important’ speech activities, serving as buffer, warm-up, and release of tension, among other things. Topics are predictable, and confined to the ‘public’ aspects of the person: for example, the weather, superficial dimensions of health, activities on weekends or holidays, everyday activities (e.g., school, evening plans, television programs and movies).

What Byrnes has called ‘negative’ solidarity to characterize the American ethos, which she sees as the result of the absence of a clearly delineated class and power structure rather than the result of a particularly
strong group feeling, would need to draw on very general shared socio-cultural knowledge in the form of ritual and culturally safe or neutral topics around which solidarity, experienced as a superficial public friendliness, can be affirmed. We would also of course predict that German would have conversational routines, but perhaps that there would be less of a need for elaboration. And in fact Clyne (1979) found in his study that

the German speakers attached more importance than the English speakers\(^6\) to standardized routines marking the beginning or the end of an interaction … However, there were few standardized routines to continue the conversation. Comments on the weather are generally considered trite, stupid or inappropriate by Germans, while many other ‘next step’ formulae acceptable in English would be considered too personal.

Even the American ritual health inquiry ‘How are you?’ is interpreted as attempting to intrude into the ‘private’ areas of the person (Kotthoff 1989; Rings 1994). Both German and American consultants commented that Germans seemed to have obligatory opening and closing rituals for public encounters, with nothing in between; whereas Americans seemed to have more flexible (and sometimes optional) openings and closings, with the focus on the sociable interaction in the middle.

It is difficult to develop a conversation with an unknown person — unless, of course, one can establish some common ground or identify oneself. For this reason, some ‘casual’ German discourse appears to comprise merely a skeletal schema, such as the following in a restaurant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opener:</th>
<th>Reply:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guten Tag or Grüß Gott!</td>
<td>Guten Tag or Grüß Gott!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ist hier noch frei?</td>
<td>Ja, bitte!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Guten Appetit)</td>
<td>(Danke, gleichfalls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auf Wiedersehen!</td>
<td>Auf Wiedersehen!</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is easy to envision the difficulties of an American in Germany trying to develop small talk along American cultural lines. One American consultant, who spent some time in Germany trying to learn German, reported that he tried consistently to initiate sociable interaction, especially in service encounters such as at the library, at the shoemaker’s, and at a McDonald’s, and rarely ever received a response. An example of one of his unsuccessful attempts at the fast food restaurant which he frequented, was to say: *Ich nehme das Gewöhnliche* (‘I’ll have the usual’).
In this case, however, the lack of success in eliciting a sociable response was probably based in his mistranslation of ‘the usual’. A bilingual consultant points out that the appropriate or normal thing to say is, ‘Ich nehme das Übliche’, whereas the noun phrase ‘das Gewöhnliche’ has potentially negative connotations that the American had not picked up on. Germans in the U.S. often misunderstand small talk to be the initiation of a ‘close friendship’, and can feel set up for a disappointment. This works together with the apparently informal ease of ‘you’ as the only pronoun in use. On the other hand, I found German students in the United States appreciating the smiles with greeting or small talk initiated by, for example, clerks at supermarket check-out counters, as very pleasant and in marked contrast to Germany. A German consultant reported that the German postal system in Bavaria had issued a brochure for its clerks on how to be more friendly to the customer; the employees were instructed to smile, and to say a few ‘private’ (i.e., personal) words. A German student consultant commented that she liked the way Americans seem to take more opportunities to laugh, in contrast to the more serious-minded Germans.

(2) JOKING:

This brings us to the next, related, point concerning joking interaction. A form of adult play, joking (here assumed to include humor and irony) is a classic characteristic of solidarity behavior, built on shared sociocultural knowledge, assumptions and attitudes. Whereas Germans may joke with friends, with whom they use ‘du’, they would be less likely to joke with acquaintances under small talk conditions. A German consultant (an academic) commented that for Germans, joking is private behavior, whereas for Americans it is public as well as private. Agar (1991: 178) documented a speech event called ‘Schmäh’ among Austrians, a sort of subtle joking which he defined as ‘a humorous exchange that grows out of the moment that is based on a negative portrayal of the other’s motives or situation’. Clyne (1984) found that English speakers (and Austrian German speakers) have a more creative and lighthearted attitude and less prescriptive approach to language than Germans do.

