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AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIOCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION: ENGLISH, SPANISH AND GERMAN

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ABSTRACT. *Nowadays, the significance of linguistic analysis applied to cross-cultural communication is enormous due to the heterogeneity of societies and the increasingly cross-cultural nature of commerce, politics, education etc. The application of linguistic theory, therefore, means the study of sociocultural communication since analysing the pragmatics of intercultural communication is the analysis of language itself. By observing the range of aspects of communication that can vary from culture to culture, we will exemplify levels of difference in habits and expectations in signalling how speakers mean what they say.* © *1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved*

INTRODUCTION

Seven factors form the framework that characterises social interaction, and therefore constitute the basic and invariable principle necessary in any conversational activity: who speaks to whom, when, how, what, and to what ends. Hymes (1968: p. 110) presents these basic factors that, according to Roman Jakobson's *functions of language*, are necessarily involved in any speech event: a sender (*addresser*), a receiver (*addressee*), a message form, a channel, a code, a topic, and a setting (*scene, situation*). However, there are also several factors of conversational interaction that are present but cross-culturally variable; that is, they require specific norms for using language in a particular community: formulas, silence, loudness, directness and indirectness, telephone behaviour, distance, etc. Fantini (1995) intro-

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duces the term *linguaculture* as an attempt to link language and culture both conceptually and operationally, though a similar notion had been previously suggested by Agar (1994) by means of the word *languaculture*. According to Fantini (1995), different linguacultures share universals but differ in particularist aspects. Thus, universal factors present in any speech act seem to vary in their application to culture-specific communication.

But, how do we understand communication? In trying to answer this question we need to understand several aspects of the process of interaction itself. Firstly, all communication simultaneously consists of two messages, the explicit message and the metamessage (Bateson, 1972). This second message indicates how the speaker wants the listener to interpret the basic message. To understand not just the sentence meaning but also the speaker's meaning, the listener must make reference to the context, or make use of "contextualization cues" (Gumperz, 1977, 1982, 1992). For any kind of interaction, communication contextualization becomes a social and interpersonal obligation that depends to a high degree on shared knowledge. It is widely known, therefore, that, in conversations, interlocutors use a combination of linguistic knowledge, contextual and pragmatic knowledge, and perceptual strategies when they interpret utterances in context[1]. When there is a mismatch between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation miscommunication takes place: *misunderstandings* involve simple disparity between the speaker's and the hearer's semantic and pragmatic analysis of a given utterance, and *communicative breakdown*, on the other hand, takes place when one or more participants perceive that something, either linguistic or not, has gone wrong. If in a monolingual speech community this is a problem on many occasions, in the increasingly multilingual and international communities the interpretation (ambiguity) of communication is becoming still a major issue.

Secondly, an important way of reducing the ambiguity of communication is by making assumptions about the people we are talking to. Many aspects of linguistic choice depend on the speakers making some analysis of the relationship among themselves. The need to understand how participants decide what their relative statuses are and what language they use to encode their assumptions about differences in status requires an awareness of the underlying differences in the way of thinking. As Grice (1975: p. 45) asserts, conversation is characterised as being a cooperative

[1]In fact, comprehension in conversational interaction is assisted by factors such as: (i) redundancy; (ii) context and shared background knowledge, which assist in interpreting utterances; (iii) facial, gestural and interjectional cues (*kinesics* and *proxemics*), which are strategies for monitoring comprehension, clarifying and repairing mistakes and misunderstandings; and (iv) vagueness and ambiguity with a clear social motivation.

activity, i.e. conversation implies a cooperative behaviour, and hence can be regarded as a kind of trade-off (Wardhaugh (1985: p. 60)):

> Conversation involves a kind of trade-off between public benefit and personal profit: you have to give in order to get. If you do not provide others with responses, feedback, and support, you will find them reluctant to reciprocate.

In this face-to-face interaction, and if both parties do not know each other, they must fairly quickly start making judgements about what they can accomplish when they begin to *read* each other in order to know the kind of language they can use (Wardhaugh, 1985: p. 24), improvising during the course of the conversation (Wardhaugh (1985: p. 33)):

> The meaning of a conversation, therefore, is something that is negotiated during the course of conversation rather than directly expressed. What is going on, what is meant, depends on what has gone before, what is currently happening, and what may or may not happen. It is not fixed, but subject to constant review and reinterpretation.

This means, as Laver & Trudgill (1979: p. 28) point out, that in a conversation ''being a listener to speech is not unlike being a detective. The listener not only has to establish what it was that was said, but also has to construct, from an assortment of clues, the affective state of the speaker and a profile of his identity''.

These culture specific attitudes, assumptions and norms as well as the tacit rules which apply to the formative and active aspects of communication have as yet to be made explicit from a neutral point of view. It is the purpose of this paper to describe and explore some of these mismatch aspects of cross-cultural communication from this area of sociolinguistic research in terms of the pragmatic perspective of politeness phenomena.

