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Cross-cultural correspondence¹

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ABSTRACT: The letter of application is a widespread subgenre of persuasive discourse whereby access to certain social and material benefits is regulated. We define persuasive discourse in terms of Relevance and Test theory. In the international community, these letters are increasingly drafted in English, and we hypothesize that these nonnative English versions will tend to carry rhetorical and discursive features transferred from the writer's first language and culture. These transfers give rise to pragmatic and sociopragmatic infelicities respectively. A study is reported comparing native and nonnative writers' judgements of the suitability of a number of pre-identified persuasive strategies for use in application letters. The nonnative judgements vary along a broad orientalist-occidental scale which reflects the Modesty Maxim. Some pedagogical implications for syllabus and methodology are identified and in-class analytic Contrastive Analysis of such genres is defended.

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent and welcome global development is the increase in opportunities for legitimate international mobility on the part of the labour force and student population: more and more people can go and work or study abroad. Access to these opportunities is, however, still limited and quality-controlled by an elaborate system of 'gatekeeping' (Shoemaker, 1991), and preference is shown to individuals who can present the best account of themselves to prospective employers or sponsors. The standard two-stage procedure is to fill in an application form or submit a *curriculum vitae*, and then to compose an accompanying letter of application; the first two collect all the *factual* information thought to be relevant to the bid, while the latter offers the applicant a more open-ended 'creative' opportunity for favourable self-presentation. This paper is about such letters of application.

It is at this point where we encounter a major problem: what qualifies as favourable self-preservation? In a monolingual and monocultural setting we can reasonably expect there to be a practical consensus over what qualities are usually looked for in aspirant employees or students, and in what style of language such applications are most suitably couched. Where the society is monocultural but multilingual, or where it is monolingual but multicultural, there will be problems. The present paper is about international, that is, cross-cultural *as well as* cross-linguistic communication, where norms and expectations about self-presentation are likely to be differently valued by applicants and their prospective hosts. Speakers of different L1s will prefer different forms of expression and strategies of self-presentation and will often transfer these preferences to L2 use, with dire consequences. Thus the indiscriminate transfer of unsuitable discourse conventions from L1 to a FL has been shown to lead to 'discourse accentedness' (Scarella, 1984) and even 'pragmatic failure' (Thomas, 1983). Specification of the nature of these differences, particularly in their written expression, lies within the field of *contrastive rhetoric* (Kaplan, 1972). In other words, it is possible to write in English while failing to write English. This applies to writing application letters (ALs).

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And finally, while the problems of discourse accent will arise to a greater or lesser degree irrespective of the languages of applicant and host, the language of the application is overwhelmingly likely to be English, not simply because most sponsors are located in the English-speaking world, but also because English is often the *lingua franca* for such communication, even when it is the NL of neither party (Smith, 1987). That there exists a whole spectrum of regional Englishes is beyond dispute (Quirk and Widdowson, 1985). What is less well known is that even if two people are consensually native speakers of English, this does not warrant any assumption that they have a shared rhetorical style: as Yamuna Kachru writes: 'At present, it seems to be uncontroversial that native varieties of English such as American, Australian, British and New Zealand differ significantly from each other in their rhetorical styles' (1993). She quotes as evidence the research by Connor and Lauer (1988), which revealed markedly different persuasive rhetorical styles in the written English of children in the UK, USA and New Zealand.

2. BACKGROUND

We claim that application letters (ALs) are instances of written persuasive discourse. Persuasion is defined by Lakoff (1981) as follows:

By 'persuasion' I mean the attempt or intention of one participant to change the behaviour, feelings, intentions or viewpoint of another by communicative means.

'By communicative means' is important, since this is what makes persuasion different from coercion. In the context of ALs, 'change' is not to be taken too literally, since this would imply an assumption on the applicant's part that the recipient of the AL is prejudiced against him from the start. Such a stance would license some overstatement and possible distortion on the applicant's part. While we must assume that such prejudice is not always to be ruled out, it would be more sensible to assume an ideal situation where the recipient's attitude is initially *neutral* and where it is the applicant's job to swing it in his or her favour. We would suggest that the applicant's aim is not to change the recipient's opinion of him or her but to convince the recipient that s/he is optimally suitable for the job or sponsorship. We assume therefore that the main obstacle to success is not sponsor prejudice but intense competition, since there are many more applicants than awards, otherwise the job or bursary would have to be considered of little value. It is therefore in the applicant's interest to cut out or 'disqualify' as much of the competition as possible. This s/he does by demonstrating *match*: between the applicant's attributes and the job or programme description. There are two ways of characterizing 'match', one derived from Relevance Theory, the other in terms of Test Theory.

In terms of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), showing 'match' is a matter of the applicant achieving the most possible 'contextual effects' while imposing the least possible processing effort on the part of the recipient, as Byrne (1992) demonstrates in her monograph on the language of advertising. These contextual effects will have to be the sort that highlight the positive attributes of the applicant: contextual effects that might reveal his/her less attractive attributes will have to be minimized, or expressed in ways that incur greater processing effort. Clearly this is very difficult, as is evident from the chapter 'Something to hide?' in the London University Careers Advisory Service pamphlet *How to Write a Curriculum Vitae* (anon, 1991: 17–19). The advice given here is to try to positivize potentially negative contextual effects:

In other words, your initial approach to the employer might be your best chance to mention negative facts. It is sometimes possible to present in a positive light facts which the employer might otherwise interpret negatively.

