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ABSTRACT

        Preliminary results of a contrastive discourse
analysis project at the University of Oulu, Finland, are reported.
The research focuses on cross-cultural encounters between Finnish
students of English and native speakers of English from the point of
view of students' level of social competence. The students' ability
to use discourse strategies is studied at the level of three
discourse categories: (1) the level of the whole encounter, where
students should be able to take part in the creation of a friendly
overall tone or orientation in conversation; (2) the level of the
socially demanding main topic, where knowledge of certain
organizational devices used in handling this sequence in conversation
is important; and (3) the level of one turn at talk and the
interactive strategies employed when imposing on the hearer.
Hypotheses are presented on the possible effect of cultural
differences and of deficiencies in idiomaticity at the level of
social competence on the students' performance. Contains 12
references. (Author/LB)

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SOCIAL LANGUAGE SKILLS OF FINNISH SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

In the present paper, an account is given of the model of
analysis and of the preliminary results obtained in the
contrastive discourse analysis project ca· led out in our
Department under the guidance of Professor Heikki
Nyyssönen. We have studied cross-cultural encounters
between Finnish students of English and native speakers
of English from the point of view of our students' level
of social competence. The students' ability to make use
of discourse strategies is studied at the level of three
discourse categories: (1) the level of the whole
encounter, where students should be able to take part in
the creation of a friendly overall tone or orientation in
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students' performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

To facilitate communication between people with different
cultural backgrounds, a need has been felt over the past few
years for more studies in cross-cultural communication (cf.
earlier studies of this kind, such as Scollon and Scollon 1983,
Faerch and Kasper 1983, House and Kasper 1981, Edmondson et al.
1984, Trosborg 1987). This is also the aim of our project in
Oulu, where we have been studying the communication of Finnish
university students of English with native speakers of English.
Generally, these students have reached a high level of
linguistic competence, and it was hypothesized that they would
manage fairly well in these interactions. On the other hand, if
problems and misunderstandings were to appear, they would be of
a more "sophisticated" kind, and would perhaps reveal something

of the students' perception of aspects of interaction in their own culture, and not only of their defective knowledge of the English language.

When Finnish students are confronted with a socially demanding conversation situation in a foreign language (even though they know this language well), it is predictable that there will be differences in their management of the conversation when compared to native speakers. Because their competence is still far from nativelike, they will have problems in recognizing and using the conversational strategies designed to ensure fluent flow of conversation and social concord.

We have attempted to decribe the students' conversational skills at a level beyond structural competence, i.e. at the level of their social competence (cf. Edmondson & House 1981:45; Nyyssönen forthcoming). We define social competence as (a) mastery of conversational norms, (b) mastery of certain organizational levels of conversation, and (c) ability to avoid unintentional solecisms, and we have described our material accordingly.

Our corpus consists of 48 simulated task-oriented conversations between a Finnish student of English (NNS) and a native speaker of English (NS).[1] The conversations always involve a problem that has to be solved in the course of the interaction. The situations were of four main types, designed to lead the student at some point in the conversation to invite or remind, offer to do something, complain and criticize, or admit guilt and responsibility for something, i.e. his/her social competence was put to the test in some way. These four types were then varied according to the status or power (+P/-P) and the social distance (+D/-D) between participants: we have (1) asymmetrical (+P+D) situations where NS has the higher relative status of the two and the speakers do not know each other (at least not very well), (2) symmetrical (-P+D) situations where the speakers are equal in terms of power but do not know each other, and (3) symmetrical (-P-D) situations where they are equal and also good friends. This gave us a total of 12 situations, and four versions were recorded of each situation (= 48 conversations, some 75 000 words and approx. 7

hours). A number of Finnish-Finnish and English-English recordings were also made for comparison.

