

# "Communicative Lingerings": An Exploratory Study of the Emergence of 'Foreign' Communicative Features in the Interactions of American Expatriates after Reentry

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This study attempts to identify ways that experiences living abroad have affected Americans' communicative behavior upon repatriation. These residual effects of learning the language and culture of the host country are called "Communicative Lingerings." Three general categories of lingerings are found: Linguistic/paralinguistic lingerings, interactional lingerings and perceptual lingerings. Reasons for these occurrences, and their possible connection to levels of acculturation, are also explored.

## Introduction

### *Example A*

Ken: "You've improved; you're dancing really well tonight."

Laura: "Well, I don't know, but if that were the case I'd be happy."

When I heard this reply come out of my own mouth in a dance class last December, my first thought was, "Where did that come from? What an awkward thing to say!" A split second later I realized it was a direct translation from a Japanese phrase I had learned: *Ja, shiranai kedo, soo dattara ureshii to omoimasu*. Many perfectly acceptable English responses existed (e.g. "Thanks," or "I wish!") but I had learned that the Japanese "don't say it that way," and had thus learned "the right way" to reject or denigrate compliments (Chen 1993). After two years in Japan, I seemed to have accepted this different approach, and the change lingered even though I was back in my home country among native English-speaking peers. I'd been back in the US for four months, yet this kind of utterance and other unintentional, Japanese-tinted responses and behaviors kept surfacing, surprising me each time. Was I

the only person with such odd experiences or was it a common occurrence among people who had lived abroad for extended periods of time? Were there other ways in which communicative features learned abroad subconsciously manifested themselves in the behavior of these people even after returning home? If so, why? And most importantly, what does this imply about language learning and cross-cultural interaction?

The topic of reverse culture shock has become a very common, casual one. This label itself implies that re-entrants do indeed have difficulties of one sort or another when trying to readjust to life back home. Considering my own experiences (returning home in the summer of 2001 after two years as a high school teacher in Japan, as well as after a year as an exchange student at a Japanese university in 1993) I had made several observations. Predominantly the dichotomy between what I had been "raised" to do versus what I was "taught" to do later in life seemed to be an outstanding factor.

Many studies strive to account for cross-cultural miscommunication and L2 adjustment difficulties as a result of different cultural ways of responding to various situations, such as how to respond to compliments, politely disagree with someone's idea, or use body language to nonverbally convey a message (e.g. Billmyer 1990). We are raised to behave in certain ways. I propose that we do not recognize, consider, or question most of our "natural" behavioral patterns; we continue them "because that's the way I've always done it." We are not able to explicitly define each and every act. In contrast, when going to a foreign country or learning to work with a different language and/or culture, many of these habits are suddenly considered inappropriate. At that point, someone (often within the target culture) explicitly identifies a situation where a particular behavior is (or is not) called for, raising our sociopragmatic awareness (Thomas 1983). Subsequently they deliberately teach us "the correct way" to respond, verbally or non-verbally, raising our pragmalinguistic awareness (Thomas 1983). This new understanding is then mentally and emotionally processed, and practiced until it becomes "second nature."

As I reflected on the problem, I concluded that it appears to arise upon return to the home culture or language for two reasons. First, the newly learned behavior has become automatic, and possibly even "replaced" the original method as comfortable reflex. Second and more complicated is that although we may be aware of what we learned abroad, the original "home" behavior was never explicitly recognized prior to the change, so we are unable to define the exact parameters of what was "left behind," and thus are unable to remember how to return there.

Re-entrants, adult professionals who have lived and worked abroad for extended periods of time before returning to live and work in the US, are an almost unrecognized cultural minority with their own set of doubts and questions about self- and group- identity. They leave home as

"Americans" and return home again months or years later expecting to be "Americans," but somehow they don't seem to fully "know how," reflecting the aforementioned confusion. There is suddenly sporadic confusion about how to recognize and interpret sociopragmatic conditions. Within these contexts, pragmalinguistic knowledge may also occasionally be uncertain, as interlocutors search for the appropriate linguistic form that would function in such a way as to accomplish a certain communicative goal. de Bot refers to a lexical version of this frustration as "the 'tip-of-the-tongue' phenomenon, where speakers cannot find the right word form although they know that they know it" (1996: 542).

