

# Speech act variation in British and American English

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Comparisons of British English and American English in the past have concentrated on similarities and differences at the phonetic, semantic and syntactic level, while overlooking variation at the socio-cultural level. This paper attempts first to investigate how cultural differences are reflected in five speech acts: requesting, thanking, apologizing, complimenting and greeting. It reports on the results of a preliminary study in which eight Americans and four Britons were interviewed in order to elicit their perceptions concerning speech act differences between the two cultures. Then the focus of the paper shifts to a more comprehensive analysis of one of the above speech acts, namely complimenting. Compliment data was collected in both Britain and the United States and analyzed with a view to revealing differences and similarities in language use. Results show that despite sharing an essentially common linguistic system, the rules for complimenting differ significantly cross culturally. Given the current trends of teaching language and culture simultaneously and given that American and British dialects serve as models of language instruction throughout the world, it is argued that consideration be given to such differences by ESL textbook writers, teachers and students alike.

## THE ORIGIN OF THIS STUDY

As a British student living in America, I came to realize that despite sharing, for the most part, a similar linguistic code with my American friends, there were differences in the way we used our language. When I first arrived in the USA three years ago, I, like many foreign students, experienced what is generally known as culture shock. True, I did not have the additional problem that many foreign students face of speaking a new "language," but this certainly did not make things easier and in a way I felt it made things more difficult.

While going through this cultural adjustment, I was taking courses in sociolinguistics. The majority of readings for these classes concentrated on cultures speaking different languages. I became interested in whether a study of American and British English could provide an opportunity to separate cultural from linguistic miscommunication.

Another reason for such a study is that as an ESL teacher I began to question what variation in American and British speech act use might mean to the teaching of English. Given that the current trend in ESL/EFL is towards the teaching of communicative strategies and given that standard British and American dialects are two of the international standards for instruction throughout the world, any differences in language use would be of immense importance to the EFL/ESL learner struggling to learn the communicative strategies of English speakers. Such thoughts prompted other questions: What does it mean to teach language and culture? Whose "cultural language rules" are we going to teach?

### Language and Culture

Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the textures of our lives. (Sapir, 1921:207)

A culture uses its language to express its concepts, thoughts and wishes. Great anthropological linguists (Sapir, 1921, Whorf, 1939 etc.) in their studies of various native American languages have shown how studying the form of these languages can reveal cultural notions vastly different from those of speakers of Indo-European languages. For example, the Hopi organize time very differently from English speakers (Whorf, 1939: 158); Hanunoo color is not described only in brightness and shading, but also in terms of dryness and wetness (Conklin, 1964:191). Through the study of linguistic form, then, we are able to understand various things about a culture, how it organizes such notions as color, kinship, space, and time. Although Sapir and Whorf's work has shown that a study of form can indeed reveal many aspects about a culture, their work would not help us reveal any differences in language use between the two cultures under study here. That is, a study of tense and aspect in British and American English would likely reveal more similarities than differences between how the two cultures conceptualize time. Apart from the well-known differences in pronunciation, lexicon and syntax, American and British cultures share a linguistic code which is remarkably similar. For the most part, both societies use the same semantic terms to express color and kinship and use the same syntactic form to express grammatical categories, such as tense, number and aspect. Are we then to assume that, because British and American culture share so much linguistically, there are no cultural

differences? The answer is of course no. Instead, in order to help us with this cross-cultural comparison, we must turn to the work of Hymes and others.

### **Sociolinguistics**

it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed (Hymes, 1974:4)

Hymes's work is so important because it focuses on the functions of language in context. Using a Hymesian framework, then, will allow us, not only to look at how form and function line up in the two English dialects, but allow us to study speech as it is foregrounded by the two culture groups.

Since the sixties, sociolinguistics has had a great impact, not only on anthropological studies of non-Western cultures, but also on our understanding of what is happening in our own British and American cultures. Sociolinguistics has grown so much in fact that today many approaches to the study of language and culture are grouped under its banner. The approach favored here was conceptualized by Austin (Austin, 1962) and Searle (Searle, 1962), and perfected as a means of analysis by Hymes (1974). This means of analysis was utilized as a research tool in ESL/EFL contexts by Wolfson (1989) and others—otherwise known as Speech Act Theory (analysis). Hymes defines the speech act as follows:

