

A different culture or just plain rude?

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ABSTRACT: This article is based on the observations of an English teacher both in the USA and in the Middle East (where she was also learning Arabic as a second language). It points out a tendency of some language learners to view the speech and behaviour of native speakers as always appropriate, when not all native speakers speak and act in accordance with the politeness conventions of their own cultures. Such an assumption can be problematic if language learners imitate native speakers whose behaviour deliberately violates their own cultural norms with the intent to offend. Rudeness is defined and contrasted with differing conventions of politeness and unintentional pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failure. Included are suggestions of approaches for language teachers/learners to distinguish native speaker rudeness from behaviour that stems from differing politeness conventions.

KEYWORDS: Politeness, rudeness, pragmalinguistic failure, sociopragmatic failure, native speaker rudeness, language learning, language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Forever stamped in my memory is the first time I became aware of the importance of distinguishing a native speaker who is being rude from a native speaker acting on the customs of a different culture. An American newly arrived in a Middle Eastern city where I was teaching English as a foreign language, I was standing in line in the post office. The woman in front of me had finished her business with the postal clerk, and I was putting my papers on the counter, when a man, who had not been in line, walked up and quickly put his papers in front of the postal clerk, ahead of me. My first thought was, "How rude!" But then my second thought was, "But it's a different culture." Maybe there was some deep subtlety to Arab culture that I was missing.

Another time of standing in line was at the telephone company in another Middle Eastern city, where a man behind a desk told me to go stand in a particular line. I did notice that I was the only woman in the line, but the telephone company official had told me to stand in line, so it must have been all right. Then an important-looking man told me, "Don't stand in the line. Go to the front of the line." Go to the front of the line? like, *cut in line*? To an American it was extremely rude to do so, but he seemed insistent, so I apologized to everyone as I went to the front of the line ("He told me to do this!"). Strangely, it seemed quite acceptable to everyone that I go to the front of the line.

What was this? How come in one situation a man cut in front of me, and in another situation I was told to go to the front of the line?

So I asked my Arab friends: What's going on here? Both situations seemed rude to me – the man cutting in front of me and also me going to the front of the line. After I explained the two situations, one friend told me that the second man (the man who told me to go to the front of the line) was being very polite and proper. He was

treating me as a lady should be treated, since it is not considered seemly for a woman to stand in line with men where close proximity would make physical contact possible. Upon consideration, I realized that I had seen that principle at work in other situations. At the bank they had separate sections for men and women, and at markets, too, sometimes there were separate cash registers for men and women. So the man at the telephone company was being courteous and considerate, even though my American cultural reaction thought differently.

But what about the man at the post office who cut in front of me? Well, my friends told me he was just being rude. He should have waited his turn in line.

NATIVE SPEAKERS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT?

Of interest to me as an ESL teacher in the USA and as an EFL teacher working in the Middle East (and learning Arabic) is a tendency that I have observed for some learners of a target language to perceive its native speakers as always “right”. As a result, it is possible for language learners to mistakenly consider as socially appropriate the rude behaviour of some native speakers and also not respond appropriately to such rude behaviour. In this language teacher/learner discussion, I raise the issue of native speaker rudeness, as distinguished from intercultural miscommunication, for both language learners and language teachers, using examples from teaching ESL in the USA and teaching EFL/learning Arabic in the Middle East.

Distinguishing between rudeness and customs of a different culture

In the Middle East, I encountered native-Arabic-speaker actions that seemed rude to my American sense of politeness, actions such as people being late for appointments, cutting in line, or total strangers asking personal questions. As a result, I began to view these differences as a normal aspect of the local culture. Sometimes it actually *was* accurate to consider as part of Arab culture actions that would be viewed as rude in America. Questions like “How old are you?” or “Why aren’t you married?” were very common and considered normal in that particular region in the Middle East, but where I was from in America, they would have created a negative impression of the speaker and might have provoked a retort like “None of your business!”