In terms of Test theory, showing 'match' has either *norm-referenced* or *criterion-referenced* elements, or a mix of these. Criterion-referenced appointment or nomination implies that ALL applicants who meet the requirements will be appointed: in a sense, there is no competition, since you either qualify or you don't. If no applicant has the matching qualifications the post may be left unfilled: no one was deemed appointable. With a norm-referenced procedure on the other hand, even when, as often is the case, several equally and eminently appointable people emerge from the field, these are not all appointed or sponsored. In the event further selection is done, often on the basis of the less specific and less tangible 'image' aspects of candidates. Likewise, norm-referencing is in operation if the 'best' candidate of a generally unsatisfactory field of applicants is appointed, regardless of not meeting all criteria, just to fill the post: the employer or sponsor then takes the attitude that the person suited to the job just was not available, so is prepared to compromise with the best that was available (William, 1992). While CVs cater for the criterion-referenced part of selection, the AL serves the norm-referenced. It is here that persuasion and 'image' play a decisive role, and this is the aspect that has more scope for intercultural variation. The image of the supplicant who says the scholarship is 'My only chance' is unacceptable in the UK, whereas that of superficial smartness, perhaps conveyed by submitting a well laid out, word-processed AL evinces a favourable impression.

Then there is the question of the relationship between ALs and some other sorts of persuasive discourse. They are a sort of advertisement. Leech (1983: 25) sees adverts as intended to change the opinions of an audience: a 'prejudice' definition of the kind questioned in an earlier paragraph. Lakoff (1981) contrasts adverts with propaganda: advertising, she suggests, is aimed at changes in behaviour, while propaganda is intended to effect changes in belief. This seems plausible only up to the point where propaganda triggers action, as Goebbels' did in Nazi Germany, with holocaustic consequences. As for ALs, these are intended surely to do just that: to convey a favourable impression of the applicant that is potent enough to sway the sponsor to select him/her from a crowd of petitioners. But it does make sense to see ALs as a form of self-advertisement. True, they are not so much adverts for a specific *product* (in the case of the job AL at least) or for a *service*, as they are adverts for an *image*: the closest parallel is perhaps with so-called *prestige advertising*, whereby a company sets out to boost its image in society,² an offshoot of this being the aptly-named 'sponsorship' seen at sports events and elsewhere. In ALs we see this in reverse, in the sense that an individual is trying to impress an institution, not an institution an individual – as is the case with prestige advertising.

Another approach to persuasion is that of Frazer (1987), via *disputing* or 'adversative discourse', thence to *negotiation* and so on, to persuasion itself. It would not be productive to pursue this train of thought in our approach to ALs however, which do not originate from disputes and which are distinct from any subsequent negotiation on such matters as salary, availability, conditions of service and the like.

Several researchers have indeed demonstrated the relativity (i.e., the nonuniversality) of a whole range of rhetorical strategies, among these persuasive strategies. In so doing they have developed or refined the taxonomies of persuasive strategies in such a way as to make cross-linguistic comparison viable.

Connor and Lauer (1988), for example, developed an analytic system operating with 23 persuasive appeals consisting of 14 which are called '*rational appeals*' (since they are appeals to the recipient's reason), four categories called '*credibility appeals*' (since they rely on the applicant projecting to the reader a favourable impression), and five '*affective appeals*' (so called because they appeal to the emotions). These three originated with Aristotle's *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos* respectively. Different cultures seem to make different selections from these and give them different weightings – biases that may well transfer 'negatively' to L2 discourse.

Frazer (1987) likewise operates with a three-category system of persuasion macro-strategies, which he labels as follows: i) the evidentiary approach; ii) the principled perspective; and iii) the affective perspective.

Johnstone (1989) developed a framework with three categories of persuasive strategies that are preferred by speakers of Arabic. These are:

- i) *Quasilogical argumentation*, or 'informal, nondemonstrative reasoning that takes its effectiveness from its similarity to formal, demonstrative logic' (*ibid.*: 146).
- ii) *Analogical persuasion*, which 'works by calling to mind, explicitly or implicitly, traditional wisdom, often in the form of parable or fablelike stories' (*ibid.*: 149)
- iii) *Presentational persuasion* which relies on the belief that truth and persuasive power reside not so much in what you say as how (and even how often) you say it. 'Being persuaded is being moved, being swept along by a rhythmic flow of words and sounds' (*ibid.*: 147).

Miller (1983) developed a different schematization, not Aristotelian but social-psychological. It operates with four categories, on two dimensions: 'a reward–punishment dimension and a persuader–/persuadee-onus dimension' (*ibid.*: 131). We feel we cannot apply it to 'our data since the idea of the applicant threatening the sponsor in the event of non-selection is, to say the least, bizarre.