POLITENESS THEORY

The analysis of significant cultural differences involved in communication requires an adequate theory to enable us to gain more insight into the processes going on inside people's mind while they are thinking and communicating.

The factors mentioned above such as shared knowledge, assumptions made about the participants, summed up in the rather vague expression of ''ways of thinking'' (Wierzbicka, 1994) affecting communication, are essential elements in a pragmatic crosscultural study. To deal with culture specific unmarked assumptions about participants, who they are and what roles they are taking, and their relationships with the negotiations about those assumptions we will rely on the politeness theory (Scollon & Scollon, 1995) — also called the study of face.

The term "face" used in communicative studies is really a paradoxical concept. In human interactions participants need to be involved with each other, but simultaneously need to maintain a certain distance or independence. These two sides of face, known as *involvement* and *independence* aspects are shown in contrasting discourse strategies. Involvement is considered the aspect of communication in which both participants show their common attraction. Independence face strategies grant some degree of autonomy and respect to the participants, giving each other the widest range of freedom.

Both aspects are always present in any human interaction, though they are in conflict, since emphasizing one means a threat to the other. The actual linguistic strategies that are used to communicate these different sides of politeness are the following: the strongest contrast is contained in the choice of speaking or silence, since any communication at all is some kind of involvement; lesser extremes are volubility and taciturnity, though these concepts depend on the amount of speech expected; and finally, another important matter of the negotiation of face lies in the choice of language.

The initial assumptions about face relationships are either ratified or altered in a series of negotiations. The regularites in face relationships are described as politeness systems, whose existence depends on three factors: power, distance and the weight of imposition. "Power" refers to the participants' position in the hierarchical structure. Any disparity between the social power of participants would be described as $+P$, whereas no hierarchical difference would be considered as $-P$. The distance between two participants can be seen in the relative closeness of relationships ($+D/-D$). The third factor that makes face strategies vary is the importance of the topic. With an increase of the weight of imposition the use of independence strategies will be more likely and viceversa. However, this factor depends on individual situational relationships. Therefore we will focus our attention on three politeness systems which develop according to the variation of the first two factors: power and distance.

Scollon & Scollon (1995) establish three main types of politeness systems: the *deference* politeness system, the *solidarity* politeness system and the *hierarchical* politeness system. The first one is a system of mutual but distant independence ($-P/+D$). The solidarity politeness system ($-P/-D$) implies a high level of involvement strategies, since there is no power difference nor distance felt by the participants. On the contrary, the hierarchy politeness system ($+P/\pm D$) represents the respect for social differences (Table 1).

The person in the superordinate position will employ involvement strategies, whereas the person in the subordinate position uses independence strategies. Thus, two of the politeness systems, the deference and the solidarity, are symmetrical. The third one, the hierarchical system is asym-

TABLE 1

Politeness system

	Power	Distance
Deference	$-P$	$+D$
Solidarity	$-P$	$-D$
Hierarchical	$+P$	$\pm D$

metrical. Therefore, the symmetrical/asymmetrical relationships depend on the power dimension only.

In this context it seems important to point out that the factors of power and distance may arise for many different reasons. Therefore, power differences based on social, educational, economical, psychological and/or physical factors may vary among different cultures. However, the politeness theory developed by Scollon and Scollon (1995) with the distinction between involvement and independence strategies as well as the three mentioned systems will help us to analyse lexical, syntactical and semantic aspects of cultural miscommunication.

A complementary way of comparing culture-specific attitudes embodied in linguistic components is offered by Wierzbicka (1994). Her cultural script model is formulated in a highly constrained natural semantic metalanguage based on a small set of lexical universals and of universal syntactic patterns. The use of this metalanguage will also help to clarify differences between societies' unconscious "cultural grammar", since cultural scripts deal with "things that one can or cannot say" (Wierzbicka, 1994: p. 83).

ANALYSIS

Cultural differences in interpersonal relationships, — or to use a more general term — in communicative styles will be portrayed and examined at several levels signalling how speakers vary in saying what they mean: (i) when to talk, (ii) what to say, (iii) prosodic patterning, (iv) listenership, (v) formulaicity, (vi) politeness, (vii) organization of discourse, (viii) accent accommodation, and (ix) swearing, insults and irony.

When to talk

One of the aspects where miscommunication may appear is the case of silence. Silence itself is a potent communicative weapon. The pairing of utterances (adjacency pairs) in conversational situations is so strong that

an intentional breaking of the paired relationship by a failure to supply the second member of the pair can be regarded as a deliberately uncooperative act. In fact, in a conversation between two English speakers, a silence of longer than about four seconds is said not to be allowed: if nothing is said after four seconds, there is a kind of collective embarrassment and a feeling of obligation to say something, and even a remark about the weather is normally useful. However, cultures differ with respect to what and when silence is considered as non-communication. There are other societies in which people do not talk unless they have something important to say, and therefore quite prolonged silences are tolerated in their conversational situations (Trudgill, 1983a). This is the case of North American Indian languages such as Athabaskan, Apache and Navajo. Tannen (1984) refers to the example given by Scollon of Athabaskan Indians who consider it inappropriate to talk to strangers, which has a negative effect for any non-Athabaskans.

