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## Germany vs. "The South" or: Should (and can?) second language learners be taught how to be "rude" or "sweet"?

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When I moved from Germany to Berkeley about a dozen years ago, my command of English was quite adequate, I thought, but nobody had prepared me for the pragmatic differences between the ways Germans and Californians used language. I was puzzled by a number of things -- for example, by people constantly asking me how I was and then not stopping to hear the answer -- all of it. If they did stop, I would notice their eyes glaze over after a minute or two. I quickly learned that the expected answer was 'fine'. They did not really want to know the truth.

For a few weeks, I was also amazed at people's friendliness. 'My, am I popular!' I thought. However, I quickly learned that smiles and "friendliness" in California did not mean what I had grown used to expect them to mean. In Germany, they signal genuine affection. In California, they often merely signal 'I don't bite!'

Knowing what I know now, I wish somebody had told me these things and a variety of others, even practiced them with me. A class on applied cross-cultural communication would have been very helpful. I am grateful that I had at least a chance to practice -- in California -- before I moved to Virginia, because it turned out that Virginia style politeness contains just about every element of California style politeness I found difficult to learn, only in a much more elaborate version. I would have been an unmitigated social disaster had I tried to survive in Virginia straight off the plane from Frankfurt.

In this paper, I want to discuss some major differences in communicative conventions between Germans and Virginians -- from what I have been told, they hold for much of the South -- and make a case for teaching those conventions explicitly, for practicing them, and for giving people who move from one to the other a chance to become familiar and more comfortable with those conventions before, or soon after, their arrival. This could prevent a lot of hurt feelings and insecurity.

A number of scholars (Byrnes (1986), Lakoff (1975), Kuhn (1981, 1992), Kotthoff (1988), House and Kasper (1981), House (1989), and Hall (1984), have discussed the fact that in the U.S., Germans have a reputation for being rude or abrupt. Part of this reputation can no doubt be traced to German military personnel barking Achtung 'attention' in old war movies. Some of it stems from German exchange students bristling at questions from friendly Americans trying to make small talk, responding with 'why do you want to know' or some version of 'none of your business'. Some of it stems from Germans who, when asked how they liked the U.S., happily expounded on the pros and cons, especially the cons, since the controversial aspects made for much more interesting discussion.

Another important source of that reputation lies in differing conventions for the use of speech acts and their modifications. In German, directives and other utterances

are frequently modified by particles such as <u>mal</u>, <u>doch</u>, <u>ja</u>, and <u>halt</u>, a technique that allows the speaker to use a relatively direct speech act without projecting too rude an illocutionary force.

Gib mir das Salz 'give me the salt' is a command.

Gib mir mal das Salz 'give me mal the salt' is a request.

Mal, which does not translate well into English, plays down the cost of any request, making it less imposing. Thus, a more direct speech act can be used. After all, you ask someone more directly when you need a quarter than when you need \$50. Unfamiliarity with the importance and proper use of those particles and how their function does and does not translate into English causes problems for Germans who speak English as well as for Americans who speak German. Germans who speak English cannot find proper translations for mal and thus may simply leave it out. Voila! A rude command. Americans, on the other hand, who go to Germany, will hear commands, but the mal's and halt's won't really register because they are easily overlooked when you have not been alerted to their presence, importance, and proper use. The result? Americans will probably perceive the Germans as rude. And they might even try to use the commands the way they hear them -- without particles -- and then sound too rude in return. Since that can be uncomfortable, though, they might simply use more indirect versions of the respective speech acts instead, which, in turn, causes them to be perceived as too unassertive or indirect.

Having said all that, however, it is important to note that, particles or not, Germans do tend to use more direct and blunt speech acts, whether in requests, apologies, or statements. Kasper and House in particular have pointed this out (1981), and so has Byrnes (1986), and also Kotthoff (1988), who gave a good contrastive example of student paper critiques at German and American universities. Below is an approximate translation of her example. The German professor would write something like the following in response to a very badly done book report:

This paper is totally unacceptable as is. You have not grasped the key concepts of the book. It is not clear which ideas are yours, and which ones are from the book. Read the book again and see me if you have questions. (1988:14)

The American professor would respond to the same review much more kindly:

You have taken on a challenging task with this book review. One can see that you have put a lot of effort into dealing with the content and into doing justice to the author. There are, however, a few points that are not quite clear yet. You might also want to make a clearer distinction between... (1988:15)

Even German students, writes Kotthoff, find the U.S. critique more palatable. However, there is the danger --and I can tell that from personal experience and from that of a number of friends -- that the German students may not <u>get</u> the message that the paper really is not acceptable and will be stunned to find out later from the grade

just how unacceptable it was. On the other hand, encouragement provided by positive feedback works for Germans as well.