The only purely contrastive analysis of ALs as written genres of which we are aware is that in Wierzbicka (1991: 192–196). She attempts a systematic semantic specification of the AL called *podanie*, which was widely used in communist Poland and which the *Dictionary of the Polish Language* defines as 'a written document addressed to the authorities, asking for something, a petition'. Wierzbicka elaborates, pointing out that the *podanie* is 'asking for something that the institution may or may not grant, where the response is ... arbitrary and unpredictable' (*ibid.*: 194). The English *application* (letter) is something very different, being 'restricted to situations when an institution has the power, but also the obligation, of offering certain categories of people certain rights and goods if these people meet certain specified criteria' (*ibid.*). Notice that Wierzbicka's distinction between the Polish and English genres is in fact expressed in terms of norm- and criterion-referencing respectively. However, we have already demonstrated above that responses to ALs are not wholly criterion-referenced, contrary to her claim. Still, while her definition falls a little short of the sort of AL we are dealing with, the essential point is made that 'while an application may be "unsuccessful" it can hardly be "refused" or "rejected"', and candidates are usually 'invited' to apply and often even 'thanked' for applying. This sort of response is (was) not the case with the *podanie*, or its surviving counterparts in other totalitarian regimes. Our once Western, capitalist counterpart of the *podanie* is the approach we are more and more encouraged to make, in our 'Enterprise Culture', to a firm or business to put up sponsorship money to finance some activity or research we wish to do. The firm(s) in question have, in all likelihood, not offered such funding, although, as the practice grows,

firms will put in place procedures to deal with such overtures. The absence of a prior offer is what makes the difference between this sort of sponsorship request and our ALs. Two other sorts of *podanie*-like request are those for: i) the so-called 'discretionary' pay rise that is not automatic but that depends on the merits and/or persuasive power of the applicant, and ii) the tax relief that the British Inland Revenue grants people, not by right but 'by concession', again often depending on the applicant's plausibility in the eyes of the Inspectors. (Inland Revenue, 1992: 8, 20).

Wierzbicka's analysis is certainly suggestive, but is too deductive and introspective for our purposes: she seems not to have compared a corpus of *podania* with one of ALs, but to have compared her own, possibly idiosyncratic, conceptualizations of each. There is no knowing how many people who have experience of the genres (Bhatia, 1993) would agree with her.

You Sihai (1990) states that ALs for jobs are (or were a few years ago) unknown in the People's Republic of China, since decisions about where people go to work are/were made on their behalf by a beneficent State. But there exists the prescribed format of the genre she translates as Application Report, 'most commonly used when people want to join the Communist Youth League or the Party' (You Sihai, 1990: 75). Its major rhetorical goal is to show how 'advanced' one's ideas are and how beneficial they will be to the State. There is therefore less reference to self than to societal need and benefit.

In an earlier paper (James, Scholfield, and Ypsiladis, 1992) we analyzed the letters freely written in English by Greek advanced learners of English applying for much-coveted travel and study grants to the USA. These grants were fictitious but the letters were written at home without time limit and with access to a bilingual Greek–English dictionary, so the writing could be called quasi-authentic. A panel of British English native speakers was then asked to read and evaluate these applications, indicating which words and expressions they felt to be unsuitable to this genre and why. The original writers were finally shown their own letters with the parts that the natives had found dubious underlined, and given an opportunity to respond. These writers' oral protocols were tape-recorded. The pragmatic failures were discussed in relation to all the categories described above.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

In the present study we continue to pursue the broader aims implicit in the foregoing discussion: to specify more and more precisely the nature of ALs as instances of persuasive discourse, and to develop an analytical framework for the cross-linguistic description and comparison of persuasive strategies deployed in their ALs by members of different speech and cultural communities.

We set ourselves moreover certain specific objectives:

1. To see to what extent and in what respect speakers of 6 different L1s would agree with native-speaker views about the relative suitability of certain specific persuasive speech acts included in ALs. The nativespeaker views were those elicited in our previous study (James, Scholfield, and Ypsiladis, 1992) described above.
2. To determine the degrees of consensus and/or disagreement among the 6 groups of nonnative speakers concerning the persuasive strategies used in advanced learner English.
3. To identify the extent to which these nonnatives are aware that certain things are sayable and certain persuasive strategies are admissible in the L1 but not in British English – or vice versa.

4. METHOD AND SUBJECTS

In the present follow-up study we compiled a composite application letter (AL) comprising 10 sequences taken *verbatim* from the 8 letters written by our Greek applicants, arranged in as logical a sequence as possible and with a few connectives added to enhance coherence. Each of the 10 parts of the composite letter had been identified by the native speakers, 8 as clear and distinct kinds of failure, the remaining 2 as acceptable. Our subjects were six groups of French ($n = 10$), German ($n = 6$), Greek ($n = 6$), Polish ($n = 9$), Portuguese ($n = 5$) and Syrian Arabic ($n = 9$) speakers: a total of 45 subjects. All were advanced learners of English and all potential 'international' students who might well need to write such ALs occasionally, and who might not know how, as Lennon (1993: 41) observes:

Advanced learners may be inept at being tentative, noncommittal, at implying, at sounding someone out, at expressing criticism, approval, doubt or praise... and so forth.