Even though, among European cultures such extremes do not exist, people of northern countries are known to be less talkative than in southern countries. In Germany or England a large amount of fast, uninterrupted speech by a participant from a southern country might be interpreted as a sign of superficiality or even a lack of deference. Thus, Spaniards are often judged as noisy and hypocritical. Long silences, on the other hand, will be regarded as a consequence of mental slowness or ignorance. In this sense, silence or the lack of silence results in cross-cultural stereotyping. However, the expectations of the amount of speech is relative and highly dependent on the grammar of context. According to Scollon's already mentioned distinction between involvement and independence strategies, silence would be an extreme example of non-communication and face independence. Returning to the example of Athabaskans, silence is employed in a deference politeness systems, whereas for western cultures it would be more associated to the inferior position in a hierarchical system.

What to say

Once two persons are willing to start a conversation, the success of communication develops from the shared implicit knowledge of how to address one another appropriately. The study of forms of address has received a lot of attention in sociolinguistic research (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Braun, 1988). Ferguson (1991) examines second person pronouns as forms of politeness in terms of grammatical agreement. Languages differ in their inventory of address variants. In some languages two or more subject pronouns convey different levels of politeness and allow a more detailed encoding of differences in age, sex, social or economic status. Moreover, cultural norms and values

are reflected in the address system. Whenever speakers have to choose between several variants, all of which are grammatically correct, as in languages such as German or Spanish, the foreign speaker might suffer the confusion of when to use which. Thus, Scollon & Scollon (1995) gives the example of a foreign language learner of Spanish who found it difficult to remember when to use the familiar set of Spanish pronouns *tú* or the formal ones *usted*. When expected to address someone with the formal term, using independence strategies of politeness he/she was using the involvement forms[2].

In relation with the power/distance scale, in Germany the misuse of the familiar form *Du* instead of *Sie* will be felt as absolutely offensive by the native speaker. Mainly, because the involvement form in a formal context will sound like putting someone down or establishing a solidarity/familiarity system that in Germany is made explicit only in a very close relationship.

In this context, address behaviour will be understood as a significant distinction in the reciprocal or non reciprocal use of symmetrical address forms from asymmetrical ones (Brown & Gilman, 1960). Apart from grammatical agreement, pattern co-occurrences of various politeness markers in forms of address often belong with lexical collocational constraints, systems of textual cohesion and/or patterns of social interaction. In terms of politeness strategies, in any culture a speaker who uses independence strategies expects to hear reciprocal independence strategies except in the case of clear hierarchical differences. The same happens when the first speaker uses involvement strategies. In a familiar context he will be answered by involvement strategies, whereas in a hierarchical context he will adopt the inferior position. However, the problem arises with the linguistic forms in which these politeness strategies are expressed. Thus, miscommunication in crosscultural contact will emerge when two or more participants fail to agree on the initial system of hierarchy or misuse the linguistic markers of politeness in the negotiation of face.

Prosodic patterning

The following level of cross-cultural difference belongs to the field of speech rhythms. Whenever the expectations of the participants in communication differ about aspects such as pacing, intonation, pausing or timing, the interpretation of discourse will be affected and therefore, com-

[2]In American varieties of Spanish the personal pronoun *tú* has been partly substituted by the form *vos*, both opposed to the pronoun *usted*. The simultaneous existence of two forms has converted *tú* in a style, education and situation marker on the formality scale. Thus, apart from the deference/hierarchical asymmetry between *tú* and *usted*, native speakers will choose between *tú* and *vos* according to many specific factors of politeness asymmetry.

municative conflict will arise. Different habits in how fast to speak often lead to misinterpretations about the speakers' personality and intention, as already has been mentioned earlier. Slower speakers might consider the fast flow of others' speech as sign of an egotistical attitude and/or lack of interest in what they have to say. Faster speakers feel that the slower partner is not talking to them or is not explicit enough (Tannen, 1984).

In oral discourse, intonation serves as an indication of declarative, emphatic or question function, as well as the termination of the speaker's turn. Both stress and tone contour are essential elements for cohesion of discourse. Thus, for instance contrastive stress, questioning intonation or final intonation contour affect the sequence of communication and turn-taking (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

The rhythm of oral interactive discourse is determined by two fundamental aspects of timing: turn-maintaining and turn-taking. Very small differences in the expectation of the length of inter-turn pauses may lead partners to adopt negative attitudes toward each other. This is also due to the fact that each inter-turn pause means a point for decision taking. By means of changes in tempo, intonational contours and the completion of syntactical units, the other speaker will know how he/she has to react. Scollon and Scollon distinguish between four kind of pauses: cognitive (taken for time to think); interactive (for turn-taking); backchannel (to receive some kind of feedback); or pauses due to other external causes. Apart from these factors, longer pauses belong to independence strategies, whereas shorter pauses are related to involvement politeness strategies. Thus, when the length of pauses differ significantly a hierarchical politeness system, with the speaker using shorter pauses becoming dominant, may develop.