It represents a level distinct from the sentence, and not identifiable with any single portion of other levels of grammar, nor with segments of any particular size defined in terms of other levels of grammar...To some extent speech acts may be analyzable by extensions of syntactic and semantic structure, as commonly analyzed in linguistics, but much of the knowledge that speakers share about the status of utterances as acts is immediate and abstract, and having to do with features of interaction and context as well as of grammar. (Hymes, 1974:52)

Speech act analysis as proposed by Hymes has allowed us to identify an area of language use hitherto much neglected. Speech act studies on apologizing (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983), refusing (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1985), expressing gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986), complimenting (Herbert, 1986a, 1986b; Holmes, 1984, 1986, 1987; Wolfson 1981b, 1983; Wolfson and Manes, 1980), and invitations (Wolfson, 1979b), have provided many interesting and useful insights into cross-cultural variation of language use. Their findings continue to contribute

greatly to ESL classroom practices. More and more effort is being made to use these findings in teaching verbal strategies to ESL students. The emergence of books such as Say It Naturally (Wall, A. P., 1987) and Speaking Naturally (Tillit, B. & Bruder, M. N., 1985) are examples of such a trend. The idea behind such texts is that teaching formulaic speech acts will allow students to participate more fully in the culture in which they find themselves. Wolfson presents a convincing argument for teaching communicative strategies.

Foreigners in English-speaking countries who have a reasonable command of English and who understand and can make themselves understood without great difficulty, are unconsciously assumed to be equally knowledgeable regarding the sociolinguistic rules of the community. Since linguistic competence is an aspect of communicative competence, people who have one are expected to have the other and are therefore held responsible for sociolinguistic violations in a way which those with less ability to communicate would not be. Furthermore, the fluent speaker in an English-speaking environment is likely to interact more with native speakers and therefore has more opportunities to err and in more ways (Wolfson, 1988b:149).

## THE STUDY

There are two parts to this study. The first part raised general issues and attempted to pinpoint speech act similarities and differences between British and American speakers of English. The second part concentrated on one particular speech act, the compliment and its variation.

### Part One

#### Defining the Speech Communities

with the increased emphasis on nationalism in modern times, the question of the symbolic meaning of race and language has taken on a new significance and, whatever the scientist may say, the layman is ever inclined to see culture, language, and race as but different facets of a single social unity which he tends in turn to identify with such political entities as England or France or Germany....From this standpoint it really makes little difference whether history and anthropology support the popular identification of nationality, language and race. The important thing ... is that a particular language tends to become the fitting

expression of a self-conscious nationality and that such a group will construct for itself, in spite of all that the physical anthropologist can do, a race to which is to be attributed the mystic power of creating a language and a culture as twin expressions of its psychic peculiarities (Sapir, in Mandelbaum, 1949:29).

I realize that it is very dangerous to equate nation with culture. Although throughout this paper I have been referring to British and American culture, I recognize that within the two nations there are many races, languages and cultures. Yet as Sapir mentions above, nationalism has had such a large impact on the way we think of culture in the twentieth century that, more often than not, the two become equated so that we often speak of American and British English meaning the English that characterizes those two nations rather than any specific "cultural group" within those nations. The two groups under study in the first part of this paper are middle class British and American academics working at the University of Pennsylvania.

### Subjects

Twelve participants were selected and subsequently interviewed regarding their views on British and American speech act differences and similarities. Eight of these were white Americans who had either been to the UK or, through their work, had extensive contact with British people outside of the US. The other four participants were white British people who had been living in the USA for varying amounts of time, as the table below shows (the informants names have been changed so that they may remain anonymous):

<u>Name</u>	<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Length of Stay</u>
Simon	British	in US since 1983
Stuart	British	in US since 1978
Peter	British	in US since 1988
Steve	British	in US since 1982
Lynn	American	lived in England for 2 years
Susan	American	6 weeks in Northern Ireland summer 1989
Tom	American	summers of 1987,1988,1989 in Northern Ireland

Josh	American	6 weeks in N. Ireland summer 1989
Naiomi	American	3 weeks in England, 1984
Doug	American	lived in England for one year, 1986-1987
David	American	contact with British academia outside England
Katherine	American	lived in England from 1983-1985

All interviews were conducted by myself, a British national. Although I am aware that this may have influenced responses, at this initial stage of research, finding an interviewer who was neither British nor American proved impossible.