Not only is it important to recognize the readjustment needs of these people in their own right, but as educators of language and cultural awareness, perhaps understanding these needs and why they occur will lend insight into how to better teach these aspects of sociolinguistic competence to English language learners in our classrooms. There appears to be a large gap in the literature on the learned communicative habits acquired abroad by reentrants, as well as lingerings between multiple second languages within one adult learner. My intent in this research was to find out if other people felt the same sense of confusion upon reentry as I did, and if other possible explanations became evident.

### Background

There is myriad research on issues related to second language acquisition and cross-cultural communication, ranging from code switching and both L1 and L2 transfer or interference, to the concepts of "face" (e.g. Brown & Levinson 1987) and culture shock. There appear to be five generally related themes in the research, yet none of them has the combination of features to address the unique linguistic situation of these reentrants.

First, regarding cultural issues, there are many psychological studies that focus on the culture shock of returning from abroad, also known as reverse culture shock or reentry adjustment, but their primary focal groups tend to be exchange students returning to their home campuses (e.g. Gaw 1995; Hogan 1996), corporate executives returning to the home office (e.g. Adler 1981; Martin & Anthony 2002), missionary families (e.g. Pollock 2002), or military people returning to a domestic base, and their respective conditions. The focus is primarily on general cultural readjustment, rather than on specific linguistic behavior.

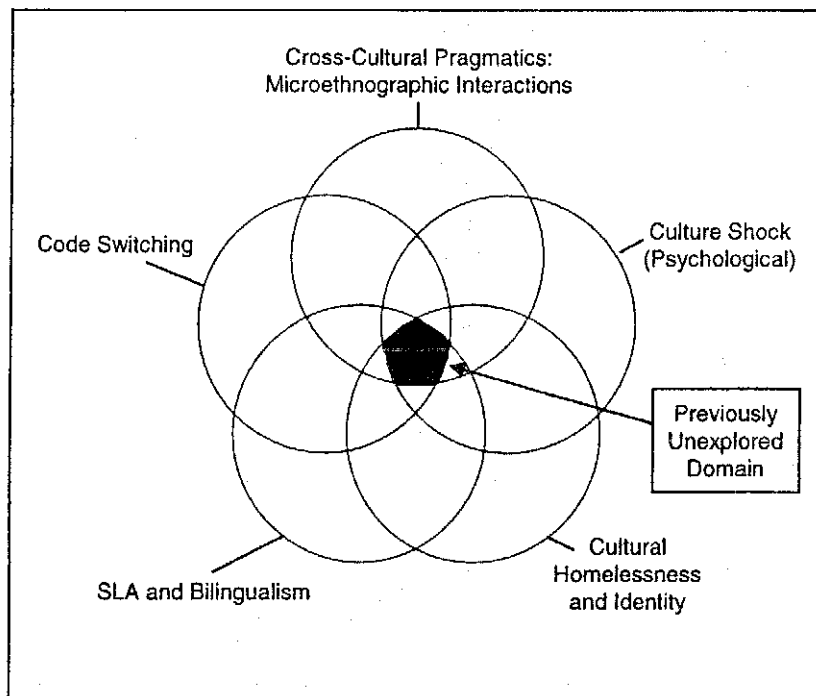
The second group of studies is on the notion of "cultural homelessness" or "third culture kids (TCKs)" These tend to look at children (such as those with parents in military service) who frequently relocate, often internationally (e.g. Pollock 2002), or multi-ethnic people who are unable to identify fully with any one group of people and thus always feel like

outsiders (e.g. Navarete-Vivero & Jenkins 1999).

Linguistically, the third area of interest is code switching. However, these researchers mainly approach the subject from perspectives of grammar, language choice and identity of bilinguals (e.g. Matsuda 2000; Nishimura 1997), or types of code switching (inter/intra-sentential, mutually intelligible/unintelligible, etc.) thereof (e.g. Martin-Jones 1995; Pfaff 1979; Yoon 1992).

The fourth group of studies are related to second language acquisition (SLA) and bilingualism, with linguistic foci on language attrition and rejuvenation (de Bot & Stoessel 2000) and interference (e.g. Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1990; Poullisse & Bongaerts 1994), both L1 and L2. These studies predominantly looked at immigrant populations or bilingual programs in schools. Similarly, there is a large body of research on implications of L1 and L2 attrition or underdevelopment that focuses not so much on SLA practices, but on language policy, practice opportunities, and motivation (e.g. Hornberger 1988; 1991; Freeman 2000).