Within the context of foreign language learning, the lack of proficiency and fluency of the non-native speaker automatically forces him to take longer pauses and puts him into an inferior position. Within the European context, the speakers in southern countries are quicker and use shorter pauses, in general, tending more to involvement strategies than in the north. Hence, Spaniards are often perceived by Germans or English people as dominating the conversation, giving the foreign conversationalist little chance to take his or her turn[3].

Michael Clyne's study (Clyne, 1994) on cultural variation in turn-taking

[3]We know that the turn-taking mechanism allows one person to speak at a time; each party is recognized to have the floor at a particular moment by means of a role shifting. If Western societies have a "no gap, no overlap" rule for conversational turn-taking, there are however societies, some Caribbean communities such as Antigua, where talk is expected of people and it is perfectly normal for everybody to speak at a time, at least in certain situations (Trudgill, 1983a: p. 131). In "How to Ask for a Drink in Subanun", Frake (1964) described language norms in the Subanun of the Philippines, which employs certain kinds of speech in drinking encounters.

rules also reinforces the view that cultural differences in politeness norms significantly affect the smooth flow of communication. Different turn-taking behaviour between cultures of different pausing length results in misunderstandings about the partner's speech intention and consequently in miscommunication. Turn appropriation and maintenance are often achieved by long turns as well as the increase of volume and speed in southern European countries. Such communicative behaviour will be felt as domineering and as an inadequate involvement strategy by northern Europeans, leading to communication breakdown.

Listenership

Closely related to the previous level is the interpretation of listenership. Returning to Bateson (1972), all communication conveys two messages, as we outlined at the beginning of this paper, the linguistically explicit message and the metamessage. This second is a superimposed message that indicates to the listener how to interpret not just the sentence meaning but the speaker's meaning. All communication takes place in real-time and therefore transmits contextualizational cues. Thus, a successfully coherent communication depends on three factors: the basic message, the met-amessage and discourse contextualization. During the development of the topic in the interaction, each speaker needs to keep communication going, confirming to the others his or her understanding of the contextualised messages. At this stage, *feedbacks* (gestures of the listener such as nods of approval: *mhm, yes*, etc.) are an important element in conversations in order to guarantee the continuation of a turn in the turn-taking process. Whenever a listener fails to indicate his or her following of the messages the speaker must deduce a misunderstanding[4]. For example, particles such as *er-er* can be used to prevent others from coming into the discussion, indicating that you have not finished your turn but that you are thinking what to say next; as Andersson & Trudgill (1990: p. 102) state, with

[4]This fact makes *discourse markers* extremely useful in any speech event. Probably, the most important function of discourse markers is precisely to mark the organization of conversation in the same way as punctuation signals the organization of written texts. Spoken language is normally less elaborate than written language simply because it has to be improvised: ''the spoken language is typically a language of *here* and *now*, while the written language is typically a language of *there* and *then*'' (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: p. 105). The important role played in language by these words can be proved in telephone conversations: ''A conversation without any of these small words would sound peculiar and unnatural. The best proof that we need these phrases probably comes from a simple test that everyone can do while speaking on the phone. When you are listening to a person who has a lot to say, listen to yourself also. You will hear yourself saying *hmm, oh dear, yeah*, etc., at intervals of a second or two. Try to keep quiet. After five or ten seconds, you will hear a worried voice saying, ''Hello, are you still there?'' (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: p. 102).

expressions such as *er-er*, "the point isn't to give information but to make the listener understand that you are thinking". Interjections such as *oh!, ah!, wow! damn, ok*, etc. signal something about what is happening in the mind of the speaker, and hence they are expressive, and reveal something about how the listener should receive and/or react to what has been said: "by using these small words, we react to what other say, indicate our feelings about what we say ourselves, and point to how the listener should understand our utterances" (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990: p. 105). Words such as *well, anyway, now then*, or *ok* may have a *textual function* since they can be used to introduce a new topic in the discourse. Tag questions are typically used to ask for confirmation. The important role played in language by these words can be proved in telephone conversations (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990: p. 102; Andersson & Trudgill (1990: p. 102)):

> A conversation without any of these small words would sound peculiar and unnatural. The best proof that we need these phrases probably comes from a simple test that everyone can do while speaking on the phone. When you are listening to a person who has a lot to say, listen to yourself also. You will hear yourself saying *hmm, oh dear, yeah*, etc., at intervals of a second or two. Try to keep quiet. After five or ten seconds, you will hear a worried voice saying, "Hello, are you still there?"