In the actual recording situation the participants were left on their own, without the analysts listening to the interaction. This had the desired effect: the participants regarded these conversations as natural and none of them requested that their contribution should be discounted. However, when the speakers were asked to give their opinions of their conversational behaviour, both parties pointed out some differences in the non-native-speaker performance. NSs felt that a native speaker of English would on the whole do more explaining, would try to reassure the other party more, would show more interest and react more emphatically than the Finnish students did. In their opinion, the Finn often sounded reticent and unwilling to communicate! On the other hand, NSs often thought that the Finn spoke in a very direct and decided manner, even sounded businesslike. These comments, then, point towards the existence of some kind of cultural difference between the two parties, and not so much to deficiencies in the linguistic competence of Finns. Conversely, the NNSs were more worried about their linguistic competence. The students felt that they had spoken too "correctly", that they had to look for words and that they could not think of any of the filling phrases that native speakers usually have at their disposal; they felt they had spoken too slowly and were not fluent enough. They were therefore conscious not only of deficiencies in their structural skills but also very vaguely of deficiencies in idiomaticity at some other level.

2. TOWARDS A MODEL OF ANALYSIS: DISCOURSE CATEGORIES

Quite a few models of spoken interaction already exist. Some of them also contain information about strategic elements in discourse. This is the case in the model of spoken discourse by Edmondson and House 1981, for example. This model stresses the importance of conversational strategy, or "the way in which speakers make use of interactional structures in order to gain their conversational goals" (Edmondson & House 1981:45). Conversational strategy may express itself at many different

levels: at the level of certain exchange types (e.g. pre-exchanges), in some interactional moves called the supportive moves (e.g. sweetener, grounder), and at the level of gambits. However, it is somewhat time-consuming to apply such a highly integrated model as this to a corpus as large as ours, even though it would reveal a great deal of the students' strategic abilities.

Another approach to the strategic aspects of spoken interaction is the description of universal politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson 1987. The authors propose a widely acclaimed classification of the manifestations of social politeness, or devices aimed at avoiding a threat to the hearer's or speaker's face in interaction. These devices are very heterogeneous in form and length, and the classification is made at the level of the speech act, without reference to the overall structure and flow of conversation. This theory, when applied to conversational data, does not give an organized or coherent account of what really goes on in conversation, even though it may offer a plausible framework for the strategic aspects of interaction.

What we therefore decided to do was try to combine elements of both approaches in the analysis of our intercultural encounters. We have identified strategic elements at three different structural levels: (1) the level of the whole encounter, (2) the sequence during which an imposition (e.g. complaint, request, invitation) is made and a preliminary agreement or outcome is reached (this might be termed the imposition environment, the level of main topic, etc.), and (3) the level of one individual turn at talk. These levels roughly correspond to our definition of social competence (cf. above).

3. ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE STRATEGIES

We took a very close look at 12 representative conversations in our corpus in order to see how well our students managed on these three levels. We also paid special attention to differences between that group of students who have reached a high structural competence, and those whose structural competence is relatively low.

The following is an excerpt, where X is a Finnish female student who has recently come to work as an au pair for Y, a native speaker of English. The situation is thus asymmetrical in terms of relative power (+P) and there is social distance (+D). X is here introducing some problem she has on her mind, and by the end of this sequence (but in the middle of the extract) a preliminary agreement is reached:

(1) X: *Mm I'm sorry to disturb you like this, but*
      I've got a couple of problems [on...
     Y: Uh-huh.]
     X: *...my mind, and I thought we could discuss*
(5)   *about them, if you have time.*
     Y: Of course I have time. Please tell me. What
       are your problems?
     X: *Well ((clicks tongue)) well it's - it's a bit*
       silly, because I heard from the boys that my
(10) *day off, Wednesday, has been [put off.*
     Y: I was] just about to discuss that with you.
     X: *Oh! Well I was thinking that uh maybe you*
       could have told me a little earlier.
     Y: Well you know it was very last minute. I
(15)   only just heard about this job interview, and
       I was really just about to ask you. I mean
       you wouldn't mind really, would you? You
       could have another day off.
     X: *Well ▪ well I was planning to go to - down to*
(20)   *- to town, but uh maybe ca- I can cancel*
      it.
          (preliminary agreement)
- -
      I have to discuss it with [my...
     Y: It] would really be a great help to me if you
       could. I realize it's a little bit
(25)   inconvenient. It's such a last minute
      request, [but...
     X: Yeah.]
     Y: ...it would be such a help to me if you could
       stay. I mean it's really important to me to
(30)   get this job.
     X: Okay, okay, I know. Yeah okay. Well I was
       thinking that I would go to mm to some movies
       or somewhere with my friends, but we can
       cancel it if - if that's important for you,
(35)   or we can decide some other day, maybe Friday
       or Sunday or if it...
     Y: You could have another day off. Yes that's...
     X: Yeah.
     Y: ...the weekend would be better for you to go
(40)   to the movies, or to go [(with) some...
     X: Okay.]
     Y: ...friends, wouldn't it? There's much more to
       do at the weekend.
     X: Yeah, that's [right. Yeah.

(45) Y: There's] really not much to do on a Wednesday
        anyway, is there?
     X: Yeah, that's right.
     Y: It would really help me out...
     X: Yeah. ∎ [That's good. Yeah.
(50) Y: And I really] want to take this job. (Etc.)

3.1. Orientation

At the level of the whole conversational encounter it is
possible to talk about <u>co-operative strategies</u>. We are
concerned with the overall tone of the conversation and the
orientation of the speaker and hearer towards each other: how
well do they understand each other and what is their
interpretation of the situation? Moreover, we are interested in
whether they are able to take on a situationally appropriate
role and to enter a common universe of discourse.

3.1.1. Ritual equilibrium

Speakers generally aim towards convergence. They desire each
others' approval and want to maintain a certain ritual
equilibrium in the interaction, this being manifested in
attempts to express empathy, friendliness and interest towards
the interlocutor. This then refers to what has been called
<u>positive</u> or <u>solidarity politeness</u> (Brown and Levinson 1987:101-
129, Scollon and Scollon 1983:167), or to language that is
normally used between intimates (expressions that stress that
the speaker and hearer are members of the same in-group, that
the speaker knows the hearer's wants and is taking them into
account, that one's interlocutor is admirable or interesting as
a person, etc.). A certain amount of such ritual linguistic
behaviour is important in any situation between two speakers,
but the amount expressed varies according to the situational
variables (the social roles of the speakers, the seriousness of
the matter at hand etc.). Furthermore, the degree of
orientation in a certain culture towards this kind of behaviour
may vary; e.g. American society is generally considered a
typical example of a positive-politeness culture.

We hypothesized that in the Finnish culture a different politeness system is prevalent, that in Finland people are oriented towards deference and considerateness towards each other, or what is called negative or deference politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987:129-211, Scollon and Scollon 1983:168). Finnish speakers do this by using language that emphasizes the freedom of action of the other individual, but also at the same time the distance between speakers (we will return to this point at the third level). It is obvious from the excerpt above that it is Y (the NS) who is more active in expressing positive politeness and friendliness than X (the NNS); Y's lines 6-7, 11 and 15-18 indicate a generally friendly and empathetic attitude towards X, but there are no instances of X's corresponding attitude towards Y. In the dialogues studied this trend was apparent, whether the situation was symmetrical or asymmetrical.