But there were times when I encountered behaviour that seemed rude to me and was also considered rude by the local Arab people. While teaching in the Middle East, I found that a single American woman attracted a lot of attention. As I interacted with the families of my Arab friends, I was frequently asked about marriage, and it appeared to be acceptable for my new acquaintances to do so. So when I was asked similar, very personal questions by a taxi driver, a total stranger, I did not know that he was being rude, and, consequently, I did not know how to respond appropriately. It made me uncomfortable, though, so I asked my Arab friends about it. They were horrified. Such behaviour was terrible. One said that such behaviour should get a smack across the face. Another said that I should have written down the driver’s identification number so that he could be found and punished. In that cultural context, inappropriate behaviour toward women of good reputation is taken seriously and treated harshly.

As I discussed my observations with my native-Arabic-speaker friends, they were appalled to find that I was deeming actions of rudeness as part of their native culture. In fact, they were quite concerned that I might associate the rude behaviour of a few people with Arab culture and thus add to or even create negative stereotypes about Arabs. Their concern was valid.

Not all people are polite

When working as an ESL teacher with students who had only recently arrived in the USA, I observed that I was not alone in this initial view that native speakers are always right. While teaching a conversation class in an intensive English programme, the subject of nonverbal gestures came up. Since I was aware that other cultures may attach different meanings to gestures, I gave the students an assignment to observe people in a public place for 30 minutes, watching for nonverbal gestures. The students were to try to discover the meaning of the gestures. In discussing their observations, we talked about the reactions of other people to these nonverbal movements. Even if the students did not understand the meaning of the gestures, they could observe the facial expressions of people as they reacted to the gestures. In this way, they could tell whether or not a gesture had a positive meaning.

As we discussed this issue, one student asked, “You mean not everything American do is OK?” Her first thought was that Americans were always right (since they are native-English speakers), but then she realized that Americans are like people in every country. Some are polite, some are rude, and some are in between. In a discussion with another class of international students in the USA, a woman from Korea commented, “I think some American are rude because I know not all people are polite.” All of the students in that particular class agreed that there were rude people in their countries, which included Japan, Korea, Honduras, Indonesia, Nepal, and Saudi Arabia. Some native speakers are rude, others are not. How is a language learner to tell the difference?

Recognizing native speaker rudeness

Davies (2003) points out challenges in identifying “ideal” native speakers who are perfect examples of appropriate speech, but for the purpose of this discussion I use the term *native speaker* to refer to what Davies calls the “common sense idea, referring to people who have a special control over a language, insider knowledge about ‘their’ language. ... the models we appeal to for the ‘truth’ about the language, they know what the language is...” (p. 1). Native speakers are familiar with the norms of their culture and recognize norm violations when they occur, and they are able to distinguish the misconduct of individuals from the culture as a whole. Chambers (1995) says, “The rules governing speech acts, though not encoded anywhere (except by ethnographers), are understood thoroughly by natives and often misunderstood by outsiders” (p. 9).

The mystique of the native speaker is often encountered throughout the world. Le Page (1997) describes Chomsky’s work based on “knowledge of that famous phantom, the idealized speaker-listener in a homogenous speech community with complete knowledge of its language” (p. 19). Kramersch (1998) explains further:

Linguists have relied on native speakers' natural intuitions of grammatical accuracy and their sure sense of what is proper language use to establish a norm against which the performance of non-native speakers is measured. Native speakers have traditionally enjoyed a natural prestige as language teachers, because they are seen as not only embodying the "authentic" use of the language, but as representing its original cultural context as well (p. 79).

With such views of native speakers, it is not surprising that language learners view them as perfect models of speech and behaviour, particularly when in the target culture.

However, an area that has received less attention is recognition of native speaker rudeness, in which the nationals of a country, knowing the politeness norms of their culture, deliberately commit norm violations with intention to offend. Beebe (1995) describes native speaker rudeness as instrumental, "serv[ing] two functions: to get power and to vent negative feelings" (p. 154). A language learner newly arrived in a foreign country may not be able to differentiate such native speaker rudeness from politeness norms of the target culture that are unlike those of his/her own culture. But language learners do need to be able to recognize native speaker rudeness for what it is and not assume that it is socially acceptable, simply because it is from a different culture.