Within the power dimension, cultural differences in indicating listenership might affect the implicit hierachical position of the speakers. Returning to the example given above of the Athabaskan Indians, who remain silent in conversation with strangers, any Western World speaker would interpret the lack of showing listenership as an act of hostile superiority.

Showing listenership as a way of processing conversation is, therefore, an essential feature for cohesion in discourse. Backward looking confirmation, such as gaze maintenance or different ways of feedback assure both speaker and listener of a shared interpretation of the message, the metamessage and the context. This shared knowledge simultaneously serves as an sign for group identification. Therefore, cultural differences in showing listenership not only interrupt the cohesion of discourse, but also stand for an immediate lack of group identity. Not only will the speaker put the smooth transmission of her or his message into doubt, but also identify the listener as a person with strange speaking habits or just as an outsider.

Formulaicity

Other cross-cultural differences that may lead to miscommunication are contained in linguistic conventions. These conventions in language usage are culture-specific and belong, according to Anne Wierzbicka (1994) to "things that can or cannot be said". In other words, formulaicity implies

cultural norms that are implemented by linguistic devices. Language makes considerable use of routines, and stereotyped patterns ("*frozen* chunks") for openings, greetings, thanks, apologizing, introducing topics, turns, interruptions, terminations, and so on, involving a kind of ritual; and these routines may cause socioculturally-based miscommunications if they are not known. For instance, dealing with cultural scripts, Wierzbicka offers the example of English question tags. Translated into the semantic metalanguage, a question tag of the type *doesn't it*? functions as an indication that the speaker expects the addressee to agree or not with the previous statement. Thus, opposite polarity question tags express the cultural norm of acknowledging and accepting possible differences of points of view. A linguistic equivalence can be found in Spanish and in German, but also expressing their culture-specific conventions. In Spanish the question tag would be translated into the appendix "*verdad*" after a statement.

(a) *La crisis del gobierno es muy lamentable*. vs

(b) *La crisis del gobierno es muy lamentable, "verdad"*.

Even though the literal meaning of the word conveys the confirmation of the truth of the statement, in fact, the speaker seeks the agreement of the listener. Thus, the linguistic expression stands for the cultural tendency to expect support, but not difference in opinion as in the English case.

(a) *The crisis in Yugoslavia is terrible*. vs

(b) *The crisis in Yugoslavia is terrible, isn't it*?

In German, the question tag would correspond to a negative question or a positive answer with the addition of *doch*. Similar to English, the combination of (a) "negation + *doch*" invites a confirmation but allows for a contradiction, whereas the same-polarity (b) "statement + *doch*" commits the listener to an agreement.

(a) A: *Sie ist doch nicht von hier*?

B: *Doch, sie kommt aus Schwelm./Nein, sie kommt aus Schweden*.

(b) A: *Sie wollen heute doch noch kommen*.

Also, English speakers often feel "constrained" for the absence of a real equivalent to *please* in Scandinavian languages, and likewise Europeans are often distressed by the absence in English of a real equivalent for *bon appétit* (French) or *buen provecho* (Spanish), or for the much narrower function in English of *please* than *bitte* in German or *prego* in Italian, etc. An obvious example of cultural conflicts within the politeness system lies in the differing frequency of the use of polite expressions in two given languages. The limited use of expressions such as *please, sorry* and *thank you* in Spanish can induce English speakers to infer a lack of distance, and patronizing familiarity, within the communication, and, therefore, a stronger power position of the Spanish speaking party.

Trudgill (1978: p. 8) examined the relatively recent usage in Britain of the form *cheers*!, which affects not only non-English speakers in general

but also, within the English-speaking world, non-British English speakers. Originally this form was a drinking toast but now it functions both as a formula for leave-taking and for thanking. The problem for non-British English speakers lies in when *cheers*! is used and when not, since, for example, you **cannot** use it as a leave-taking formula in a case such as the following:

A: *Well, my dear, take care of yourself, and I'll see you in six months' time*.

B: *Cheers*!

And, similarly, you **cannot** use it as a kind of thanking formula in a case such as the following:

A: *I'd like to take you out to dinner tomorrow night*.

B: *Cheers*!

The exact functions of the form *cheers*! are outlined by Trudgill (1978: p. 8) as follows:

> It seems, in fact, that amongst certain sections of the community "Cheers!" can be employed (a) as a drinking toast, but particularly (b) as a way of thanking whoever has bought a particular round of drinks, and presumably by extension (c) as a way of thanking someone for a minor service that they have just rendered in your presence — the opening of a door, the picking up of a dropped pencil, or something similar. And it *is* also used as a leave-taking formula (perhaps by extension of a "thanks and goodbye" usage and/or of the "your good health"-type component of the drinking toast) but only in informal telephone conversations, in familiar letters, or if the leave-taking is a routine or minor one. Other less frequent uses are equivalent to "Hello!" in fleeting encounters where no further conversation is going to take place; and to "here you are" (cf. *bitte, prego*, above) in giving someone something.