Considering the lower social status of the NNS in asymmetrical situations, it is rather surprising that the students exhibited instances of this kind of linguistic behaviour at all. The strategies most commonly used by NSs were:

Claim reflexivity (e.g. offering and promising,
   including both speaker and hearer in the activity)
Give gifts to hearer (e.g. sympathy, understanding,
   flattery, compliments)
Claim common point of view (e.g. avoid disagreement,
   presuppose common ground, joke)

The same strategies were also manifested in the students' talk, even though to a much lower degree (48 instances vs. the NSs' 104). This finding does not support the hypothesis by Scollon and Scollon (1983:169), who argue that positive or solidarity politeness is not really a valid option for someone in a lower social status. Admittedly, certain strategies are not very likely to occur: e.g. students rarely claim reflexivity with a speaker who has higher status. But because the NSs generally made many attempts to create a friendly atmosphere, students felt free, for example, to claim a common point of iew with them (admittedly, this was often done indirectly by avoiding disagreement, by yes-butting). On the other hand, it would have

been possible for them to use more emphatic language, to stress that they understood the NS's views (= give gifts to hearer) etc. In this way, the actual complaint on lines 12-13 could have been formulated in a more hearer-supportive way, by adding elements (sweeteners, cf. Edmondson and House 1981:46) such as:

I'm sure that you have a very good reason to do so but...

Such a complaint would not only have been more friendly but also more successful.

In symmetrical situations the lack of shows of camaraderie and solidarity by the students was very obvious: the total number of instances of positive politeness in the students' talk was less than half of the number of the NSs (42 vs. 89), even though in a situation between equals an equal amount of such behaviour might be expected. The most common strategies used by NSs were:

Claim common point of view
Convey that some want (goal, or desired object) of hearer's
   is interesting or admirable to speaker, too
Give gifts to hearer

The first and last type were also used by the students to some extent (even though giving gifts to hearer are seldom very emphatic in content). Some of the more competent students were also able to banter with their interlocutors. However, not even the most linguistically competent students employed the second strategy; the students avoided taking explicit notice of aspects of the hearer's condition, nor did they exaggerate or intensify their interest in him/her. Instead, some students claimed reflexivity with the hearer, which is admittedly one way of creating a friendly atmosphere but not as personal as an explicit reference to the hearer.

It is precisely these things that NS informants were missing in the talk of Finns: they felt that there was a general lack of reassurance and a lack of interest towards themselves, thus making them feel uncomfortable. It appears, then, that the results support our hypothesis of Finnish culture as one that does not stress closeness and intimateness in interaction

through overt linguistic means. This assumption is further
supported by the following quantitative data of other hearer-
supportive behaviour in our corpus:

(a) Amount of speech

On the whole NSs spoke much more than the students (44 053
vs. 30 961 words, or 59% vs. 41%). It is only in two situations
that the student actually spoke more than the NS, and one of
them was the situation above. Still it was the NS who gave a
more dominant impression and who was responsible for
maintaining the conversation, as judged by an outside NS
informant. Relative silence or avoidance of speaking is thus
one of the factors that may reflect a deference system and the
emphasis on distance between speakers prevalent in Finland, and
in this way contribute to the idea formed by NSs that Finns are
taciturn and unwilling to communicate (cf. Scollon and Scollon
1983:170-171).

(b) Backchannel behaviour

Students were generally very competent in listening aloud
and giving some kind of backchannel feedback. In fact they
seemed to use more backchannel items than NSs! Even though this
might indicate a positively friendly attitude towards the
interlocutor, it is not as promising as it may sound because
students did this instead of taking a turn at talk, and in this
way avoided active participation in the communication. The
maintenance of conversation was easily left to the NS, as can
be seen towards the end of the extract above.

Students used short items such as _yeah_ and _mhm_ more than
native speakers of English. Such backchannels only acknowledge
that you are in the listening mode (cf. Stubbs 1983:190). _Yeah_
often sounds too minimal, though, and it is indeed not very
empathetic in tone. It is not surprising, then, that the
repetitive use of _yeah_ tends to give a totally indifferent
impression

More emphatic and longer backchannels include _that's right_,
I know and _okay_. They show that the content of the previous

turn has been understood and to some extent accepted (Stubbs
1983:190). Students definitely favoured that's right (as in the
extract above, lines 44, 47), which they often used
unidiomatically in contexts that do not call for agreeing with
the propositional content of the previous utterance.