Examples of rude native speakers are not difficult to find. Rudeness that is obviously rude cross-culturally would include comments such as those identified by Beebe (1995) like "Oh shut up you fat pig!" (p. 154) said by a pedestrian to a driver, and "Just take you (unintelligible) and get out-a-here, a'right?" (p. 164) said by an impatient customer in line.

Other forms of rudeness may not be as readily apparent cross-culturally, though. A website, "Rude People" (2004), gives opportunity for people to tell stories of rudeness they have observed. One such story is by a couple denied credit by a company that did not let them know about the decision: "I just can't get over how rude they were. I shouldn't have to call you time and time again and email you just to find out I was denied" ("Can I Get a Status," 2007, ¶ 2). Yet in many cultures, directly refusing someone would be considered rude, and avoiding direct refusal would be the appropriate approach. Yum (2000) says that indirect refusal is much preferred, in contrast to directness of refusal in North America. Williams (1998) points out that Arabian Gulf Arabs are reluctant to "be the bearers of bad news", which "can cause great stress to Westerners accustomed to dealing with, and adjusting to, the realities – good or bad – of any situation as it unfolds" (p. 30). The company which did not inform the applicants of the credit denial was being rude according to the American customer writing on the rudeness website (but the same action in another culture could be viewed as polite consideration).

How are language learners to know what native speaker behaviour is rude, particularly if it is similar to polite behaviour in their own cultures?

INTERCULTURAL MISCOMMUNICATION VERSUS RUDENESS

Some language teaching material tells language learners how not to violate target

language politeness conventions. Valette (1986) points out, “Most foreign language programmes introduce the students to the polite behaviour expected of persons living in the country or countries where the target language is spoken” (p. 185). Second language programmes and texts, too, devote considerable attention to teaching students how to function appropriately in the culture that they are immersed in (that is, ESL text series such as *Quest* (Hartmann & Blass, 2007) and *Mosaic* (Werner & Nelson, 2001) by McGraw-Hill and *Express Ways International Version* (Molinsky & Bliss, 2002) by Prentice Hall Regents). Language learners are sometimes taught how to respond in various social settings, and even though their social interaction language skills are not always accurate and/or socially appropriate, at least there is an attempt to teach such skills.

Some sociolinguistics and pragmatics research has explored cultural differences in manifestations of politeness (for example, Wolfson, 1989; Conlan, 1996), and such findings can provide suggestions for language teachers/learners to assist in overcoming intercultural miscommunication due to different norms of politeness when diverse conventions of politeness contrast with perceptions of rudeness. Huang (2007) discusses research in interlanguage variation in speech acts, mentioning speech acts such as apologies, requests, expressions of gratitude, refusals, and complaints, all areas where cultural differences affect perceptions of politeness. Kienpointner (1997) says that “one and the same type of speech act can be polite within one language and/or culture, but impolite or even rude in other languages and/or cultures” (p. 253), for example, bare imperatives (cf. Wierzbicka, 1985, 146ff.).

It is these instances of deliberate violation of norms of politeness that are deemed rude by those who share the same understanding of politeness conventions. Culpepper, Bousfield and Wichman (2003) refer to “communicative strategies designed to attack face, and [which] thereby cause social conflict and disharmony” (p. 1546). Beebe (1995) says that rudeness “causes antagonism, discomfort, or conflict and results in some disruption to the social harmony” (p. 159) and continues, saying that “[t]he idea that socially sanctioned norms of interaction are violated is central to the perception of rudeness” (p. 159). Lindsay (1999) discusses rudeness that she sees has come about as a result of increased efficiency through telephone technology, such as telephone power plays through the interruptions and being kept waiting of call waiting and the hold button. She sums up rudeness done in the name of efficiency, saying, “You know what rude efficiencies are because they make you angry!” (p. 34).