Here is the composite letter in 10 numbered parts:

1. *I'm writing in connection with the 'travel scholarships' that your organisation offers to students that study in British universities. 2. First of all, I would like to congratulate you on this initiative of yours and secondly to express my concern to take part in this competition. I know that the number of awards is very limited and that it will not be a very easy task since there would be many candidates to compete with. 3. By the way, I am a very hard working student and I strongly believe that I consider myself a good candidate for this award. 4. I speak four languages - English, French, Chinese and Greek - and therefore I do not have problems in socialising with other people. Also, I hold one degree already in Social policy with specialisation in Clinical Justice; now, I'm in my final year in the Sociology and Linguistics joint honours degree at the University College of North Wales. 5. Moreover, I have just started taking courses in computer wordprocessing. Actually, to tell the truth, I find this quite hard and I'm thinking of postponing it for the time being. 6. Your scholarship is my only chance to make a study visit to the U.S.A. since my financial state would not permit me to do such a thing at my own expense. 7. Finally, I have to admit making a study visit to the U.S.A. is my sole opportunity to complete my research on Crime and Deviance; data from the U.S.A. would be very helpful for this. 8. I am sure you will take my application into serious consideration and I hope you will not refuse me the chance of a lifetime. 9. I'd be very grateful if you could send me a leaflet about the universities that the study visits include. I enclose a postal order for £5 to cover the mailing expenses. 10. Thank you in advance for your cooperation, I am looking forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.*

After having had time to read the whole letter, the subjects were asked to consider the 10 Parts successively, registering on a 5-point scale how 'suitable' they thought that formulation was in a document of this nature (see Appendix 1). We refer to these as Target Language English (TLE) judgements. Subjects were reminded that a proform CV (curriculum vitae or resumé) had accompanied the AL, eliciting all relevant *factual* information about the applicant. They were asked to vocalize their thoughts while making these decisions, and these protocols were recorded.

Finally (see Appendix 2) subjects were asked to imagine the letter had been written in their L1 and was addressed to an institution in their country, saying the same things in the same ways, and on this basis were asked to assess the suitability of each of the 10 parts on the same 5-point scale. We refer to these as Own Language (OL) judgements. With hindsight, we regret having not supplied translations of the letter in the subjects' NLs, since being asked to *imagine* that a text is written in one's NL is at least an unnatural and possibly an unfeasible task.

A short questionnaire was used to elicit information about the respondents' sex, how long they had studied English and resided in the UK, and whether they had ever been taught how to write ALs in the L1 and/or in English.

The data analysis was both descriptive and we used t tests, ANOVA, and the Pearson r correlation where appropriate.

5. RESULTS

1. Lumping the ratings of all 45 subjects of different NLs together, the order of suitability of the parts of the TLE version was descriptively as follows:

MOST 9 4 1 10 7 6 3 8 2 5 LEAST

Note: Parts 1 and 9 were the two judged as perfectly 'suitable' by the Native Speakers, the rest as unsuitable.

2. All the nationalities agreed in their judgement of Parts 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, and 10 of the letter. This agreement accorded with the Native Speaker classification only in respect of parts 1, 5, and 9.

3. There was virtually no difference between their TLE and OL judgements, the two rank orderings of suitability of the *whole* letter being:

TLE VERSION: Greek > Syrian > Polish > Portuguese > French > German
OL VERSION: Greek > Syrian > Polish > French > Portuguese > German

There was a high correlation ($r = +0.76$) between these two sets of overall ratings. This strongly suggests that these subjects are guided by their first language pragmatics.

It was predictable that the Greeks should consider the AL to be the most suitable, since the pragmatic failures in it were made by Greeks in the first place.

Note also that there is a broad oriental-occidental cultural scale reflected here. This confirms the findings in You Sihai (1990).

4. Only a few individual parts elicited significant differences of judgement from among the 6 different nationalities:

i) Part 2 in TLE and OL versions ($p = .001$ for both) was considered unsuitable by the Germans, Poles and French subjects, while the Portuguese, Greeks and Syrians thought it suitable. Is this perhaps the reflection of a North-South divide?

ii) Part 7 (in TLE text, $p = .036$) was judged as slightly unsuitable by the Portuguese and Germans, but as suitable by the Greeks, Poles and French, with the Syrians in between.

iii) Part 8 (in TLE text, $p = .051$) was judged as unsuitable by the Portuguese, as less so by the Germans and French, and as least so by the Poles, Greeks and Syrians - with borderline significance. There seems to be an East-West effect here.

5. No overall differences of judgement were found due to the raters' sex, the academic discipline they had studied, the number of years they had been learning English or number of years they had spent living in the UK.

6. 23 of the 45 judges claimed to have been taught how to write ALs in the L1. These judges judged the Parts significantly more severely, both in the TLE ($p = .036$) and the OL ($p = .004$) versions. It seems that the composite AL broke a significant number of the rules these subjects had been taught, and that these infringements are of sufficient generality and

salience to be perceptible across a language barrier. This raises a question, which we address below, of whether the defects are in fact (all) linguistic in nature.

7. 33 of the 45 judges said they had been taught about writing ALs in English. But there was no significant difference between their ratings of the composite AL and those of the judges who had NOT received such instruction. Since the AL was 80 percent unsuitable in English, we conclude that instruction on writing ALs is best given in the L1, and then transferred to L2 use, a hypothesis explored in Garrett *et al.* (1991).

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Certain implications can be drawn from these results for the identification of priorities and the selection from options in the teaching of this genre and perhaps related genres in English as an L2. The pedagogic implications are of two sorts. The first sort concerns *syllabus*, that is, decisions about WHAT should be taught, what should be avoided, and what the learner can be encouraged to transfer from L1. This is the domain of points i) to v) below. Section 7 addresses the question of HOW to teach, and so is in the realm of *method*.