As a rule, however, Germans tend to stay with the facts, as unpleasant as they may be, and strive to express them as clearly and explicitly as possible. When I first learned about Grice's (1975) four maxims, quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, I felt they reflected how Germans communicated quite adequately. Virginians, on the other hand, make extensive use of Grice's conversational implicatures -- you have to work at understanding what is really meant.

I will now present a brief analysis of some features of polite behavior in Virginia in terms of Lakoff's politeness rules (1975, 1990), comparing and contrasting them with their counterparts in California and Germany. It is my hope that this paper will demonstrate how polite behavior in Virginia "works" and how some coaching in its main elements will help newcomers to its culture whose styles may be quite different, to communicate more effectively by helping them to avoid alienating the people they speak with or being alienated by them. Some coaching can also help Virginians who plan to go to Germany or who work with German colleagues and bosses.

As Gumperz (1981, 1982), Lakoff (1975, 1990), and Tannen (1986), have argued, speakers tend to interpret what they hear within their own framework of reference. They assume that everyone who speaks the same language functions just like them and thus interpret whatever the other may say or do to mean what they would have meant, had they said or done it themselves. Since speakers from different speech communities (and not just from other countries -- see for example Tannen (1981 and 1986)) communicate according to different rules, this leads not only to clashes, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings, but also makes repair of such problems difficult because speakers rely on their own respective repair mechanisms to resolve the problem (Gumperz 1982; Tannen 1986). This usually makes things even worse and can lead to dislike and prejudice.

While there are many variations on communicative conventions, Lakoff (1975, 1990) argues that there are three major strategies around which they are built: distance (don't impose), deference (give options), and camaraderie (be friendly). She cites German and British culture, and European middle and upper classes in general as examples for distance politeness, in which conflict is assumed as inevitable and to be avoided by preventing "participants coming into direct contact with one another." (1990, 35). A variety of rules on what is considered acceptable behavior and talk help preserve people's space, and protect their privacy and their feelings. The second strategy, deference, she argues, is the one preferred by the Japanese, and by women in general in many other societies as well. It is characterized by the use of euphemisms and circumlocution, and by the liberal use of hedges and questions. The third strategy, camaraderie, values friendliness and personability higher than properness and non-offensiveness. Lakoff cites the Californian style with its appearance of instant intimacy as a prime example of conventional camaraderie (1990, 18). Lakoff further argues that those strategies are especially distinct in casual encounters and casual acquaintance relationships. As people get to know each other better and become friends, they incorporate type three elements while dropping the ones from the others if they are incompatible (especially in case of strategy one) or incorporate them alongside their own

(strategy two).

Virginia politeness conventions (and those of the South in general), however, seem to incorporate an interesting combination of strategies one, two, and three, including conventional camaraderie and distance, which, Lakoff argues, are really incompatible. This makes it very difficult for outsiders to always respond appropriately to the cues they get in conversations. Considering that many cultures view strategy three as the one appropriate to closer relationships, the potential for mixed signals in a society that intertwines strategy three (conventional camaraderie) with one (distance) is enormous.

In order to illustrate what happens, let me compare and contrast a few encounters in Germany, California, and Virginia. Overall, casual encounters, while generally involving some version of "how are you" and "have a nice day" in both California and Virginia, generate a more involved and detailed version of that in Virginia than they would in California. Below you will find composite examples of typical service encounters in a store in Germany, in California, and in Virginia (the more elaborate versions are more likely if there is no line, even though a line is no guarantee for brevity)(C = customer; S = salesperson):

Germany:

C: Guten Tag. 'good day' (maybe)

S: Guten Tag. 'good day' (task)

C: Auf Wiedersehen. 'good bye'

S: Auf Wiedersehen. 'good bye'

### California:

S: Hi. How are you?

