

“*Aber ganz ehrlich*”: Differences in episodic structure, apologies and truth-orientation in German and Australian workplace telephone discourse

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study of cultural differences in conversational structure and the expression of apology in German and Australian workplace telephone discourse.

While the overall episodic structure of German and Australian telephone conversations was similar, there were differences in content or social orientation. This impacted on both whether and how topics representing high threat to face were aired. Australians preferred to avoid face-threatening acts and, if an apology was required, minimise threat to face by telling half-truths. Germans were more likely to provide a truthful account of events, express disappointment and chastise their interlocutors.

While such cultural styles were initially transferred from German into English, the longer German native-speakers interacted with Australian English-speaking colleagues, the more likely they were to hide negative opinions and tell half-truths. At the same time, Australians who interacted with Germans on a daily basis tended to accommodate towards German interactional style in English.

This study indicates that further research should be conducted on Australian and German workplace discourse. Such research may further our understanding of stumbling blocks to successful inter-cultural workplace communication and provide insight for the teaching of socio-pragmatics in second language acquisition settings.

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“We live in an age of apology, don’t confuse it with authenticity.” (Marber, 2007)

1. Introduction

This case study indicates that, expression of apology shares little connection with honesty or authenticity in Australian English. While German native-speakers equate apology with honesty in German, the longer they work in an Australian English-speaking environment, the more likely they are to apologise by resorting to half-truths and hide their feelings of disappointment.

Not only do we live in an age of apology, but also in one of rapid globalisation, resulting in increased participation in inter-cultural teams in which English is the most significant *lingua franca* (Clyne, 1994: 2). However, knowledge of

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English does not necessarily include understanding the discourse conventions of the culture in which the language is spoken, and widespread use of English may increase the likelihood of cultural misunderstanding or communication breakdown (Halmari, 1993).

Within business settings, inter-cultural communication breakdown can have highly detrimental social and economic consequences (Clyne et al., 1991: 252). For example, a large number of managers terminate overseas assignments early due to an inability to adjust to foreign cultures (Black and Mendenhall, 1990), leading to high monetary costs (Harris and Moran, 1989) and cementation of cultural stereotypes (Béal, 1990; Byrnes, 1986).

Critical to this research are negative stereotypes of native-speakers of German (Byrnes, 1986; House, 1996, 2006), many of which may be due to cultural differences in conversational style (House, 2006) or transfer of style from one linguistic code to another (House and Kasper, 1981).

To date very little research has been undertaken on cultural attitudes to Germans in Australia. This is surprising considering the increasing number of new German-speaking immigrants to Australia, especially in the multicultural metropolitan areas of Melbourne and Sydney (Everke-Buchanan, 2007). Many recent German migrants come from educated white-collar backgrounds (Clyne, 1988: 77) and, according to the 2006 Census, German Australians are the fourth largest ethnic group in Australia (ABS, 2007). If Austrian and Swiss ancestry is also taken into account, they are the 3rd largest ethnic group. German (presumably including Austrian and Swiss variants) is spoken at home by 75,625 Australian residents, representing the 7th most widely spoken language other than English in Australia (ABS, 2007).

This study aims to highlight possible areas of contention stemming from transfer of conversational style. Such research may be of benefit to second language teaching and help close the “conspicuous gap between theories of language and theories of language use” (Loveday, 1982: 9). Rather than leaving second language learners to discover cultural differences in sociolinguistic and interactional rules by trial and error, this and similar studies can help predict complications before they occur (Loveday, 1982).

2. Theoretical framework

The study combines two methodologies for the study of cross-cultural communication. Firstly, it takes a contrastive approach, which compares native discourse across cultures in order to pinpoint differences between two languages and cultures. Secondly, an interactive inter-cultural approach is used to understand the discourse of people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interacting in a *lingua franca* or the first language of one of the interlocutors (Clyne, 1994). By using these two approaches, the researcher was able to ascertain whether there were differences in conversational style in German vs. Australian first language data (contrastive) and whether transfer and/or convergence of such differences was apparent in interlanguage role-play situations (interactive inter-cultural approach).

The analysis falls into two parts: the structure of telephone discourse and the enactment of apologies.

2.1. Structure of telephone discourse

Telephone calls share a universal structure (Halmari, 1993, 1995; Hopper, 1992):

1. *Opening*: The opening usually follows a four-part sequence of adjacency pairs:
 - i. A summons-answer sequence (e.g. the phone rings and the callee answers ‘Dave speaking.’).
 - ii. An identification and/or recognition sequence (e.g. ‘Dave!’/‘Hey Sarah!’).
 - iii. A greeting sequence (e.g. ‘Hi’/‘Hi’).
 - iv. Enquiries about health or a ‘How are you?’ sequence (e.g. ‘How are you?’/‘Alright, yourself?’) (Schegloff, 1972, 1986; Grieve and Seebus, 2008).
2. *Optional non-topical*: A non-topical episode involves conversation that does not constitute the main purpose of the call, e.g. a discussion of the weather or an extended ‘How are you?’ sequence in which participants talk at length about their day-to-day lives, for example, their health (Halmari, 1993; Pavlidou, 1994).
3. *Middle or business*: The business episode is introduced by mentioning the reason for calling and is usually initiated by the caller (McLaughlin, 1984; Schegloff, 1972).
4. *Closing*: A closing may be initiated by either the caller or callee (Schegloff and Sachs, 1973). It can be interrupted by further topic nomination but usually follows Button’s (1987, 1990) archetype of closing, consisting of two adjacency pairs:

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