Figure 1  
Relationship Between Re-Entrants' Language Experience and Major Fields of Research



Finally, there are many studies that focus on the cross-cultural pragmatics of microethnographic interactions, analyzing miscommunications

and expectations in specific speech acts and events such as apologies, requests, and compliments (e.g. Chick 1996; Billmyer 1990).

At best, each focal area has tangential relation to this situation in question and some connection to the other areas, but there appears to be a significant gap in the literature regarding the microcosm of language and culture among re-entrants, tying all of these areas together (see Figure 1). I hope that this paper will convince researchers of the legitimacy of the need to fill this gap.

### Methods

In order to narrow the scope of this study, the following research questions were posed:

1. Upon repatriation, do re-entrants catch themselves unintentionally displaying "foreign" communicative behaviors, either verbal or non-verbal? If so, what are they? What are the re-entrants' beliefs about why this seems to happen?
2. Similarly, do these re-entrants ever perceive other people's displays of "home culture" communication style to be strange? What are the re-entrants' beliefs about why this seems to happen?
3. Most importantly, are there any emergent patterns visible in their reported experiences?

My participants were seven (counting myself) adult re-entrants who had lived overseas for a year or longer, but had only returned to live and work "at home" again within the past 12 months. Five were English teachers and three worked in other areas of social service and development (one had two jobs). Six were European Americans, and one was Arab American. The earliest re-entry date was in May, 2001, and the latest was in December, 2001. Language proficiency ranged from being fluent in two or three language varieties and conversant in others, to minimally functional in the host-country's language but only truly comfortable in standard American English. Although all were initially excited about the impending overseas assignments prior to going, and in retrospect considered the experience to be invaluable, the degree to which participants truly enjoyed the experience or looked forward to returning home varied considerably. (See Appendix A for brief profiles of participants.) All interviews were conducted in March, 2002. Three participants were interviewed in person, allowing for transcription, while the other three were primarily contacted over the telephone due to geographic distance. Follow-up conversations were held with all participants as well, mainly on the telephone.

The best way to answer the research questions, at least initially, appeared to be a type of ethnographic interview. For my own data contribution, I wrote down 'foreign-tinted' communicative behaviors I have noticed in myself, or that others have pointed out to me. I also asked sev-

eral people who have known me for a long time (e.g. my mother) if they had noticed anything different in my speech or behavior after returning from Japan on either occasion (1994 or 2001).

After writing down and looking at my own self-observations, I developed a very loosely structured set of questions for the other participants regarding their speech anomalies, behaviors and perceptions of their home environment. Aside from general data regarding language proficiency, what countries they'd been to and for how long, etc., some of the questions I had planned to ask were along the lines of:

How has repatriation been difficult for you?  
 What has been difficult for you to culturally adapt to upon return?  
 Have you found any (foreign language) accidentally slipping into your English?  
 Has anyone else pointed out something you did or said that was "left over" from your time abroad?  
 Have you had any experiences interacting with an American where you thought their speech or behavior was strange, but probably wouldn't have noticed it had you not lived abroad?  
 Why do you think this happens?

However, as interviews progressed, some of the questions were modified in the following ways:

Since coming back, have you caught yourself falling into speech patterns of the other language(s)?  
 Have you caught yourself speaking English but in a (non-English) way?  
 In what situations do you find (non-English) words coming out?  
 Have you noticed anything in your behavior that's still (foreign country) style?

Many of the questions I actually used were not so topically clear, independently. As interviewees narrated, I would occasionally interrupt and ask them to focus on one aspect and give me more detail, for example, "What kind of impulse was it?"

I did not want to be too detailed in my questions or give examples in the beginning for fear of restricting the input of the speakers, potentially convincing them to ignore or otherwise overlook other types of examples that would have been pertinent. As the topic and research questions were very metacognitive and metalinguistic in nature, I had to allow for the fact that respondents probably had not given them much – if any – thought before. When setting up the interview time, I sent an e-mail to everyone letting them know the general topic and types of information I was looking for, thus ideally giving them time to reflect on their experi-

ences. During the interviews, I allowed significant tangential storytelling, hoping it would jog their memories and otherwise help the informants make connections and recollections for themselves. Depending on how they responded to my initial questions, subsequent ones often strayed from the list as they brought new and different ideas to light.