C: Fine. And you?

S: Fine.

(task)

S: Have a nice day. (maybe -- It seems that the frequency of these has greatly decreased in the last few years. It used to be standard about 10 years ago and now they are used only some of the time (then again, maybe my sensitivities have changed after 4 years in Virginia.))

C: Thank you. You too. (maybe)

Virginia:

S: Hi. How are you today?

C: Pretty good. How are you?

S: Just fine. What can I do for you today?

(task) Thank you for ......

C: Thank you. (or: You're welcome)

S: Have a nice weekend/evening/....

C: Thank you. You too.

S: And come back and see us again.

C: Okay. Bye.

S: Bye.

The above, however, is the short version. Not infrequently, such service

encounters are expanded into virtual pseudo-relationships, as S follows up with a series of questions such as the following:

Where are you from?
Is your family still there?
Do you miss them?
Do you go back often?
What brought you here?
Where do you work?
What do you teach?
How many languages do you speak?
Are you married?
Have you met anyone yet?

More detailed information is elicited and given. All "free" info is turned into more conversation. At the end of the exchange there is a more elaborate 'Nice talking to you. Please come back and see us again. Good luck with (something specific) or have a good (something specific that had been mentioned in the previous conversation).'

While such questions are not uncommon in small talk situations at parties and such in California either, I had never encountered them in service encounters before I came to Virginia. Here, however, even service encounters are frequently turned into pseudo relationships. I have even taken to avoiding certain cosmetics counters -- or banks -- because their salespersons established such elaborate relationships that I feel guilty when I buy something at another counter. And sometimes I avoid them because I simply don't have the time or inclination for a lengthy visit. This has never happened in California even though sales clerks there were friendly as well.

As this example shows, the trickiest part for newcomers is small talk in Virginia -- in service encounters and with just about everybody who is not a close friend. Here, much more detailed and personal questions are asked than in California -- with follow-up question probing ever deeper. The problem? It is considered rude and inappropriate to divulge negative or problematic information. On the other hand, one also should not be so positive as to appear to be bragging.

To explain this in terms of Lakoff's politeness strategies: Virginians ask questions which would be off-limits in all but the most intimate conversations in Germany. The intention behind this is camaraderie -- the person should be made to feel like a friend. And you are supposed to answer them and sound as if you were telling the truth. However, you can't tell the truth if the answer would be negative or otherwise problematic. This is part of distance politeness -- don't impose your problems on others.

Why is this difficult? The personal questions signals to newcomers that this may be a budding friendship. If that is welcome, they will happily respond in kind, and quickly realize that what they have said is not appreciated. The other person changes the topic, plays down the significance of what has been said ('Well, I'm sure it'll be okay') which our German speakers in turn would find very offensive. If such closeness is not welcome to German speakers, they will feel imposed on and respond with 'None of your business,' which makes them look rude.

A similar problem involves the expression of opinions. In Virginia, you have to chat amiably and agreeably, without letting too explicit a contrary opinion "spoil the atmosphere." Germans do not have that rule. Honesty is valued above all. In fact, Germans consider it a sign of integrity to stand up for their opinion and to say what they think, whereas they really have only bad words for people who do not do that. Those people are considered deceiving brownnosers.

Now what about teaching newcomers these strategies? Byrnes (1986) bristles at the thought of actually teaching someone to be what she considers rude. I believe the key is an understanding of what this really means within the culture where it is practiced. Standing up for one's opinion is valued in Germany. In German eyes, a conversation would be hardly worth having if there were not some differences of opinion. If everybody agrees, then why talk? Obviously, Germans use talk much less for its relationship maintaining function than Americans do -- which may be, at least in part, because relationships are assumed to be more stable and are taken for granted to a higher degree than is the case in the U.S. Moreover, their arguments and acerbic remarks often function as solidarity signals, similar to those Schiffrin (1984) describes in her work on Jewish speakers. As Schiffrin writes: 'They seem designed to show that the interactants' relationship is close enough to withstand what would be considered by outsiders to be verbal assaults' (1984:331). As Schiffrin also points out, Tannen (1981b, 1986) has argued that Jewish speakers create rapport by mutual complaining -- another tool that Germans use in a similar way, and another one that does not work as well in Virginia, at least not in casual encounters.