Politeness

Closely related to how the concept of metamessage is understood by Scollon & Scollon (1995), Tannen (1984) deals in her article with indirectness in communication. Simultaneous to but underlying the explicit linguistic message, the intention of the speaker is indirectly transmitted by prosodic patterns, gestures, mimicry and other contextualizational cues. If we return to the three politeness systems mentioned before we could say that the greater the power and distance between two speakers, the stronger the indirectness in the use of independence strategies will be. Thus, in any culture, the speaker in the inferior position in a hierarchical system would never openly deny a request from his/her superior or would never directly state what he or she likes or thinks. However, the use of indirectness, its characteristics and its application again is culture-specific. There are some societies or cultures which use indirectness more frequently than others, and misunderstandings due to different uses of indirectness are com-

monplace in cross-cultural communication. In very general terms, in a hierarchical society a non-native speaker has to be more careful with indirectness than in a more liberal society: the more hierarchical a society is, the more indirect it is in social interaction; in contrast, the more egalitarian, or liberal, a society is, the less indirect it is in social interaction. Indirectness also implies the use of independence strategies.

In England, the well-known tendency of making an understatement can be interpreted as a form of indirectness, as an independence strategy that prevents the listener's emotional involvement. Greeks seem to make beliefs and dislikes known by rather more indirect means. Tannen (1982) investigated indirectness in male–female discourse by Greeks, Americans, and Greek–Americans, and came to the conclusion that conversational style is both a consequence and indicator of ethnicity; conversational style, according to her, ''includes both how meaning is expressed, as seen in patterns of indirectness, and what meaning is expressed, as in how much enthusiasm is expected''. In Asia, particularly in India, a remark about any object may be taken as a request for it. Whereas in any formal conversation in which two speakers are making an appointment, the Spanish speaker would rather openly admit that he can not make it at the time or date proposed, both English and German speakers would introduce their denial with an apology:

English: *I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that...*
German: *Es tut mir leid, aber...*

Organization of discourse

One of the less obvious but most disturbing aspects for cross-cultural communication lies in the cohesion and coherence of disourse. Even when a foreign speaker is proficient in the vocabulary and grammar of the foreign language, he is likely to organise his disourse according to the logical patterns of his native language. The constraints of culture on our thinking and, particularly, our thought patterns and verbal behaviour are analysed by Kaplan (1966) in ''Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education''. His study includes teachers' expectations regarding the appropriate rhetoric sequence of texts, incurring into the imposition of what they consider to be the logical organization of thought. A recent study (Monroy & Scheu, 1994) analysed the differences of discourse patterns in Spanish and English by Spanish learners' of English as a foreign language (FL). Cultural variance in the rhetoric sequence became obvious, since the students tended to transfer the organization of Spanish patterns to English discourse.

According to the expected pattern of discourse organization Scollon & Scollon (1995) comment on the western preference for deductive patterns

as a combination of the call–answer-topic adjacency sequence coupled with factors such as turn exchange and timing. Related to the politeness strategies and systems, the direct introduction of a topic — opposed to the delayed introduction of Asian speakers — is an involvement strategy, which, combined with short inter-turn pauses, represents the speaker's domination in a hierarchical system. The use of inductive rhetorical strategies, where the topic is preceded by facework, implies a preference for independence strategies and stands for a symmetrical deference system.

Accent accommodation

Cross-cultural variance in hierarchical/deference politeness systems can even be detected in phonological and morphological adjustments. Social psychologists of language (Howard Giles and his co-workers[5]) developed what is known as *accommodation theory*, which is, according to Trudgill (1986), a fruitful basis for understanding the linguistic convergence and divergence that takes place when speakers of different dialect backgrounds interact face-to-face. This theory focuses on speech and discusses and attempts to explain why speakers modify their language in the presence of others in the way and to the extent that they do (Trudgill (1983b: p. 143)):

> This, briefly, attempts to explain temporary or long-term adjustments in pronunciation and other aspects of linguistic behaviour in terms of a drive to approximate one's language to that of one's interlocutors, if they are regarded as socially desirable and/or demonstrate good will towards them. This may often take the form of reducing the frequency of socially stigmatised linguistic forms in the presence of speakers of higher prestige varieties. The theory also allows for the opposite effect: the distancing of one's language from that of speakers one wishes to disassociate oneself from, or in order to assert one's own identity.