Quite simply, rudeness can make people angry as they evaluate others’ speech and behaviour according to their own standards (Eelen, 2001). Yet not everything that makes people angry is rude. Cultural differences in politeness norms are a factor in determining whether or not what is communicated is rude. Brislin (1993) says, “People find violations of culturally influenced values and practices emotionally arousing....they might become obviously angry or upset if the social setting permits such reactions” (p. 18). Violations of culturally specific politeness norms can make people angry, but violations of politeness norms by language learners are often unintentional and thus not deliberate rudeness. Therefore rudeness can be seen as deliberate violation of culturally specific norms of politeness with the intent to offend when the speaker knows what those norms are and intentionally chooses to go against them.

LEARNING TO RECOGNIZE NATIVE SPEAKER RUDENESS

In their own cultural setting, people both recognize and know how to respond to rudeness, but in second/foreign language cultural settings, language learners may not be able to identify rude behaviour or know the socially appropriate responses. Their speech and actions may conflict with native speaker expectations, which can cause problems. McKay (1992) points out that culturally different expectations may cause conflict, and McGroarty and Galvan (1985) state, “In the area of cultural norms related to language use, unstated differences in expectations can also lead to difficulty in communication” (p. 84). Beebe and Waring (2005) say that “Beebe (1993, 1994a, 1995, 1997) has repeatedly argued for the management of rudeness as an important component of pragmatic competence in interlanguage pragmatics” (p. 69). The challenge for language learners unfamiliar with the target culture is to recognize native speaker rudeness as opposed to cultural norms that are vastly different from their own (as discussed by Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Language learners also need to know how to respond appropriately to native speaker rudeness, because sometimes there are undesirable consequences to not responding appropriately and effectively to rudeness.

Practising some private ethnographic research

Apart from learning through trial and error, how are language learners to know what native speaker behaviour is rude? Eslami-Rasekh (2005) says that “[t]he responsibility for teaching the pragmatic aspects of language use falls on teachers” (p. 199) and describes how teachers can use awareness-raising activities to teach students about cross-cultural pragmatics. Such pragmatic awareness should include recognition of native speaker rudeness, because “[i]t is the language that ESL and native-speaking students have to deal with in the real world” (2005, p. 166). However, Eslami-Rasekh points out that English teachers, particularly teachers in EFL contexts, are challenged by “lack of adequate materials and training, which are the result of a lack of emphasis on pragmatic issues in ESL teaching methodology courses” (p. 199). She goes on to suggest that teachers be alert for suitable material and teach their students to watch for examples of both pragmatically appropriate communication and inappropriate interactions.

McKay (1992) suggests that people traveling to different countries 1) do background research, 2) talk to native informants and 3) look for practical social implications. This advice is excellent in terms of learning to recognize native speaker rudeness versus cultural differences, in a sense telling expatriates to do their own ethnographic research to discover the whys and wherefores of their host country. It makes sense to find out as much as possible about a country before going there. Kohls (1987) lists areas to investigate prior to departure, such as history, government, climate, religion, family structures, and roles of men and women. Even though such background information will not prepare for every eventuality, it creates an awareness of issues to be alert for, likely areas of cultural confusion.

Language teachers can alert their students to areas of major cultural difference between their home countries’ cultures and the target language culture. For example, time and gender are viewed very differently in the USA versus in conservative Arab cultures in the Middle East. Appointments and scheduling are adhered to more strictly

in the USA, but many times I went to meetings in the Middle East at the stated time and was the only person present for half an hour. (Everyone else knew that the meeting would not really begin until around half an hour past the stated time.) Two areas of gender difference that I noticed immediately when I arrived in the Middle East are compliments and eye contact. It is not unusual in the USA for a man to compliment a female coworker about her appearance, with no insult intended. But in conservative Muslim areas, such attention from a man (other than male relatives including brother, father, husband, uncle, or grandfather) would be viewed as inappropriate, even offensive. Similarly, eye contact between unrelated men and women is problematic, very different from the American practice of looking people (men and women) straight in the eyes when conversing with them.