Standardizing the questions was difficult, mainly because no matter how clear and concise I thought they were, respondents inevitably interpreted them differently from how I had originally intended, and rarely were they interpreted the same way twice. Upon noting what prompt a participant needed to understand what I was truly looking for, I would try to use that approach with the next participant, but inevitably the same round-about discussion would ensue until we understood each other better. Natural, conversational interviewing seemed to facilitate this better than a formalized list of exact questions.

I should address one commonly held concern about the merits of self-reported speech data. As Blom and Gumperz (1972), among others, illustrated in their study of Norwegian bilinguals, native speakers are often unaware of their own speech patterns. Thus, people's reports on what they tend to do is often unreliable. Wolfson also argues that native speakers lack the intuition to recognize their own speech behaviors because "sociolinguistic rules are largely below the level of conscious awareness" (1983: 83). This has been well documented.

However, I would contend that what makes this study different is that the participants are not being asked to evaluate their own behavioral styles or report what they think they usually do. On the contrary, they are recounting experiences that were completely out of the ordinary for them, without any sort of immediately recognized pattern, except for the fact that they generally believed these anomalies were residual effects of their time abroad. It is specifically the "where did that come from?" nature of the occurrences that made them salient enough to be noticed and remembered in the first place.

Swain has done extensive research demonstrating the value of output in SLA specifically because, among other things, it facilitates "noticing." Unlike Wolfson's complaint that many language features are "below the level of conscious awareness" as mentioned above, the unexpected nature and sudden recognition of language gaps or accidental interference is what brings these events immediately to the conscious level. Swain explains that the act of noticing "may trigger cognitive processes which might generate linguistic knowledge that is new for the learner, or that consolidates their existing knowledge" (1998: 67). As I demonstrated by the exchange I had with my dance partner in the opening lines of this paper, as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized something wasn't quite right, and on reflex assessed the situation to try to figure out what had happened.

As a result of the relative infrequency and sporadic nature of the experiences, plus the fact that not all pertinent examples manifest themselves out loud, it would prove difficult to set up a quantifiable or even ethnographic means of observing them first hand. In the discussion section of this paper, I will address how this matter could more formally be handled for future follow-up studies.

## Results

Data collected indicate three common areas in which communicative behaviors and perceptions learned abroad have continued to manifest themselves after re-entry. I have chosen to call these residual behaviors "communicative lingerings." The general areas emerging from the data are (I) linguistic/paralinguistic features ("linguistic/paralinguistic lingerings"), (II) expectations for interactions ("interactional lingerings"), and (III) psychological perceptions of a situation ("perceptual lingerings"). It is these residual reflexes and impulses on which I will focus.

### I. Linguistic/paralinguistic Lingerings

1.1. Almost every returnee admitted to having uttered a phrase in the language of the host country without realizing the switch until after actually hearing it. "I do it fairly frequently, at least several times a month." "Oh, yeah, that happens constantly with me." These were two comments made by Bob and Father James, respectively. Father James continued,

#### Example B

"The other night at dinner we were sitting there talking about something and I wanted to say 'why' to this other friar, and instead of saying why I said *blungtumum*. And you know, I didn't even, it didn't even hit me until after I said it."

Of the foreign language lexical items that were unintentionally uttered in English language exchanges, I identified four categories: (i) intensifiers, (ii) set phrases, (iii) emotional expressions, and (iv) backchanneling (see chart in Appendix B: Lexical Lingerings). (Note: whether or not these translations are truly accurate is not the issue. What is important is that these are the meanings assigned to the words by the speakers, indicating the intentions of the utterance.) Other non-lexical communicative features were also affected such as (1) body language and (2) thought organization.

1.1.i. Intensifiers used commonly were equivalent to "very" or "really," and were reported as being inserted in various positions in the English sentence, such as before an adjective as would be appropriate in English syntax, or at the end of a sentence, perhaps to conform to the constraints

found in the language from which the word itself came (e.g. Nishimura 1997). Bob recalled a situation in which he was talking to his sister (who lives in Kansas and doesn't speak any Arabic or have any ties to the culture):

#### Example C

B: Aaand, talking about travel plans to Thailand, and my rush to get ready, and how stupid I was to have agreed to go on a trip the last day of term when all papers, all the last round of papers had to be corrected, grades had to be turned in, and get to the airport by five o'clock, and, as I got more intense about that, some Arabic started popping out.

L: What popped out?

B: Uh, it, it's, it's almost always the same thing. Words like '*auwi*' which means 'very' and I said 'That was very stupid *auwi*,' to do that.