The first case would relate to what Howard Giles called process of *accent convergence*, "if the sender in a dyadic situation wishes to gain the receiver's social approval, then he may adapt his accent patterns towards that of this person, i.e. reduce pronunciation dissimilarities" (Giles, 1973). In terms of the politeness theory, the speaker in the inferior position in a hierarchical system would try to reduce the distance towards the other speaker by adjusting his accent to what would be considered a socially more "correct" accent pattern. The second case, the opposite process, if speakers wish to dissociate themselves from or show disapproval of others, would relate to Giles' *accent divergence*; in this way, the use of a formal style in an informal situation, for instance, can be used as a joke or to signal disapproval or social distance. This accent divergence would be a

[5]See Giles (1973) and Giles and Smith (1979).

form of independence strategy used to increase the distance towards other speakers.

Accent as well as linguistic divergence is a common feature of Spanish political everyday life. Politicians from different regions, such as Andalusian or Catalan party leaders, convey their "political" independence by maintaining their dialect or language in their speeches at Parliament. Such attitude would be regarded by German speakers as highly arrogant or even an obvious defect of social upbringing. Thus, whereas accent accommodation to "Hochdeutsch" is indicative for the deference dimension, in Spain it stands for admitting an inferior position in their hierarchical system.

But the accommodation theory is not only concerned with adjustments of high-low prestige accents but also with regionally differing accents. A key concept here is the relative *salience* of a dialect feature, which is a measure of both its awareness or distinctiveness to speakers of other dialects and their readiness to vary or accommodate to it: "accommodation does indeed take place by the modification of those aspects of segmental phonology that are *salient* in the accent to be accommodated to" (Trudgill, 1986: p. 20)[6]. In the southern regions of Spain a salient dialect feature is the omission of /s/ at the end of a syllable: non-prevocalic /s/. Thus, in a word like *canastas* the lack of the first "s" is a segmental feature, whereas the second "s" stands for the plural morpheme (Table 2).

Whenever an Andalusian speaker tries to adjust his accent to the more formal or "correct" Castilian accent, he will make phonological as well as morphological adjustments. In the case of the pronunciation of the first "s" the phenomenon would be solely phonological, in the second it would be not only a phonological but also morphological phenomenon. According to Trudgill (1986), in the case of linguistic accommodation of British English speakers to American English, the majority of them conform to the following *route* of acquisition:

TABLE 2
World-formation in *canastas*

canast	-a	-s
root	gender morpheme	number morpheme

[6]According to Trudgill (1986), this salience is related to four factors: *stigmatization*, *linguistic change*, *phonetic distance*, and *phonological contrast*. But there are also *accelerating factors* (such as *comprehension difficulties* and *phonological naturalness*) and *inhibiting factors* (*phonotactic constraints*, *homonymic clash*, and *extra-strong salience*) which affect the *rate* of acquisition of particular salient features and that cannot be predicted.

(1) /t/ > [ɾ] in better, etc.
(2) /a:/ > /æ/ in *dance*, etc.
(3) [ɒ] > [ɑ] in *top* etc.
(4) ø > /r/ post-vocalic /r/ in *car*, etc.

Milroy (1984) describes cases where speakers of different dialects of English fail to understand each other, and suggests that the insights of a sociolinguistic approach, specially the *Ethnography of Communication*, may be really valuable in studies of cross-dialectal communication and miscommunication: "comprehension is a complicated matter, requiring a multidisciplinary approach; it seems that the perspective offered by sociolinguistics, concerned as it is with the analysis of speech events in their social context, might be a helpful one" (Milroy, 1984: p. 27). In the same way, Schnitzer (1995: pp. 234–235) also proposes a pragmatic point of view in this multidisciplinary approach to interdialect communication: "We must become accustomed to adjusting our ears to different accents and our expectations to different contexts; we must also adjust our own use of the language, from the phonological to the pragmatic levels".

Swearing, insults and irony

In addition to these other aspects, the *Ethnography of Communication* is also concerned with ritual speech acts and specialised routines in particular communities. All languages have swear-words and the kind of swearing in any given language may reveal to us something about the values and beliefs of the speakers of that language, as there exist intercultural differences on how, when, why, and even to whom swear-words are used.

As Hughes (1991: p. 5) points out, swearing is a violation of taboos, and, in turn, the use of taboo-words has to do with the different ways of dividing up the world, particularly how cultural meanings (the values of a society) are expressed in language. That is to say, the type of word that is tabooed in a particular language is generally a good reflection of at least part of the system of values and beliefs of the society in question. But tabooed subjects can widely vary from community to community: one's mother in law; certain game animals; death; excretion, bodily functions; religious matters; the left hand (the origin of *sinister*); sex and female relations; in some communities word-magic plays an important part in religion, and even certain words considered as powerful are used in spells and incantations; and so on, and so forth.