One implication of this attitude toward language is that Germans are less likely than English speakers to engage in linguistically-based humor in everyday discourse (cf. Norrick 1993 on conversational joking among American English speakers). The game of punning back and forth that is played by many English speakers is not known to or understood by most German speakers. Clyne (1979), in an empirical study, found that ‘irony based on understatement is used and understood much less by German speakers than by English speakers .... Verbal humor and verbal
irony are, at best, the province of creative writers …’ Further, my ethnographic interview data revealed that Germans tended to judge Americans negatively on the basis of what was seen to be their excessive joking; they were assumed to be ‘frivolous’ and ‘not serious enough’.

An interesting question to be explored is the degree to which Germans and Americans attempt irony (cf. Clift 1999) (in any form, not just the understatement variety discussed in Clyne) in sociable conversation, and their success in interpreting it accurately, especially across cultures. Irony assumes extensive shared knowledge, including concerning participants’ attitudes, and for that reason might be considered too risky for sociable conversation among strangers. An additional problem is the subtlety of prosodic, paralinguistic, and nonverbal signalling of irony, especially in the American ‘deadpan’ style. Crosslinguistic differences in the use of prosody between English and German would contribute to difficulties in the accurate reading of irony.

(3) THE EXPRESSIVE ROLE OF PROSODY:

Solidarity politeness can involve hyperbole in the expressive/attitudinal message, which is conveyed largely through prosody in American English. This creates a strong contrast with German, in which the same sort of information is conveyed not so much through prosody as through the use of particles such as ‘denn, ja, doch’ (Möllering and Nunan 1995; Raith 1986). According to my consultants, the American pitch contours and intensity can create an overly emotional impression for a German, whereas the relatively flat German intonation contour can sound monotonous or uninvolved to an American. Other problems related to prosody are suggested by Swan and Smith (1987), who comment that aspects of German intonation can make speakers sound peremptory in English and that glottal stops inserted before words beginning with vowels create a staccato effect that is very unusual in English.

Implications for the classroom

Lörscher and Schulze (1988) provide an explication of how classroom discourse does not offer opportunities for authentic practice of politeness. Interrelations of the dimensions of solidarity politeness behavior for Americans, and their interpretations by Germans, need to be explored through examination of the discourse of sociability.

It should be noted that the focus in this paper, while linking theory and research findings with the interpretation of situated interaction, has in fact been on a limited range of aspects of interactional competence which appear to be significant in initial sociable crosscultural contact.
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Such a focus may offer a manageable starting point for a teacher who might otherwise feel overwhelmed; Rings (1989: 466) points out that one of the caveats … may be the wealth of information to which teachers could introduce students. The teacher’s job, therefore, is to choose those tasks on which to concentrate at any given time, based on student and teacher goals and interests, and on the materials available for use.

I would like to suggest some specific ways of including the development of pragmatic awareness and interactional competence in our classrooms, acknowledging and building on Nash (1976), Mugglestone (1980), Kramsch (1981, 1993), Bublitz and Weber (1986), Lovik (1987), Lörscher and Schulze (1988), Rings (1989, 1992, 1994), Arendt (1996), and Bardovi-Harlig (1996). I return to the pedagogical points laid out at the beginning of the paper, and suggest that each point can be applied at all levels of language teaching.

(1) We need to organize teaching around speech activities as discourse rather than around isolated speech acts. Thus, for example, in the classroom rather than designing lessons on ‘information questions’ or ‘requests’, we would organize teaching around ‘small talk’ as a social practice. Arendt (1996) provides a range of examples of small talk as well as pedagogical techniques, and Rings (1989) offers a model of how to work with an example of a casual conversation in the classroom. The analysis of small talk discourse can explore openings, closings, and sequencing, the types of speech acts performed, and prosodic and paralinguistic dimensions, as well as typical grammatical and lexical characteristics. Most importantly, a focus on a practice such as small talk provides an opportunity to explore cultural differences in how interlocutors create conversational involvement in initial encounters. Such a teaching focus fosters a particular habit of mind.

(2) We need to develop in learners the ability to look for patterns through discourse analysis and a certain critical distance, rather than ‘facts’ or ‘rules’ about language and culture (cf. Bardovi-Harlig et al. 1991; Bardovi-Harlig 1996). In effect we need to inspire their interest in language and culture, and give them the tools to become ethnographers of their own communication.

The use of authentic discourse as examples for analysis is extremely important. Possible sources are video clips from film and television, collected both by the teacher and by learners, illustrating prototypical discourse from both the native culture and the target culture. Such discourse can be used for analysis, but it is essential that each cultural
perspective be represented. Thus the American discourse must be commented upon and reacted to by Americans and also by Germans, and vice versa. Training learners to conduct ethnographic interviews about sociable discourse would be valuable (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon 1996). Eventually, learners should generate their own discourse and receive feedback, from a native speaker of the target language, oriented to the interpretation of communicative intent. Role-plays, ideally videotaped and then used to provide feedback and an opportunity to redo the roleplay, are an extremely valuable tool for working on all aspects of interactional competence (cf. Davies and Tyler 1994).

