

## A WAY WITH WORDS THE INFLUENCE OF LANGUAGE USE ON NATIONAL PERCEPTIONS

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### *1. Introduction*

The English language is spoken natively by over 300 million people across six continents (Gordon, 2005), and given that each individual has his or her own idiolect, it is inevitable that a great degree of variation exists. However, according to linguists Quirk and Stein (1990), the reason that English has persisted as a single language is due to the duality of speakers' linguistic identities: "Besides (and without rejecting) a uniquely personal or local identity, we learn to acquire a sense of identity with a wider group—such as the nation" (p. 29). Viewed from this perspective, in conjunction with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)—in which the psychological basis for social grouping is defined—it follows that English speakers from various countries will use language as a tool by which intergroup biases are reinforced. For example, let us turn to the dynamic between Canada, the United States and England: Both Canada and the United States are former British colonies, and therefore all use English as their dominant languages; however, the social and political culture of these countries differs greatly. Cultural differences directly correspond to differences in language use, and variation is in turn interpreted by listeners as markers of social identity.

In this paper, we argue that variation in language use among native English speakers from Canada, the United States and Great Britain informs our perceptions of Canadians, Americans and Britons. We predict that Britons will be the most direct in language use, and therefore be considered curt; Americans will be neutral in their language use (alternately direct and indirect), and be considered aggressive; and Canadians will be the least direct in their language, and therefore be considered the most polite. The discussion of our research is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a brief overview of speech acts, namely, what constitutes "direct" and "indirect" speech,<sup>1</sup> and how these are perceived by listeners. Section 3.1 describes our methodology for gathering data, which are then analyzed in Section 3.2. In Section 3.3 we briefly describe the use of profanity (or lack thereof) among the various groups, the impact it has on listener attitudes towards speakers and how that may contribute to perceptions of the various nationalities. Finally, in Section 4, the foregoing analysis culminates with our conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these terms refer to exactly quoted speech (He said, "I'll come") vs. reported speech (He said he would come), but here *direct* and *indirect* contrast degrees of bluntness.— Eds.

## 2. *Defining Speech Acts*

According to Searle (1969), speech acts are defined as linguistic events that are composed of several layers:

- a) the utterance itself,
- b) the reference and proposition expressed in the utterance, and
- c) the intention of the utterance (or its compliance-gaining strategy), for example, demand, request, assertion, etc.

Each of these components coalesces to form the basis of interpretation in discourse. Aside from these foundational elements, other factors exercise influence over interpretation, such as the listener's life experiences and attitudes (Bradac, 1990:398), which may then be reinforced by speech acts. Here we see the circular nature of the interaction of attitudes and language, where attitudes inform the interpretation of speech acts, which may in turn reaffirm attitudes. Various types of acts affect attitudes differently, and here we concern ourselves with two particular types of illocutionary act—direct and indirect—and their effect on attitudes.

### 2.1 *Direct Speech*

One subtype of speech acts is that of *direct speech*. A direct speech act is defined as one in which "only the illocutionary force and propositional content literally expressed by the lexical items and syntactic form of the utterance are communicated" (SIL International). What this means, essentially, is that in a direct speech act, only necessary words and word-orderings are used to convey a message. Brown and Levinson (1987:66) cite some common uses of direct speech:

- a) commands/requests ("Go the back of the line");
- b) suggestions/advice ("You shouldn't do that");
- c) non-cooperation or unresponsiveness; and
- d) expressions of disagreement or disapproval ("I find that offensive").

However, because direct speech is employed for maximal efficiency—it is meant to satisfy a speaker's desires—the addressee's wants are sometimes overlooked, which may result in the addressee taking offence. Offending the listener is undesirable and can be construed as aggressive, while the purpose of speech acts is to gain compliance. Thus, direct speech is avoided when possible and supplanted by indirect speech (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60).

## 2.2 *Indirect Speech*

The second subtype of speech acts to be discussed here is *indirect speech*. SIL International defines indirect speech or indirect illocution as “an illocutionary act in which the speaker expresses another illocutionary force other than that literally expressed in the utterance . . .” (2004). This is accomplished by relying on

- a) shared background knowledge,
- b) principles of conversation, such as the cooperative principle (both speaker and listener participate in discourse),
- c) convention, and
- d) the ability of the addressee to make inferences.