1.1.ii. Set phrases were utterances that are commonly accepted as complete responses to a prompt. This group also had two subsets: those with direct English correlations and those with no fitting English equivalent. The former include direct translations of words or multi-word phrases such as "yes," "no," "good morning," "I don't know," or "a beer." Susan described an interaction during her family's relocation back to the US from Mexico:

#### Example D

S: In restaurants, when you order food, I don't know why but you have, for example I was sitting with my family, when we drove up here we drove from Monterey Mexico all the way to Philadelphia with a truck full of crap and junk and stuff. So we stopped in a diner in Louisiana and I remember we would say, "Um, una *cerveza*--I mean a beer." Or would say "sí" or "no." I think just because when you give orders to someone in Mexico in a restaurant it just seemed to be natural, ordering food in a restaurant in Spanish, that seemed so natural. Because when we traveled all around Mexico we always use Spanish at a restaurant, even though around the table I'd be speaking English to Sophie or my husband, then you turn and speak Spanish.

L: So you got used to assigning roles, in a sense. Like a language role with an identity, you'd use one for your family and when you turn

...

S: Spanish, right, exactly.

Set phrases with no English equivalent are naturally more difficult to describe. Examples include "Hodi" in Swahili, which is used upon arrival at someone's house, announcing the arrival and intent to enter the house. Linda explained that although she never actually uttered it, for a while after returning to New York, every time she approached someone's door, she felt the urge to call,

Example E

"Hodi! Hodi! Hodi! which is like, hey, I'm here, I'm coming in!"

Father James described his unintentionally picking up a Kewa term of endearment:

Example F

"And, and another thing, they would, uh, as a sign of affection, the older people especially would come up to me and hug me and say 'ah abunanagio, abunanagio', and it means my little son. You know, my little son. And so, uh, I found myself saying that to, you know, people, (here) or in situations, because it was such a sign of affection, really."

Another is the Arabic response "inshala," which means "God willing," but is often used to indicate uncertainty regarding whether something will take place, or to reduce pressures of responsibility. Susan explained that common exchanges with her students in the UAE such as the one below brought these words into her habitual language repertoire:

Example G

"I'd tell my students 'have this essay ready by tomorrow, okay? — 'Oh, inshala teacher, inshala.' And it's like no, not inshala, have it done."

1.iii. The third type of code-switched utterance was emotional expression. While these expressions could potentially be used in larger sentences, they all were described in contexts where they independently comprised the full utterance. For example, Linda recalled a Swahili lingering,

Example H

"When I'm mad at someone, catch phrases come out, like when I'm driving I said *Drama!* Which is like 'oh, man! What are you doing!'"

"¡Hijole!" is a virtual Spanish equivalent for "holy cow!" or "son of a

gun!" that Susan described using as a response to something unexpected. To this day, I continue to say "Are?" (Japanese) when I suddenly realize there is a problem, such as remembering a forgotten appointment or digging in my bag for my keys only to realize they're not there. It's as if I were saying to myself, "Hold it..." or "what the...?" There is no conversational context for many of these exclamations, as they tended to be a remark-to-self when nobody else was around.

1.1.iv. The fourth type of verbal lingering is backchanneling style. When in conversation with an English-speaking interlocutor, respondents would often backchannel (Schegloff 1982) in ways learned abroad. In conversation with my mother at one point, I hadn't noticed that I had been regularly and frequently saying "mm; um!" in Japanese instead of the comparatively infrequent "yeah," "okay," or "right," until my mother finally interrupted her own story and asked: "What's with the grunts?"

Fr. James and I had the following exchange when I described that experience to him:

Example I

L: And ...(she) would look at me a little funny...

F: OH, okay—

L: ... It's not a word necessarily—

F: Ah—

L: --but it's not what I would have said had I not gone to Japan.

F: That is very true. Very true. I found that is, that is constant with me. Like um, well, oh yeah, the nonverbal communication is constant. I, I've just found, my family is constantly laughing at me for, for the, for instance (laughs) this may sound funny, but like, if uh, they had this way, the old people there, or all the people there, of when something happens that isn't good, or, I don't know how to say it, like if ... you said something and I disagree with it, I'd say "uhhOOOuhhhhh!"... And also their way of laughing... They laugh on this one pitch and then it goes up I don't even know how to approximate it really, but I think that has happened for me on several occasions when I was laughing... Oh absolutely, the nonverbal communication is just constant..."