Surprisingly enough, backchannels that explicitly support
preceding utterances (You're quite right, yes; Stubbs 1983:190)
were used only by the students in our corpus, not by the NSs.
Moreover, they tended to be used most by the linguistically
less competent students. This tendency is in line with the
general tendency to avoid taking speaking turns; the less
competent students seemed to use it as a kind of compensatory
strategy.

(c) Number of questions

The number of questions asked can be considered another
indication of willingness to take on some responsibility for
the maintenance of the conversation, and also a sign of
interest in the other person or in the issue at hand (and
sometimes also of dominance). On the whole, the number of
questions asked by the student per situation was almost always
smaller than that by the NS.

3.1.2. Synchrony

Besides trying to maintain some kind of ritual concord in
interaction, speakers also strive towards a certain synchrony
in tempo, tone of voice, timing of responses etc. during their
talk. Participants tend to anticipate each other's talk and
change their own line of talk according to the demands of the
situation. This was sometimes difficult for the students to
achieve. NS informants noted that students did not always
notice that the NS said something that clearly expected some
kind of reaction - the NNSs did not pick up the ball! In the
extract above, the student (X) is following her own line of
argument, and when Y says something that upsets this (line 11:
I was just about to discuss that with you), the student accepts

this into the conversation by a very emphatic Oh! but then
continues her argument the same as before.

Being somehow not in synchrony with one's interlocutor was
common especially with the linguistically less competent
students: this was manifested in a slower, sometimes stumbling
tempo, monotonous tone of voice, lengthy pauses, failure to
respond (e.g. to a compliment), short responses which forced
the NS to continue speaking, etc. Some of these were of course
due to defective linguistic competence, but this kind of non-
synchrony is perfectly possible between two native speakers,
too. However, some aspects of it (notably narrow range of
intonation, high tolerance of silence inside and between
speaking turns) may be considered cultural features that are
likely to cause discomfort for somebody in whose culture
different norms prevail.

Timing can also be understood at a more global level: in the
extract above, the student presents her complaint right at the
beginning of the conversation, and this may have had a negative
effect on the overall tone of the conversation.

3.2. Organization

At a more local level we wanted to look at how the student
manages to take up and deal with the (socially demanding) main
topic of the conversation, i.e. how well s/he is able to use
various organizational strategies. To study these strategies we
identified the so-called FTA environments (FTA = face
threatening act) in our corpus, meaning the conversational
sequences during which the student brings up the problematic
issue for discussion and by the end of which at least a
preliminary agreement is reached.

The aspects of the organizational level under consideration
were: a) how the student introduces the main topic of the
conversation, i.e. what kinds of framing and focusing devices,
if any, s/he uses, b) how s/he prepares the imposition that is
coming up in the conversation and what kind of reparatory work
(e.g. grounders and expanders) s/he does after it, and c) how
the student takes, keeps and gives the floor, i.e. how well
s/he can use so-called gambits.

Referring to our example, certain observations can be made about the kinds of organizational strategies the NNS is applying

The student (X) does not use any framing devices to indicate that a new phase is beginning in the conversation. Instead, her opening turn at talk is a focusing strategy, a metacomment by which she tells her interlocutor what is to follow in the conversation. This turn is simultaneously a preparatory move. Framing and focusing devices were indeed very infrequent in the 12 conversations we studied in more detail.

Both preparatory and supportive work is needed in an FTA-environment, the amount and quality depending on the seriousness of the imposition. The NNS's next turn (lines 8-10) serves as a preparatory move for the FTA, but this is not enough to anticipate the high threat to face involved in a complaint. That the NNS does not do any supportive work afterwards adds to the abruptness of her behaviour. Our native speaker informants wanted more preparatory work here, and especially of the kind that would arouse less misgivings about the coming imposition. This is opposed to the results of the study by House and Kasper (1981) where this kind of preparatory work was regarded as unnecessary in connection with complaints (i.e. native speakers did not do preparatory work with them). Perhaps the way House and Kasper approached the speech act of complaint was somewhat too mechanical, as the context was very simplistic, e.g somebody spoiling the complainer's blouse. If the context is even slightly more complex, however, preparatory work is demanded.