According to Leach (1964: p. 29), any theory about the sacredness of supernatural beings is likely to imply a concept of sacrilege which in turn explains the emotions provoked by profanity and blasphemy. In Catholic and Orthodox countries there are taboos associated with religion, and for instance, many more expressions relating to the Virgin Mary, sacrilegious

expressions, can be found in those countries than in Protestant ones (Andersson and Trudgill, 1990: p. 57). In fact, in Norway, some of the most strongly tabooed expressions are related to the devil (Trudgill, 1983a: p. 30). In Western societies, there are taboos relating to sex, religion, bodily functions, ethnic groups, food, dirt and death. Spanish and German make use of swear-words, and English, as Andersson and Trudgill (1990: p. 14) point out, "is not different from other languages in having words and expressions that no one is supposed to say but that everyone does say — or nearly everyone". But particularly in Spanish, swearing, in its different possibilities (*expletive, abusive, humorous*, or *auxiliary/lazy* swearwords), is said to be something very typically "Iberian" both quantitatively and qualitatively[7] (Pérez-Reverte (1994: p. 6)):

> Uno se percataba de eso al oír a los guiris insultarse en su lengua. Un súbdito de Su Grandiosa Majestad, por ejemplo, discutía con otro y cuando le decía *stupid* era ya el colmo. Hasta el *fuck you* de los yanquis sabía a poco. En cuanto a Europa, dos franceses se liaban, es un suponer, porque uno le había echado al otro ceniza de Gitanes en el fuagrás, y se decían el uno al otro *cretin, con, cocu* y cosas así. *Cucu*, por ejemplo, sonaba a perfecta mariconada en comparación con aquel sonoro *cabrón* español. Y en cuanto a Italia, qué les voy a contar. Un milanés sorprendía a su legítima en el catre con un oficial de carabinieris y todo lo que se le ocurría era decirle a ella *puttana*, que convendrán conmigo ni suena a insulto ni suena a nada, mientras que en castellano podía elegirse, sin problemas entre un amplio repertorio: *pendón, mala zorra, chocholoco*. O *caho puta*, sin ir más lejos. Prueben ustedes a decir eso en francés y comprenderán de qué les hablo.

The use of swearwords, at least in the English-speaking world, can also be understood from the point of view of the politeness system. The use of swearwords, slang, or simply a more informal language, by a hierarchically dominant speaker, such an employer, in a conversation with a hierarchically non dominant speaker, such as her or his employee, can be interpreted as a friendly gesture and even as a sign of solidarity. In this sense, as Lars Andersson and Trudgill (1990: p. 72) point out, "... the truth is that the language used between equals or near-equals (some people will always be more equal than others) tends to be less formal. So, when your boss swears with you, you have advanced in the company. When he swears at you, it is the other way round".

In the same way, in most communities there are rules for activities such as the narration of stories and the telling of jokes. Even studies of Black American speech acts and accents, such as "sounding" like a white speaker vs black speaker, can also be considered under this heading (Labov, 1972).

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[7]It is not very uncommon at all to hear swearwords amongst members of the Spanish Parliament in any of the sessions of the Congress.

Irony is also cross-culturally variable not only from an *inter* but also *intra*-cultural perspective. The British sense of humour is known to be very different from the American; in fact, "many British people in the U.S.A. have made remarks of a teasing, ironic, tongue-in-check sort — only to find that Americans have taken them seriously and have even, therefore, taken offence" (Trudgill, 1985: p. x). In Spain, other things being equal, Southerners, mainly from Andalusia, are acknowledged to not only be more sincere, kindhearted (friendly and sociable) and open-hearted but also have a more developed sense of humour than Northerners; whereas in England the case is the opposite[8].

CONCLUSION

The present analysis of the impact of cultural values on speech act realizations, obviously, cannot account for all communication issues, such as personality factors or the interaction of culture, gender, status and age. However, research in cultural variation in communication from a pragmatic perspective plays an important role in describing the intercultural communication processes in order to avoid communication breakdown and communication conflict. Gumperz (1982) showed how verbal communication can serve either to reinforce or to overcome those barriers that exist between individuals of different social and ethnic backgrounds. Trudgill (1983a: p. 131) pointed out that differences in the rules for social interaction between cultures "can often lead, in cross-cultural communication, to misunderstanding and even hostility", inasmuch as "where cultural differences are greater, the misunderstandings can be greater too". That is the reason why Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz (1982: p. 14) suggest that in an encounter between culturally different speakers a *communicative flexibility* or — in Peter Sherwood's words (Sherwood, 1996) — an approach to the *no man's land* domains, is required in order to neutralise dissimilarities and be successful. This communicative flexibility and tolerance depends on the speaker's awareness both of cultural otherness and its multiple linguistic characteristics. Therefore, a major task of pragmatic linguistics remains in the study of differences in the way in which members of different cultures conceptualise communication itself, and how such conceptual differences are to be related to the actual patterns of verbal behaviour. From this point of view, we hope that this article will contribute to the understanding of the complexity of cross-cultural communication as well as supporting education in intercultural communication.

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[8]See Walter Nash (1985), Gnutzmann and Kohring (1981), as well as the monograph *Language and Humor* (N1 65, 1987) in *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language*.

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