(3) We need to present cultural themes (e.g., the public versus the private self: what is the boundary between an acceptable and unacceptable degree of self-disclosure in small talk?) as opportunities to explore diversity within the home and target cultures. In promoting awareness of a different ethos, we can start by having students consider how they may have experienced different situations in their own lives. Class discussions should probe learners’ cultural knowledge concerning, for example, (a) when the focus of a conversation is on information content or social bonding; (b) when it’s socially acceptable to argue and how arguing is done; (c) acceptable and unacceptable ways to interrupt people; (d) who jokes with whom, when, how, and about what; (e) when it’s acceptable to express strong emotion; (f) what topics are acceptable and unacceptable for small talk, and whether students agree with the taboo against discussion of politics, religion, and sex; (g) when direct enforcement of social norms is considered acceptable and unacceptable (e.g., adult/child, drill sergeant/recruit, friend/friend). This technique allows learners to recognize that within each culture there is a wide range of modes, and that a general cultural ethos represents an emphasized tendency which they also have within their cultural repertoires.

A follow-up technique would be to have students design roleplays as potential manifestations of an ethos in terms of specific interactional behaviors, emphasizing implications for misinterpretation of communicative intent across subcultures within their own culture, and extending analysis then to the implications for crosscultural miscommunication. Such techniques emphasize the importance of sensitivity to the cultural definition of the situation. In this way, learners come to realize that what at first glance may seem very ‘foreign’ is also part of a familiar repertoire, but only in a particular context. This raises students’ awareness of the complexity of situated interpretation, and also prepares them to explore cultural stereotypes (both positive and negative) as potentially linked to specific behaviors with different cultural meanings. For example, learners could explore what bases there could be in interaction for
Germans’ impression of Americans as ‘frivolous’ or ‘superficial’, and for Americans’ impressions of Germans as ‘abrupt’ or ‘cold’.

(4) We need to highlight the idea that each crosscultural encounter is a new context. Understanding typical cultural patterns and interpretations of the target culture does not mean that one can predict the behavior of interlocutors; human beings are not cultural robots. To each new situation participants bring their own cultural patterns and expectations, but interpret interaction from moment-to-moment as an emergent process (cf. Tyler and Davies 1990). Such a perspective also emphasizes a range of possibilities rather than simply warning learners about possible negative effects in crosscultural encounters.

Whereas these suggestions have been made in relation to the classroom, contexts in which learners can be immersed in the language and culture would be ideal. Learners could be given ethnographic assignments, the results of which are brought back into the classroom for analysis as a part of explicit metapragmatic instruction which emerges from the discourse collected by the learners themselves.

Conclusion

Using the framework of interactional sociolinguistics to link theoretical work on cultural ethos and research in crosscultural pragmatics with the interpretation of situated language use, this article has drawn teachers’ attention to three interrelated aspects of conversational style which are important in sociable crosscultural encounters between Americans and Germans. The goal has been to provide teachers of both English and German as second languages with conceptual frameworks for and ideas about classroom practice which will teach culture appropriately. This paper has argued that awareness of crosscultural pragmatics and the development of interactional competence should be reordered as a high priority from the beginning of language study, as the basic framework within which all aspects of communicative competence are developed.

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Notes

1. The term ‘crosscultural pragmatics’ is being used here in a much broader sense than the study of speech acts (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).
2. The author began her professional career as a teacher of German to Americans, but since her more recent experience has focused on teaching American English to Germans among others, this latter perspective is foregrounded in the paper. It is hoped, however, that information has been presented throughout the paper in such a way that the implications for both perspectives will be obvious.
This perspective is consistent with Klein’s (1991) point that what people learn is both language and parallel information, simultaneously.

The information from ‘ethnographic interviews’ is used simply to provide examples as appropriate. Such information is, of course, most probably an indication of cultural norms (i.e., ‘how one thinks people behave’) rather than actual behavior.

In addition to the one just cited involving lack of care of a borrowed item, there is also the example of a student dealing with a friend who didn’t admit having forgotten to hand a paper in for him, a student dealing with a friend who isn’t doing her share of the work, a librarian speaking to a student who had made pencil marks in a library book, and a student speaking to a fellow student who has taken her seat in the library.

The English speakers who participated in Clyne’s study were Anglo-Australians; I believe that there are sufficient similarities Australian and American norms.

References


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