Gambits are necessary for fluent conversation, although they do not further the actual content of conversation, as their propositonal content is minimal. However, gambits are an essential tool for lubricating the conversation, and at the same time enable the speaker to plan his/her output and also help the hearer to decode it. The NNS here uses quite a few turn-taking gambits (well, I was thinking), but without much variety. A frequently used item by this NNS is because with which she keeps the floor and which she seems to use instead of the gambit you see to avoid direct reference to the hearer. There are no other turn-keeping gambits, and no instances of

turn-giving gambits. However, turn-giving gambits were not much used by the native speakers, either.

On the whole, the students were quite good at using English gambits, in spite of monotony (e.g. overuse of well) and lack of idiomaticity (e.g. I think to start almost every turn). It is important to study the Finnish gambits in our Finnish material to be able to explain the Finnish students' possible difficulties in using the English ones.

As the students were divided into two groups according to their structural competence in English (group A better, group B weaker), it was interesting to see what kind of differences, if any, there were between these groups in their use of gambits. When only FTA-environments were examined, group A seemed to be slightly more competent in using gambits (native speakers were of course the ones who set the norm). It seemed to be especially difficult for group B to master turn-keeping and turn-giving gambits. As for all the occurrences of gambits in the 12 conversations under closer examination, Table 1 shows the results according to the type of situation and type of gambit:

Table 1

	-P+D			+P+D			-P-D			
	Taking/Keeping/Giving			T / K / G			T / K / G			
A	14	17	-	27	20	2	19	18	1	total 129
B	14	8	1	14	10	-	10	6	3	total 66

The figures in Table 1 are not absolute but related to the total length of the conversations, which makes comparison possible. The total sums clearly indicate that group B used considerably fewer gambits in the conversations as a whole. It is of interest, though, that the turn-giving gambits were used more by group B (although the figures are very small in both groups, as turn-giving gambits are considered to be the most difficult of the gambits to master).

3.3. Interaction

At an even more local level, i.e. the level of one individual turn, we have concentrated on identifying the interactive

strategies resorted to by speakers when presenting a certain
issue that is likely to be an imposition on the hearer, or
alternatively a threat towards their own face. This refers to
the speech act that it was hoped the student would produce at
some point in our cross-cultural encounters, namely invitation,
offer, complaint, or apology.

3.3.1. Choice of strategy

When presenting this face-threatening act, there are always
certain choices or basic strategies open to the speaker, which
are designed to anticipate and tone down the effect of the
imposition. One of the interactive strategies is to presuppose
and emphasize friendly relations between speakers, and to show
that you are taking the hearer's needs and feelings into
consideration. This is what we have referred to as solidarity
or positive politeness above. Another strategy is to stress
that you do not want to impose on the hearer but leave him/her
some freedom of action or a chance to refuse, for example. This
we have referred to above as deference politeness. However, it
is also possible to combine the two and be both deferential and
friendly during one's turn at talk.

The factors that determine the choice of strategy are the
type of situation at hand (whether the situation is
asymmetrical or symmetrical in terms of power, whether the
participants are close friends or strangers) and the
seriousness of the imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987:71-78).
The weighting of these factors may vary from culture to
culture: it is possible to hypothesize that one of the reasons
why considerateness is a more likely strategy in Finnish
interactions may be that Finns tend to assign a great deal of
relative power to a person that they do not know, and
especially to foreigners, and this aspect outweighs the want to
create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere by e.g. asking a lot
of questions about the other, during the first contacts (cf.
also Scollon and Scollon 1983: 171 for the potential for
miscommunication involved in assuming different values for
distance).