The following chart summarizes our findings under 1-5

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PART	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-
NSs	+	x	S	+	-	S	x	x	+	+
NNSs	+	+	S	+	-	S	x	x	+	+

KEY: + = considered suitable
S = neutral judgement
- = considered unsuitable
x = NNSs were divided

i) Where all 6 nationalities agreed that the Part is suitable and further agreed with the English native speakers, we have instances of *strategies one could safely recommend for use among all cultures* in this study (English included), and possibly (subject to confirmation) beyond these few. In that case we might posit the existence of rhetorical or pragmatic universals. For instance:

Part 1

I'm writing in connection with the 'travel scholarships' that your organisation offers to students that study in British universities.

This Part was considered 'a good introduction' to the letter by all nationalities - with no significant differences in their judgements. The mean ratings on a 0-4 scale were: TLE version 2.91, with $p = .416$, OL version 2.84, with $p = .727$. These ratings are in agreement with our English judges, who had likewise considered Part 1 suitable. Although every nationality saw it as a necessary form of introduction, the Greeks and Germans scored it slightly lower than other nationalities as there were among them 2 subjects who criticized this Part for being 'not formal enough'. The Syrians gave it the highest rating, finding it 'to the point'.

Part 9

I'd be very grateful if you could send me a leaflet about the universities that the study visits include. I enclose a postal order for £5 to cover the mailing expenses.

This Part was considered to be suitable by all nationalities with no significant differences between them. Mean ratings were: TLE 3.0 with $p = .724$, and OL 2.78 with $p = .738$ - in agreement with our English native speakers. They claimed it was 'a polite way of asking for more information'. There was a significant difference ($p = .04$) in the Poles' TLE and OL judgements (the latter being higher than the former), perhaps as a result of either faulty teaching/learning, or guessing.

ii) Where all nationalities agreed and found it unsuitable, agreeing with the English native speakers. The formulations and strategies used in such Parts are exactly those that students should be warned against using. For example:

Part 5

Moreover, I have just started taking courses in computer wordprocessing. Actually, to tell the truth, I find this quite hard and I'm thinking of postponing it for the time being.

This Part of the letter was considered by all nationalities as unsuitable, as it had been by the English native speakers. Mean ratings were: TLE 1.2, OL 1.11. The Germans and French tended toward the 'very unsuitable' end of the scale, claiming that this part is 'a contradiction with the earlier statement of being a hard working student' or that 'this type of information is unnecessary'. Note this appeal to the principle of Relevance. The Portuguese, Greeks, Poles and Syrians found it unsuitable, closer to the 'neither suitable nor unsuitable' sector of the scale, claiming that it is a 'negative, weak point for someone to mention in a letter of application', but that it 'shows some kind of sincerity'. However these differences among the nationalities were not statistically significant ($p = .456$ TLE, $p = .676$ OL). The Greeks scored it slightly lower in their own language, commenting that negative points about oneself should not be mentioned in such letters in Greek.

iii) Where all the nationalities agreed and found it suitable but disagreed with the English native speakers, who found it unsuitable.

These could be instances of usage to be recommended for English as an International Language (EIL), defined by Danchev (1992: 282) as 'something like a common denominator of all the possible nonnative varieties', in other words a means of communication among users of English from different nationalities none of whom is a native speaker. In this case one could keep the pragmatic values of his own language and use English without committing any pragmatic failure in the company of fellow nonnative speakers of English. If one native speaker entered the group, it would be his/her responsibility to adapt toward the EIL norm - for that is just what it is, a nonnative norm. Native speakers are reluctant to give way to EIL norms, as Singh *et al.* (1988: 53) point out, asking why it should always be the NNS who gets blamed for communication failure and 'why the less than efficient comprehension abilities of native speakers escape attention'. Part 4, for which the mean ratings were 2.96 TLE, 2.98 OL, is just the sort of utterance that NNSs ought to get used to processing, and which the mother tongue educator must accept responsibility for teaching:

Part 4

I speak four languages - English, French, Chinese and Greek - and therefore, I do not have problems in socialising with other people. Also, I hold one degree already in Social Policy with specialisation in Clinical Justice; now, I'm in my final year in the Sociology and Linguistics joint honours degree at the University College of North Wales.

This approach had been considered by our original English judges as a tedious egotistical recital of the applicant's attainments, which will cause the reader at least boredom or

possibly even *irritation* of the sort that Johansson (1978) described, albeit with regard to nondiscoursal errors. It is an infringement of what Leech (1983: 136ff.) calls The Modesty Maxim, which requires the speaker to 'Minimise praise of self and maximise dispraise of self', adding that 'To break the first submaxim of modesty is to commit the social transgression of boasting' (*ibid.*). In contrast, in this study it was considered by the non-English judges to be a suitable way of 'presenting yourself in a positive manner'. We seem to have here an instance of the type of quasi-logical argument mentioned earlier. All the nationalities agreed, with nonsignificant differences among them ($p = .601$ TLE, $p = .133$ OL). The Portuguese scored slightly lower, insisting that this information would be better in a CV. The Germans scored slightly lower too, but for different reasons, indicating that they required more details (i.e., the level attained in the languages mentioned). This would have made this part even more egocentric to native English speakers' ears.