The German style has also similarities to what Kochman describes in *Black and White Style in Conflict* as the discussion style of African Americans. Standing up for one's opinion is valued. Anything else is considered devious and problematic. This shows that the problem is not at all one-sided. Germans coming to the South will have to learn to express their opinions more cautiously, certainly in conversations with speakers of Anglo-Saxon heritage. On the other hand, the typical "polite" Southerner will likewise have problems in Germany. Being agreeable and being able to conduct lengthy conversations without voicing any differences of opinion is not a valued trait in Germany. Unless speakers voice an opinion now and then, and respond appropriately to those uttered by others, they will not function at their full potential in a German setting.

The question I posed in the title is 'Should -- and can this be taught?' I hope I have answered whether this should be taught. It will make cross-cultural encounters much more rewarding for all parties involved. But can it be taught? Byrnes (1986) argues that those ways of using language are akin to deeply engrained traits, learned at childhood, and that therefore they really can't be taught.

I agree that they are deeply engrained, and this is precisely why they cause emotional reactions such as dislike in encounters with someone who does not share the style. But I don't agree that they cannot be taught. Virginia, California, and presumably the rest of the U.S. as well, is full of people who have learned to make adjustments to their homegrown style and now function quite adequately pragmatically. That most of them have had to learn how to the hard way does not diminish the argument, but rather strengthens it.

The first step the student of either background has to take is to fully understand how the system works, and develop an understanding and appreciation for the value system on which it is built. This will not be an easy task, but understanding that arguments can be meant as a friendly solidarity reinforcement will make it much easier to learn to become comfortable with a more argumentative style than simply treating the task as 'having to learn to operate in a way one finds detestable.' And the success that comes with operating appropriately in a new culture reinforces the learning and makes it easier as one goes along.

Second, overcoming lifelong conditioning takes work. It is therefore necessary to practice the behaviors that are to be learned for the target speech community. This means that Germans need to learn to have lengthy agreeable conversations about a wide range of topics. They have to learn to respond to questions in a way that sounds sincere without divulging problematic information. This can be practiced. To prove the point: Countless Germans have learned how to do this -- or else they would not be able to operate as successfully as they do in Virginia or California. Some even embrace that style, and find it much to their liking. When I found in California that I had trouble making small talk, I took a course that taught me how to do it, and the quality of my social life immediately skyrocketed. In Virginia, I had to expand my repertory substantially, but I managed -- after a while. And so have a number of others I know. One can learn to be nice and sweet enough to get by, without losing one's self-respect.

The same is true for Southerners who learn German. Modeled after those courses on how to do small talk, one can also practice how to argue and give clever and sometimes acerbic repartees -- and how to cope with getting them. This is something that will help Southeners cope with living in Germany, or cope with their German bosses and colleagues at German companies located in this country. I even found examples for exercises that could be used: a little booklet called *Rede und Antwort* by Hueber. It presents a wide range of possible speech situations, and provides just as wide a range of answers, all of which are likely to be encountered in German settings. Unfortunately, this booklet lacks any explanatory notes -- while one of its recommended uses is self-study. I can imagine that it often meets with consternation. However, with proper explanations about the social function and significance of what is found in it, such a book can be very helpful.

Moreover, this is not a matter of replacing ones own style completely, but a matter of simply expanding ones repertory and learning to use its full range judiciously. Besides, Southerners (and Californians) have an advantage: their ability to start conversations and to keep them going can help in Germany as well, as long as the speaker comes across as sincere and not as phony. The traditional German style evolved in a very non-mobile society that had to defend itself against intruders from East and West, and thus has a strong in-group vs. out-group polarization. Now, Germany is not nearly that stable anymore, and Germans are beginning to learn how to do the things that Americans know how to do as part of their normal style. With an expansion and practice of a more direct repertory, Southern speakers can be very successful communicators in Germany. And they don't even have to be rude to do it.

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