### Interviews

The interviews generally lasted around twenty minutes. Participants were told about the topic at the beginning of the interview and were told that they would be asked to comment on any differences they had noticed between American and British English other than in lexicon, pronunciation or syntax. During the interview, participants were given a list of speech acts and were asked to say whether they had observed any differences in the way they were expressed in the two cultures. This list can be found in the Appendix. Interviewees were encouraged to give anecdotal support to their observations, the idea being that these would symbolize the norms and values of speech and interaction in their own cultures and also indicate how they viewed the host culture. Definitions of the various terms were not given, it being taken for granted that although various speech acts might differ in the way they are used by the two groups, the actual lexical definitions were likely to be similar. The interview was used as a method to obtain intuitions and observations about how the interviewees think they behave and how they think the other group behaves. Thus, any observations made by the interviewees can be claimed to be neither correct nor incorrect; they simply need further empirical analysis which was conducted in the second part of this study.

### Analysis

**Lynn, American:**

"I think that the stereotype of British people of being more reserved is accurate and it's true that people are quieter at first and more reserved and that you need to have a more low key approach in some ways with people .....and I think that politeness is an accurate description of many British people that they are very good at softening criticisms and saying things, in a way that doesn't cause someone to become so defensive."

**Stuart, British:**

"There is a level of superficiality in human contact here, that is very different from Britain. There is that first level of contact which is where you get the exchanges of "hellos", "how are you", and first name things and the second phase which almost stops you getting to know people as people. Well, in Britain I would say that barrier is broken down almost invisibly and that people do have much greater closeness and more willingness to get inside of people as people and I am really aware of that superficiality once and awhile, people that you really think you know and suddenly they are still quite distant from you. Words are being said but there is not that closeness."

These quotes capture, in part, the stereotypical views that the two cultures hold of each other, that is, the idea that English people are polite, indirect and cold as opposed to the Americans who are loud, direct and pseudo-friendly. Interestingly, the British comments above seem to mirror what many foreign ESL students say regarding American behavior. Experts are apt to blame the language deficiency of ESL students as the main reason they cannot make American friends. However, we cannot use this excuse in the case of Stuart since he is a native speaker of English.

Below I report on five of the speech acts in which there was consensus among my informants as to differences and similarities between language use in the two English speaking cultures.

#### Requests

Six of the nine Americans perceived the English as being more polite in requests and generally more indirect than Americans.

**Lynn, American:**

"One time I was teaching in a school (in England) and a teacher was making a request of me. She had two types of students in her class and was interested in narrowing it down to one type and she wanted to give

away some students that she felt might be more suitable in my class..but the way it was presented to me...I didn't see it as a request. I didn't get the sense that she felt pretty strongly about this, and that she really did want them to change level. But in effect her request was more serious, not more serious but it was, she was really hoping that I would take her students, but it was said in such a way that I didn't think it mattered."

**Josh, American:**

"As a general rule, the English were likely to say 'please' and 'thank you'...more apt to say 'please' and 'thank you' if they were asking for something."

**Peter, British:**

"I think they are more direct.....Just getting to the point very quickly. I remember going, we went away to Bath with Kim's family and with Kim's sister and she just picked up the telephone in the hotel and said, 'Have you got any VCR's, we'd like one please?' And they didn't actually have one they could lend to us but it was very direct and there was no 'would you mind' – any sort of ambling along initially to set up the situation, it was just straight in."

**Steve, British:**

"Americans will typically come straight out and ask you to do something will quite often just tell you to do something ;pass the bottle' and an American basically treats everyday requests as part of living and doesn't view asking for something trivial as infringing on your rights, etc."

Thanking

Both American and British interviewees said they had noticed differences in "thanking". One of these felt that British people were more profuse in thanking. One commented on the form, feeling that British people were more likely to use the complete "thank you" rather than its abbreviated "thanks". Four concentrated more on the types of things for which people thanked each other rather than on the frequency of thanking.

**Katherine, American:**

"I noticed that, at Oxford, people don't use the telephone as frequently as Americans do and I was frequently thanked for telephoning in circumstances that for me were absolutely routine...but it seemed to me even in other circumstances I would be thanked profusely for taking the time to telephone or spending the money to telephone."

One of the British interviewees felt Americans thanked more.



**Stuart, British:**

"I would say that Americans are much more willing to use the word 'thank you' and say it much more quickly. Myself as an Englishman have the flaw of tending not to thank people still, because in England it is just something that you would expect people to do. More words are used here is what it comes down to, they say [it] a lot more."