McKay (1992) says that also helpful is identifying what are areas of major difference between the target culture and the language learner's own culture, and one way to do so is through *cultural informants*. Brislin (1993) describes a cultural informant as "...a knowledgeable individual who can answer queries when difficulties arise" (p. 240). He goes on to say, "As a result of his or her own cultural experiences, the informant knows what adjustment to another culture is, how people can misunderstand everyday encounters, how people's cultural background can affect their everyday behaviour, and so forth" (p. 240). But not every native speaker is a good cultural informant. It is helpful if the cultural informant has lived in a foreign culture or has had extensive interaction with people of other nationalities. Awareness of language and social implications is necessary, along with a degree of objectivity, an ability to acknowledge and explain the less desirable aspects of his/her own culture. Also, it is very important that a potential cultural informant be able to tell language learners when they are doing or saying something inappropriate. Many people, out of a sense of politeness, prefer to not mention cultural mistakes; consequently, they are not good cultural informants. People who, when necessary, will tell expatriates what to do, what not to do, and why, are valuable cultural informants.

What can language teachers do to help their students find cultural informants? In discussing with my ESL students in the USA how to find American friends, I mentioned several situations where they might find cultural informants. First, dormitories are natural places to make connections, particularly if international students are given the option of having American room-mates. I had to caution my students not to spend time only with fellow students from their home countries, because doing so could give the impression that they do not want to be with people from other countries, including the host country. Parties and clubs in areas of interest, as well as sports teams, are also situations where international students can develop friendships with potential cultural informants. Another excellent opportunity for finding cultural informants is the provision of host family programmes at some universities, an arrangement whereby international students are connected with families from the host country and can spend time with them in activities such as family dinners, shopping, family outings, and so on.

The third area that McKay (1992) mentions, looking for practical social implications, is like doing ethnographic research in miniature (as I had my ESL students do in the class activity described earlier). Such research involves watching the local people, looking for actions and reactions. In particular, what kinds of speech or actions precipitate negative responses? Does some behaviour receive positive reactions in

one setting yet negative reactions in another? Observing before acting is a good rule for language learners seeking to learn culturally appropriate speech and behaviour.

Also, language teachers can give assignments alerting students to watch for native-speaker rudeness that would be considered normal in their home countries. For example, two strongly held American values are waiting to take turns and not talking during movies. If a person were to cut in line at the supermarket, very likely he/she would receive angry comments like “Hey! No cuts!” or “Excuse me! The end of the line is back there!” But in some countries it is considered normal to “elbow” to the front of the line, and students from such countries could view such behaviour as acceptable when in fact it would be considered rude in America. Similarly, talking during movies in cinemas is unacceptable in the USA but is common in some Middle Eastern countries, and so students from such countries might not realize that this behaviour is frowned upon in America where it is considered rude to disturb others who are watching the movie. Language teachers could instruct their students to observe the reactions of others to cutting in line and talking during movies, and then discuss how the responses of people in the USA to such behaviour differ from the responses of people in their home countries.

CONCLUSION

There are rude people in every country, people who deliberately violate the conventions of politeness of their own cultures with intent to offend. Since customs vary considerably from country to country, the task for language learners when they are learning to function in a foreign country is to distinguish what is from a different culture and what is rude. And the task for language teachers in target cultures is to help students recognize when behaviour that seems rude to them is merely culturally different, as opposed to times when the behaviour that they observe is, quite simply, just plain rude.

Cultural difference. Second/foreign language teachers encounter it all of the time, whether in their native countries or in a foreign land. Sometimes it is funny, sometimes it is confusing, and sometimes it even results in interpersonal conflict. And therein lies the challenge: to be able to step back and analyze interactions before reacting negatively to someone from a different culture who has just done something that seems irritating and even rude, and also to teach second/foreign language learners to be alert to the distinction between rudeness and cultural differences.

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