Brown and Levinson (1987:132) also describe common strategies for indirect speech including

- a) assertions framed as rhetorical questions (“Do you mind doing X?”);
- b) offers framed as imperatives (“Have some more cake”); and
- c) imperatives framed as assertions (“The fare is two-fifty” meaning “Pay the correct fare”).

Indirect speech, unlike its counterpart, takes the listener’s wants into consideration and corresponds with politeness; therefore, it is generally more desirable in discourse.

## 3. *Analysis of American, Canadian and British Language Use and Attitudes*

While the preference for indirectness in speech is universal—that is, speakers of all languages aim to protect the wants of listeners if only to gain compliance (Brown & Levinson, 1987:33; Burgoon, 1990:60)—problems arise in multilingual and multicultural contexts, where the boundaries for types of illocution vary. Potentially problematic contexts occur not only cross-linguistically but—as in our study—where a common language is shared cross-culturally. It is with this context that we return to our study to analyze the dynamic between Americans, Britons and Canadians.

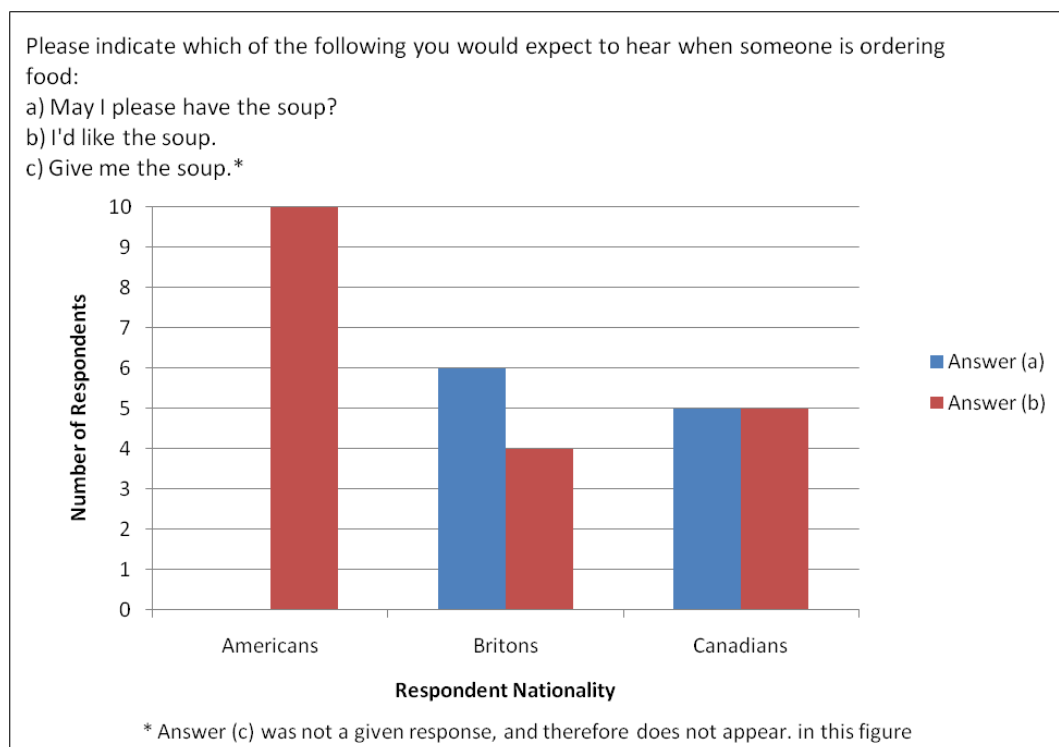
### 3.1 *Methodology*

To glean information about the speech of Americans, Britons and Canadians, we conducted a survey of thirty people—ten from each country. Once responses were collected, they were compiled to provide insights about the correspondence of expectations of language use to more general attitudes toward people of other nationalities; these insights are the basis of our analysis. Although these findings are by no means comprehensive—since thirty people are meant to represent millions—they may be interpreted as a snapshot of general attitudes espoused by English-speakers

from around the world. One benefit of such a small sampling is that the differences are salient. Preferences among the various nationalities we polled contrast greatly.