It is relevant to note here that You Sihai (1990: 84) also found that 'application letters written by Chinese students read rather arrogant and unconvincing because of the frequent use of superlatives when they evaluated themselves'. This came as a surprise to her, since 'actually Chinese society advocates modesty'. She suggests an explanation in terms of transfer of training with a little pragmatic hypercorrection perhaps: 'They got the impression that Americans and westerners advocate directness and competition (*ibid.*).'

In our study there was particularly wide variation of opinion *within* the national groups on this Part, the Standard Deviation for the German TLE being 1.64, and showing very high ingroup disagreement. Perhaps these are merely reflections of idiosyncratic preferences.

Part 10 is another instance of the EIL norm-based judgement:
Thank you in advance for your cooperation, I am looking forward to hearing from you as soon as possible.

This Part had been considered by the English native speakers an ostentatious display of 'good manners' and consequently unsuitable in a letter of application of this sort. The failure here is that the applicant seems to be thanking the recipient for something s/he has not yet done, in order to gain his/her preference'. It is an example of a strong Affective appeal. In particular the use of the forms *in advance* and *cooperation* would imply that s/he is absolutely confident of the panel's favourable consideration. In contrast, in this study all nationalities rated Part 10 highly. Mean ratings were 2.89 on TLE and 2.98 on OL versions with nonsignificant differences $p = 0.627$ on TLE, $p = 0.338$ on OL. This demonstrates that they considered this Part to be a suitable way, as they claimed, to 'finish', or 'close' the letter.

iv) Where all nationalities agree and rate the Part indeterminately as 'neither suitable nor unsuitable', disagreeing with the English native speakers, whose ratings had been categorical and negative.

These could be instances in which the personality of the individual learner/user is stronger than the cultural influence. This might indicate that in some cases there is not a clear distinction between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in a given culture. An example is Part 3:

By the way I am a very hard working student and I strongly believe that I consider myself a good candidate for this award. Mean ratings were 1.82 on TLE version ($p = .757$) and 1.51 on OL version ($p = .787$).

This Part had seemed uncomfortably direct to the English native speakers and consequently unsuitable for use in letters of application. It is also highly egocentric, with its

three uses of 'I', which could have been avoided by using a Passive construction: 'I am considered ...'. In this study there does not seem to be a definitive answer as some of our subjects in all nationality groups found this strategy suitable and, as they claimed, a 'good way to present or promote yourself'. Most subjects, however, found it unsuitable in terms of being 'too direct', 'self-indulgent in showing his/her opinion' when 'others will have to make a judgement', or, more vaguely, that this 'could have been said in a better way'.

Another instance is Part 6:

Your scholarship is my only chance to make a study visit to the U.S.A. since my financial state would not permit me to do such a thing at my own expense.

Our English judges had claimed that the applicants in this case are 'too forward' or that they are asking for 'special consideration' (the lexicopragmatic error of overinclusion which gave this impression was the word *only*). However, in this Part all nationalities scored close to the 'neither suitable nor unsuitable' mid-section of the scale. Means were TLE 2.23 with $p = .798$ and OL 2.2 with $p = .572$. In particular they saw it as a positive point that the applicant is being 'honest in that s/he is dependent on the money' and as a negative point that s/he is 'too dramatic and puts the receiver under sentimental pressure'.

The pedagogical implication here is that non-native speakers of English and users of EIL like our subjects are unaware of two things: a) the strong negative feelings that formulations such as these evince in native speakers; and b) the dull, ineffectual neutrality with which they are likely to be received by (fellow) users of EIL. Time will have to be invested in the syllabus for raising learners' awareness of these facts.

v) Where there are differences in judgement between the nationalities.

These are instances of rhetorical usage that can be safely used within some cultures but not with others. They represent relatively parochial norms, neither suitable for use in EIL nor for communication with donor native speakers. Here again we discern the North-South and East-West divides referred to above. Part 7 is an example, as are Parts 2 and 8.

Part 7:

Finally, I have to admit making a study visit to the U.S.A. is my sole opportunity to complete my research on Crime and Deviance; data from the U.S.A. would be very helpful for this.

On the surface this Part seems like a rational appeal based on the structure of reality: argumentation by reason. However, the use of the word *sole* was condemned by our original English judges as constituting 'emotional blackmail', since it implies that a refusal would be disastrous for the applicant and the donors would be to blame. The applicant is therefore failing to observe Lakoff's Maxim of Politeness: *Leave the hearer with options*. Therefore it was considered unsuitable. However, as Sifianou (1992) has shown, the Greek view of Politeness does not match the English one, in two respects: i) it embraces *εὐγένεια* (generosity/altruism), and ii) Politeness is typically positive in Greece but negative in England. In this study, there is a significant difference ($p = .036$ TLE, vs. $p = .079$ OL) in the judgements between the nationalities. The Germans and Portuguese, with means of 1.8 and 1.6 respectively, scored lower (closer to the English native speakers, another instance of a 'pragmatic cognate'), finding this strategy unsuitable, claiming that 'the reason for going is good but it is not well stated', and that 'it is not explicit enough'. On the other hand the Greeks (mean = 3.5), Poles (mean = 3.1), Syrians (mean = 2.2) and French (mean = 3.1) scored it high, finding this strategy suitable since 'it is relevant to his/her reasons for travelling' and that 'it showed his/her objectives'. Only the Syrians, in their TLE judgement,

scored lower (closer to the Portuguese and Germans), thus showing an awareness of the pragmatic force of this utterance in English.