The following comment came from a British male who commented on the longer thanking exchange that he had observed in the USA.

**Simon, British:**

"Well I think the most obvious thing is that it seems obligatory in American English that you have to say something after somebody thanks you. like 'you're welcome,' 'not at all,' 'sure', something like that, which I never felt obliged to do in Britain, I mean you just say thanks and that's enough."

Apologizing

Two people commented on the difference between "sorry" and "excuse me". Two American participants felt that there was a difference in apologizing. One of them felt that British people apologized more to intimates for very small things. The other felt English people apologized more and that apologizing had a different use in England.

**Katherine, American:**

"It struck me that people in England apologized a lot. Mostly in situations having to do with courtesy, if you approach a queue at the same time and it is not clear who has arrived first and there is that moment of adjusting into the other line."

Greetings

Three of the participants commented on greetings. One British participant who has been in America since 1983 still finds difficulty with American greeting formulas:

**Simon, British**

"Well you know there is the classic 'How are you?' greeting which is not a question, which is just a greeting and I still find difficulty in that kind of encounter because I am still not sure what I should say, because I used to say 'How are you?' as if it were a British hello or good morning, but I think more is required."

The other two comments were about using first names versus using title and last name. They came from an American woman and a Briton who both felt, not surprisingly, that Americans used first names more than the British.

### Complimenting

Seven of the interviewees felt that Americans complimented more than British people. Of these one felt that Americans used much stronger terms, i.e., adjectives.

#### **Katherine, American:**

"Oh I think Americans compliment more readily and more and use much stronger terms, oh something is 'great,' the English will say something is 'super,' I think Americans will carry on in a lot more effusively, in a more enthusiastic kind of way. ...My recollection of listening to Americans in a shop is that they'll just carry on about a sweater in a way that once you are accustomed to the English way of speaking sounds completely overdone, too enthusiastic."

One British man (Peter) felt that American women compliment men more than English women do. Another felt that it was more dangerous to compliment women in America than it was in England. While working in America, he commented:

#### **Simon, British:**

"I am very leery of complimenting. I used to compliment people a lot. It has become very political.... You know especially if you are in a position of power complimenting other people can be, you know what do you compliment people on? Do you compliment people on their looks, no absolutely not, that's a real no no these days. I can't say to anyone around here, you know that's a nice dress, or you look nice today, I mean you know it comes out later they sue you for sexism or something like that. I stopped complimenting people, for any reason basically...I find it very difficult for a man to do any complimenting at all."

This man seems to find the sociolinguistic rules so different that he has adopted an avoidance strategy for coping with the situation

## **Part Two**

An empirical study was needed to test whether any of the participants' observations actually reflected everyday language use in the two cultures.

My reason for choosing the compliment as the speech act for further study was due mainly to the fact that a great deal of research had already been carried out in the United States (Wolfson, 1981a, 1981b, 1983; Wolfson and Manes, 1980) and in other predominantly English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand (Holmes, 1987), and South Africa (Herbert, 1986a, 1986b, 1987). Consequently, a great deal more is known about the compliment than about other speech acts. In selecting the compliment as the speech act for further research, I hoped to contribute further to these findings by researching the form, function, and topic of the compliment in another English speaking speech community.

This part of the paper explores complimenting behavior among teachers in two schools, one in England and one in the United States. It briefly defines the compliment, discusses its functions and then makes cross-cultural comparisons of the two speech communities' complimenting behavior making reference to the considerable bulk of literature already available on the form, function and use of this speech act.

### The Compliment and its Functions

A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good (possession, characteristic, skill, etc) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer. (Holmes, 1986)

Compliments have been referred to as solidarity builders that can consolidate the relationship between the speaker and the addressee (cf. Holmes 1984). They help dissipate social friction by serving to "create or maintain rapport" (Wolfson, 1983:86). What counts as a compliment, however, will differ from culture to culture and it is not difficult to imagine cultures or even situations where compliments may be seen as threatening the addressee's face (Brown and Levinson, 1978), that is, where a compliment is seen as expressing envy or desire rather than building solidarity. The issue is an extremely complex one and it is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. It must suffice to say that complimenting is a complex cultural-linguistic skill. Not only will native speakers have the potential to manipulate the compliment to build solidarity between themselves and their listener but they will also be able to use the compliment to fulfill many other functions, such as encouragement, gratitude, etc.