Going back to our extract above, the student has to complain about something to the NS who is her employer. Presumably because a complaint is rated as a high threat to hearer's face in Finnish culture, X chooses a deference strategy. The complaint here (lines 12-13: <u>Well I was thinking that uh maybe you could have told me a little earlier</u>) contains a great deal of hedging material, typically indicative of negative politeness: <u>I was thinking</u>, <u>maybe</u>, <u>could</u> and <u>a little</u> all convey the speaker's wish not to impose on the hearer. On the other hand, the rest of the complaint is in a very direct form: there is a very direct reference to how Y should have acted, and this combined with the early timing of the complaint and the small amount of preparatory and supportive work may even have made an aggressive impression on the hearer. At this point in the conversation it might have been wiser to say something like "This was a bit of a surprise to me", or else the whole complaint might have been formulated in a more hearer-supportive way ("I'm sure you must have a very good reason to change my day off, but I would have been grateful if you had told me a bit earlier, so I could have made some arrangements"). As it is, there are no overt signs of a friendly attitude to counterbalance the direct and businesslike impression.

It is apparent that making a "socially skilled" complaint is a very subtle thing and cannot be evaluated only by looking at the content of the actual speech act (e.g. in terms of its directness level and the number of modality markers it contains, as is done by House and Kasper 1981). In the complaint above, even a relatively large number of softening devices cannot compensate for deficiencies in other aspects (lack of active attempts to create a friendly atmosphere, inappropriate timing, insufficient preparatory and supportive work, direct reference to the hearer's failure to have acted in the right way). The negative effect was almost certainly not intended by the student, and would have been compensated for by overt shows of friendliness and by a more empathetic tone of voice.

In the other three versions of the same situation, the student in question either sounds even more direct, as in:

> X: -- but er from now on I think we should agree that er -
> th- about my days off.

or resorts to an off-record hint, because she obviously regards
the complaint as too much of an imposition to be expressed more
directly, as in:

> X: -- well er, I happened to hear from your sons that er my
> day off has been put off, and as we sh- tomorrow I've
> already planned to do something.

It is also worth pointing out that a complaint made to a
friend may look different: it may be more appropriate to show
anger or even aggression. Yet, it is possible for such a
complaint not to sound overtly hostile to the listener. For
comparison, here are some examples from symmetrical situations:

> X: -- but ah ∎ you - next time just let me know before you
> are going to have a party, okay?

> X: -- because er I think you should mention me about the
> parties.

> X: But if you ha- if you had told me mm two, three days
> earlier - a week earlier...

The first utterance is in fact a bald-on-record complaint (in
imperative form) with a few softening devices (just, okay?);
however, in the overall context of camaraderie it sounded
perfectly friendly. This student is linguistically highly
competent, which may in part explain why she is also socially
competent and able to use a strategy that would not be
considered typically Finnish. She is also able to use a very
rare (i.e. rare for students) turn-giving gambit okay?. The
second complaint sounds slightly less friendly and more abrupt
(even though it is no longer in imperative form); there is a
sense of teaching the hearer a lesson, which is manifested in a
direct reference to how the hearer should act. Admittedly, the
complaint is softened by I think and should, but they do not
seem to be enough to outweigh its very serious tone, especially
since the student fails at other points in the conversation to
reassure the NS that they are still friends. Incidentally, a

complaint could also be formulated in a mock-polite way (i.e. be ironic) or, conversely, in a mock-impolite way (banter - especially between friends), but students never did this; they behaved in a way that is more typically Finnish, i.e. honesty equals saying literally how you feel and also taking the other party at face value. If you cannot be honest, it is best either to drop hints or avoid the imposition. The third complaint is another example of an off-record hint.