Here we have concentrated on the *syllabus* implications of variable rhetorical preference, and have identified five categories for syllabus differentiation. We would like to compare our proposal with another. Quirk (1981) proposes that a special kind of English should be designed and taught for international communication, and labels it Nuclear English (NE). Quirk's solution to pragmatic infelicity lies in making NE 'culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic, or emotional aspirations' (1981: 156), or, as Fishman (1982) quoted in Danchev (1992) put it: 'without love, without sighs, without tears and almost without effect of any kind'. Such radical neutralization would make NE into an anodyne but wholly colourless language. We have adopted Quirk's position only in so far as we have identified some of those options that could 'safely' be taught for international use and those that constitute hazards. This was the essential implication we saw for syllabus specification.

7. METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: HOW TO TEACH

The decisions relating to the teaching syllabus are usually made by a higher authority than the teacher. But methodological decisions are more likely to be left for him or her to make. The teacher will want to identify teaching procedures that support the task of helping students to avoid the pragmatic pitfalls in the foreign language. The first question is whether the method should be implicit or explicit.

There would seem to be little hope that control of the range of pragmatic options made available by the FL could be naturally acquired by exposure within a time-span that would be cost-effective. And the price to be paid in offence given to and by others in the long course of such natural acquisition can scarcely be countenanced. The only option is explicit instruction; that is, these pragmatic choices and the nuances of difference between them will have to be systematically taught by the teacher and become the object of what Palmer (1922) called the learner's 'studial capacity'.

This should be done in such a way as to raise pragmatic awareness without, however, asking the learner/user to jettison her/his own culture and personality and become just an 'ersatz' native speaker as Cook (1993) and before him Littlewood (1983) suggested we tend to do. In other words, learners and users of an L2 must be able to deconstruct language in such a way that they gain intellectual insight into its workings, but they should not be expected to forswear either their own cultures or their own individuality.

Thomas (1983) suggests that the appropriate corrective methodology depends on the precise nature of the pragmatic failure, whether it is *pragmalinguistic* or *sociopragmatic* in nature. Let us consider the distinction between these two.

Thomas's *sociopragmatic* infelicity stems from cross-cultural differences as to what is considered acceptable social conduct, albeit displayed through the medium of language. Many of the infringements identified in our AL are sociopragmatic in this way: the utterance has the pragmatic force targeted by its author but this pragmatic force is not appropriate in that situation. It is *misused*.

At the other end of the continuum are the purely *pragmalinguistic* infelicities, which are linguistic in origin, caused by differences in the way different speech communities encode their messages. An example would be the language usage rule in Korean or Sudanese,

requiring answers to negative-polarity questions to conform to the *form*, not to the facts: as in the Sudanese positive answer to the question *Doesn't he go to school?*:

[əjwæ mæ bimfi = Lit: *Yes not go he* = *Yes he doesn't* (where English would expect *No, he doesn't*)

Again, many of the infringements our raters identified are of this type. The sentiment that the writer wanted to express was the same as a NS would have thought appropriate in this situation. But, as encoded, these utterances simply do not have the pragmatic force which the writer wanted to express and supposed them to have. They are *misformulated*.

For Thomas the distinction is not just academic, since the two kinds of infelicity call for different types of treatment: pragmalinguistic errors 'should be possible for the teacher to correct quite straightforwardly', while sociopragmatic strangeness 'should not be "corrected" but only pointed out and discussed' (Thomas, 1983: 109). There are three problems with this approach. The first is the workability of the distinction. Thomas concedes that these are the two endpoints on a continuum. There will always be less clear-cut mid-scale instances, where it will be difficult to identify an infelicity as sociopragmatic or pragmalinguistic. Most of the decisions will have to be made on the spot and there will be, into the foreseeable future, no handy reference source to look up doubtful cases. The second problem is whether the learners as well as the teacher should know about, and be able to make, the pragmalinguistic vs. sociopragmatic distinction, or whether the teacher should make these decisions alone and teach accordingly. The third problem is what pedagogic input there should be in cases of doubt – which, we contend, will be in the majority of cases. Is there a test to apply? We have two suggestions.

First, using Halliday's (1985) framework, we could say that pragmalinguistic knowledge contributes to the learner's skill in the instrumentally orientated use of language, his Communicative Competence, for 'doing things with words'. It serves the Ideational aspects of his functional competence. On the other hand sociopragmatic knowledge contributes to the learner's success in doing things with people, perhaps integratively, serving the Interpersonal function of language. That is one litmus test for learners to learn how to apply. Second, we suggest that if the infelicitous utterance can be put right by being paraphrased in a way that changes lexical items and/or structures for ones with different connotations and implicatures but keeps the same semantics, then the cause for failure was linguistic: it is a pragmalinguistic error. If the replacement still leaves one open to a charge of unacceptable behaviour, then it was a cultural or social gaffe, i.e., a sociopragmatic error. For instance, take one of our test sentences:

I would like to congratulate you on this initiative of yours.