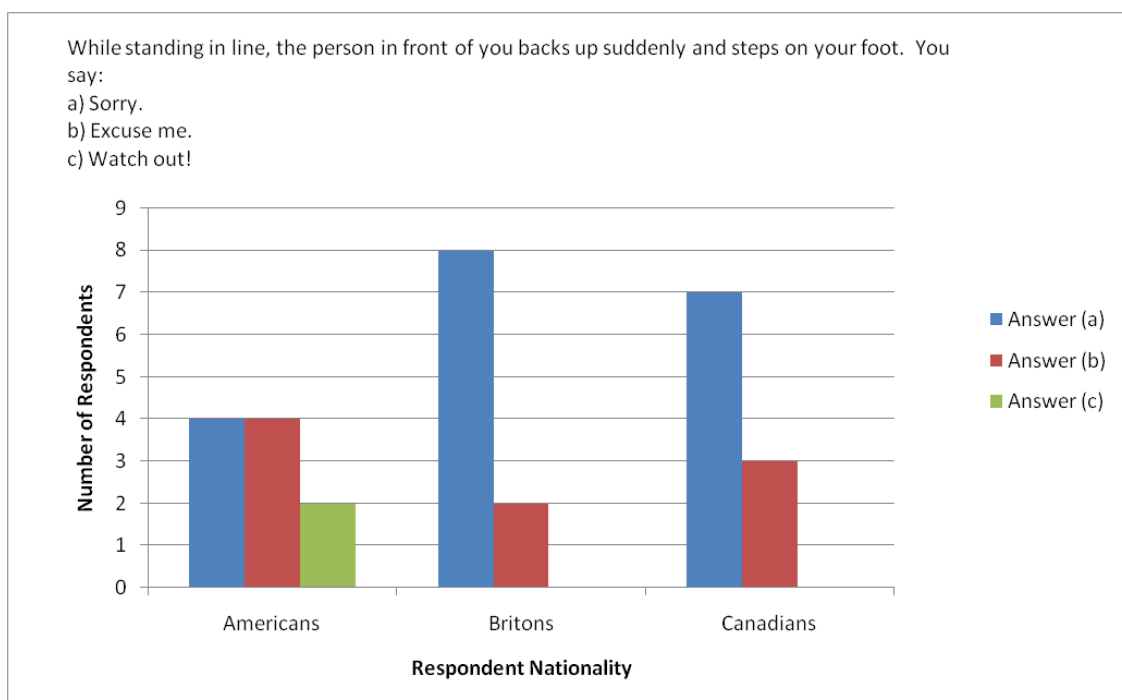
### 3.2 Results

In analyzing our results cross-culturally, we find that the most striking contrast lies with the preferences of American speakers as compared to Britons and Canadians: As mentioned in Sections 2.1-2, direct speech consists more of commands and requests, while indirect speech is characterized by the use of question forms. Overwhelmingly, rhetorical questions are the most common illocutionary and compliance-gaining strategy chosen by Canadians and Britons. Britons tend to choose the most indirect forms, in that they most often chose assertions framed as questions. Canadians are split more evenly in the types of responses they themselves use or that they expect other Canadians to use: Canadians often chose either assertions framed as questions (most indirect) or imperatives framed as assertions (less indirect). However, Americans almost unanimously opt for assertions, that is, less indirect forms, as shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1:** Responses to Question 1, showing a clear distinction between American respondents and Canadian/British respondents

Furthermore, **Figure 2**, below, illustrates that in circumstances where the intention of the speech act relates to some physical need (for example, one is being stepped on, or one would like to sit down), Americans are likeliest to use the most direct language. Direct illocution in circumstances of physical need is the expected result because, as Brown and Levinson (1987:69) point out, the purpose of direct speech acts is maximal efficiency—and particularly in a situation where one might experience pain, this approach is the most logical. (This raises the question, then, of why Canadian and British respondents do not display similar behaviour.) The discrepancy seen below is a clear sign of differences in linguistic behaviour and brings us forward in our discussion of how language use among various nationalities informs perceptions.