Similarly, instead of saying, "okay, okay..." Bob informed me that he occasionally uttered the Arabic phrase "tayib, tayib." He didn't notice any pattern regarding interlocutor or situation, but instead mused that it

seemed to come out without any particular stimulus. Jordan, who lived in the former British colony of Zimbabwe, noticed that he had picked up the phrase "is it?" in place of "really?" in conversations. A nearly universal difference between English and the other languages discussed is that instead of the common English response, "oh," many languages use "ah." Many of the participants (myself included) found this lingering in their speech. I still catch myself saying it occasionally, even though now I've been back for over a year and a half.

An oft-discussed topic among Japanese is their habit of sucking air through their teeth when deeply considering something, or to indicate disagreement or disapproval, a habit which I picked up while there and still have not overcome. I use it infrequently, once every month or two at best, usually if I'm trying to figure out how to tactfully disagree or correct someone. I notice it when it slides into my interactions because it still sounds as strange to me now as it did the first time I heard it, even though now it's coming from my own mouth.

2. Speech style and organizational pattern changes were also noted. Father James described his new speech style as "simplifying, always." As the Pidgin dialect on Papua New Guinea has only about 2000 words,

*Example J*

"there was always the effort at simplification... I was always having to translate my thoughts into the most simple, basic form, and I think that has lingered."

Akin to my "dancing" example (A) at the beginning of this report, he admitted that he often now says "Sorry, sorry," when hearing bad news, because the literal translation in Kewa was regularly used in Papua New Guinea. He acknowledged that he used to consider Americans' sympathetic use of the word "sorry" to be inappropriate and condescending, and still does, yet now has found himself using it inadvertently as a result of L2 interference.

Gestures and other paralinguistic cues also seem to linger on occasion, presumably because they "match" with a word or idea. Postures when standing or sitting are occasionally different, as was the angle at which I have caught myself cocking my head when pondering something confusing. In the first month or so after repatriation, I had to explain myself to American interlocutors a few times after receiving quizzical looks (and occasional outright laughter) whenever I pointed to my nose, as I had learned to do in Japan, instead of touching my heart/sternum, to imply, "who, me?" in conversation, as we do in the US. Father James summarized his feelings on these paralinguistic differences succinctly, saying "there's just a shock about coming back to the States."

Equally noteworthy is that several respondents said that although these "foreign" speech and behavioral patterns don't always outwardly

manifest themselves, the first mental response is not English or a standard "American" mannerism. They report a reflex "urge" to speak or behave in the new way, but "suppress" it upon realizing that it is not appropriate in their current environment. (Examples will be seen in sections below.)

The participants themselves claimed that these unintended utterances "stuck" because they were "mechanical," "throw-away," "inserts," "automatic," "memorized," "reflex/ive," or "catch phrases."

*II. Expectations for Interaction: Interactional Lingerings*

Common recognitions regarding changes in interpersonal behavior seemed to be connected to issues of distance, both physical and social. This is particularly true for hugging, kissing; or other physical elements of greetings. As Susan put it,

*Example K*

"You go up to someone, you approach them, and you realize you're too close, and you back away... You physically, you feel this 'oop!' and you stop."

Greeting styles were frequently cited as sociopragmatically difficult to re-adjust. Many re-entrants claimed that after living abroad, they had "changed (their) opinion on how Americans greet." For example, Jordan described Zimbabwean greetings as "long and drawn out," whereas in the US, "we don't even go through the motions." Linda echoed this sentiment and added that in Tanzania, "Relationships are deeper... Here relationships feel more superficial. People don't want to take the time to get to know you. There, people wanted to know everything about you."

Casually approaching strangers was also perfectly acceptable while in some other countries, but received negative responses from some Americans later. Susan described an experience in sociopragmatic failure during an encounter at a convenience store in Texas when she noticed a Caucasian couple with a cute baby and began to approach to "coo" at it:

*Example L*

"...and acting totally normal, for a Mexican, you know cause that's how I was feeling... I approached the baby of the American couple and I didn't say anything, I just went up and the man got, got pissed. I didn't touch the baby or say anything and I'm a woman I mean and... he looked at me and he said, 'Is something the matter? Is something the matter with my kid, or, what are you doing?' And I realized, whoa, I forgot, you know I'm in the US and you don't approach babies... and it's funny because I was acting like a Mexican doing that."

In contrast, there were also several examples of acclimation to