This can be paraphrased as:

I applaud/welcome this/your initiative (on your part)

The substituted lexical items and changed grammatical relations between them yield a roughly synonymous overall meaning but the implicatures they trigger are changed. For example, *congratulate* suggests attainment by the donor, while *applaud* or *welcome* suggest potential benefit to the speaker. Then, while the NP *this N of yours* has deprecatory overtones, as in *This cat of yours has killed my canary*, the semantic paraphrase *your cat* has none. But, even after making these substitutions, the utterance is still pompous and objectionable. Then it must be a sociopragmatic fault.

What we have here, then, are two crude discovery procedures that could be tried and tested (perhaps eventually refined) in the FL class: at times learners' attention is directed

towards the forms of the language being learned while at others it is the foreign culture that learners are encouraged to focus upon. At all times the relation between these two will be a crucial issue. We are therefore sceptical about the essentially teacher-centred basis for distinguishing methodological responses to these two kinds of deviance: sociopragmatic and pragmatic. Our point is that the job of identifying the type of infelicity can, and should not, be left to the teacher, but should be part of the learning objectives. Learners themselves need to develop a sense of what constitutes misformulated, as distinct from misused, language. After all, that is something we must learn to do when we become acculturated in our NL.

This methodology is where we seem to be heading. In James (1992) there are suggestions for making FL learners aware of the contrasts between L1 and FL, and reference to the work of the Grenoble group in helping learners study the FL in the light of their L1. The most recent contribution in the same direction is Widdowson (1992). He states quite unequivocally that 'Cultural understanding, in this perspective, can be seen as a function of the study of language' (1992: 107). On this assumption he proceeds to suggest something that would have been anathema in the days of Audiolingualism and the contemporaneous heyday of Contrastive Analysis:

A pedagogy of language study along these lines would be concerned with comparisons, and it would in effect bring contrastive analysis out of exile and establish it as a methodological principle. (Widdowson, 1992: 107)

We heartily concur, and offer our data and this paper further in support of Widdowson's proposal.

APPENDIX 1

Please say how suitable you consider each part to be for use in a letter of application.

Part 1

I'm writing in connection with the 'travel scholarships' that your organisation offers to students that study in British universities.

VERY SUITABLE	SUITABLE	NEITHER SUITABLE NOR UNSUITABLE	UNSUITABLE	VERY UNSUITABLE
[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

and so on for each of the 10 constituent Parts.

APPENDIX 2

Imagine that this application letter was written in *your* language, addressed to an institution of *your* country, saying the same things in the same ways: how suitable would each of the 10 Parts be then?

PT	VERY SUITABLE	SUITABLE	NEITHER SUITABLE NOR UNSUITABLE	UNSUITABLE	VERY UNSUITABLE
1.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
2.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
3.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

and so on for each of the 10 constituent Parts.

NOTES

1. A first draft of this paper was delivered to the 10th AILA Congress, Amsterdam, August 1993.
2. Examples of these three types of advert are:
Bosch steam irons – switch off automatically when not in use (PRODUCT)
We won't make a drama out of a crisis (SERVICE)
Hanson: a company from over here that's doing rather well over there (PRESTIGE)

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Modality in Ghanaian and American personal letters

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports a comparative study of the ways in which modality as a semantic feature is expressed in one nonnative variety of English and one native variety of English. A set of twenty-two informal letters written by Americans were compared with another set of twenty-two written by Ghanaians in respect of the distribution and use of modal words and expressions in the data. Given other differences such as a reading index for the American set of 11.9 grade level and 7.9 grade level for the Ghanaian set, it was hypothesized that the two varieties would make different use of modal words and expressions. The results of the analysis of the data using Analysis of variance (Anova) showed that there was no significant difference between the two sets of data in the distribution and use of modal auxiliary verbs. This finding has important implications for the description of native and nonnative varieties of English which is discussed in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The tendency in research into nonnative Englishes (NNEs) is to focus on the differences between these varieties and native Englishes (NEs), notably British and American English (Bokamba, 1982; Chishimba, 1983; Kachru, 1987, 1990; Magura, 1985; Quirk, 1989; Tregido, 1987, etc.). This is understandable since, in this field of research, as in linguistics in general, the practice is to establish new categories, in this case varieties, on the basis of differences. To take one example, in phonological theory, the distinction of the phoneme as a unit of linguistic analysis is based on the notion of contrastive distribution. This interest in differences has led to labelling varieties of English such as 'Nigerian English', 'Indian English', 'African English', etc. essentially as different ways of using English.

However, the new varieties of English do share some similarities with the native varieties; if they did not, they would cease to be varieties. Once again, an analogy with phonological theory, where the allophone is described as a variation of a phoneme in a different phonetic environment, seems instructive. This paper is an attempt to look at nonnative varieties from the viewpoint of how they are similar to native varieties.

ASSUMPTION

The assumption behind the paper is that it is important to describe the similarities between native and nonnative varieties in order to show that NNEs are related to NEs in the same way as allophones are related to phonemes.

METHOD

To show that NNEs and NEs are varieties of the same language English, samples of American and Ghanaian English were compared in respect of the distribution and use of modal auxiliary verbs. Modal auxiliary verbs were chosen because they are known to be sensitive to variation in context (Coates, 1983; Hermerén, 1978; Biber, 1988) and also

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