**Figure 2:** Responses to Question 7. In this figure, Americans opt for more direct, i.e., aggressive, language as physical needs supersede listener wants.

### 3.3 Profanity and Attitudes

One major factor in the formation of perceptions of language use is the use of profanity in discourse. During speech, one may choose to employ “language intensifiers,” which Bowers (1964) defines as “language which indicates the degree to which the speaker’s attitude toward a concept deviates from neutrality” (p. 416). The concept of deviation was extended by Bradac in his article “Language Attitudes and Impression Formation” (1990), wherein he classifies obscenity (e.g., “the f---ing tax bill”) as a type of

intensifier. Speakers' use of profanity, Bradac argues, correlates to a reduced evaluation of them by others.

The participants in this survey completed a series of six questions pertaining to their individual use of profanity and their expectations of its use, both in their home countries and abroad. We also made the distinction between discourse among friends and among strangers because any such differences indicate a willingness to adjust language (which may in itself be considered more polite). In reporting their own use of profanity among friends, Canadians say they use the least (see **Table 1**); Americans tend to use profanity more for emphasis, but 20% also say that when among friends, they use obscenities frequently. Britons who are among friends are the most apt to use profanity, as 40% report frequent use. The most noticeable, and perhaps most relevant, differences in usage occur when people are among strangers: 70% of Canadians say they never use profanity among strangers (see **Table 2**), 60% of Britons say the same, but only 50% of Americans avoid profanity when among strangers.

**Table 1:** Use of profanity among friends, by nationality of respondent

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>	<b>Frequently</b>
Americans	0%	80%	20%
Britons	0%	60%	40%
Canadians	20%	80%	0%

**Table 2:** Use of profanity among strangers, by nationality of respondent

<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Occasionally</b>
Americans	50%	50%
Britons	60%	40%
Canadians	70%	30%

This discrepancy in use among strangers is meaningful in that we now have valuable insights into why Canadians (50%), Britons (70%) and Americans themselves (80%) say they expect Americans to use the most profanity. Conversely, both Canadians (60%) and Americans (60%) expect Canadians to use the least profanity. (Britons rated themselves as using the least profanity.) Drawing on Bradac's conclusion about profanity use and listener attitudes, we can conclude that Americans' actual and perceived use of intense language negatively impacts attitudes toward them, while Canadians' actual and perceived use positively affects others' attitudes.

### *3.4 Directness and Nationality*

Attitudes towards speakers and their ways of speaking clearly come into play when we analyze the responses regarding national perceptions. In our survey we asked participants to indicate which nationalities they perceived to be the least and most aggressive as well as the least and most linguistically direct. The responses regarding aggressiveness strongly correlate to responses regarding directness: Of respondents who say they find Canadians to be least aggressive, the largest group (36.6%) also believe Canadians use the least direct language. Of respondents who say Americans are the most aggressive, the largest group (40%) also say that they are the most direct.

### *4. Conclusion*

Overall, our goal was to prove the correlation between language use and attitudes. The first step in accomplishing this was to make predictions about variation in language use: we predicted that Britons would be the most direct in their language use; Americans would be alternately direct and indirect; and Canadians would be least direct. As we see above, this proved incorrect, as Britons consistently use the least direct language and Canadians alternate in the degree of indirectness. Americans, on the other hand, do use either the least indirect or direct forms of language to convey messages and seem to unanimously choose a particular form in various circumstances. Americans also distinguish themselves in regard to profanity, in that they are more willing than Canadians or Britons to use it among strangers, which negatively affects attitudes toward them.

This study of various factors in language use yields interesting results, but most importantly, our overall analysis tells us that language use and attitudes are indeed related. Canadians use polite forms, and not surprisingly, Americans and Britons find them to be polite, if not indirect. Britons, who often fall somewhere in the middle both in terms of actual language use and perceived language use, are considered neither the most aggressive nor least aggressive, and neither the most nor least direct. Lastly, Americans, who do in fact use more direct communication, are considered most aggressive and the most direct. The significance of these facts is this: Although we all speak the same language, we use it in different ways—and those differences are what inform our perceptions of each other.

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