3.3.2. Modality markers

It is perhaps not very surprising that students as speakers of a foreign language are not very good strategic operators, and this may well be explained by other factors than cultural differences. Trosborg (1987: 161-162, 166) claims that modality markers are a difficult area for foreign language learners to master; in her study she has looked at Danish learners and their use of devices that "serve to mitigate the circumstances under which an offence was committed" (e.g. downtoners such as just, perhaps, maybe, understaters such as a little bit, hedges such as kind of, sort of). Although this finding is not as such supported by our research (there are no great differences in the overall frequencies between the NNSs and NSs),it does seem that there are differences as regards certain kinds of modality markers. The students use considerably fewer types and tokens of so-called epistemic modal expressions (cf. roughly Trosborg's subjectivizers) than native speakers. By these we mean expressions that convey the speaker's attitude to the content of his/her utterance; how certain, possible, likely etc. s/he considers it. It has been argued that a certain 'modality reduction' in language learner's use of English is to some extent 'teaching induced' (Holmes 1988:40 quoting Kasper), and that most textbooks cover epistemic modality only very sporadically, if at all (Holmes 1988:38). This is doubtless one important reason for the lack of these expressions in our students' speech as well. However, it may also be that (at least) some of these devices are difficult to learn because they are more implicit markers of speaker-attitude and their pragmatic functions may therefore be more difficult to pin

down. In this sense they might better be termed modal
. particles.

The most common particles in spoken discourse, in order of
frequency, include epistemic sentential adverbs (maybe, of
course, really, probably), modal auxiliaries in epistemic use
(might, will, should, could), parenthetical clauses (I (don't)
think, I suppose, I know) and certain lexical verbs (seem,
sound, look). The less linguistically competent a student is,
the fewer devices s/he uses and the less variation there is in
form. With the more competent students, epistemic adverbs are
the most frequent device in the same way as with native
speakers, yet relatively less frequent compared to these. What
is significant is that even the most competent students did not
use modal auxiliaries very often but seemed to compensate for
them by frequent use of parenthetical clauses. By comparison,
the linguistically least competent students appeared to
compensate for both epistemic adverbs and modal verbs by
parenthetical clauses. The students as·a whole therefore used
these speaker-oriented parenthetical expressions relatively
more often than native speakers. They were particularly fond of
I think, as is seen in the complaints above.

It is a fairly wide-spread view that the use of the English
modal verbs provides difficulties for learners (cf. Holmes
1988:22 for French and Dutch students). That the epistemic
adverbs are also difficult for Finnish learners is more
surprising. It is possible that this has something to do with
the fact that these two devices, modal verbs and (at least some
types of) adverbs, are more implicit markers of modality and
also less conventionalized as strategic elements. They can
therefore be used, apart from the function of linguistic
politeness and respect for the hearer's face, to protect the
speaker's own face effectively by avoiding commitment to a
speech act. Moreover, they may be used for downright
manipulation of the hearer and for irony, which may be
difficult for the student to do or even recognize. They are
therefore more subtle strategic devices than hedges on some
part of the proposition (e.g. a little, sort of, just, and
things like that), which do not provide such difficulties for
Finnish learners. This is then a question of deficiencies in

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the mastery of certain conversational devices. Hypothesizing about the effects of cultural differences in this area of usage is not really possible without comparison with our Finnish-Finnish interactions, however.

4. SUMMARY

In our project we set out in the first place to study strategies at the level of organization and interaction. A fairly mechanical survey has already indicated that the systematic deficiencies observed in the students' conversational skills must be due to a defective command of certain idiomatic devices used both for creating coherence and maintaining the fluent flow of conversation, and for ensuring that the listener takes no unnecessary offence when an imposition of some kind is made. We are here referring to idiomaticity above the level of syntax, i.e. at the level of certain conversational devices such as gambits, modality markers, backchannel and metacomments. As far as we know these strategies are not explicitly introduced into foreign language learning syllabuses and teaching materials. It is therefore possible to think of these deficiencies as primarily teaching induced, but one's cultural preferences probably play a role as well.

However, it soon became apparent that a more global approach is necessary if we want to account for all the problems that occur in our intercultural encounters. It is impossible to ignore such factors as the overall tone of the conversation, timing of the imposition, amount of preparatory and supportive work, and the synchronization of one's contributions with those of the other party's. Problems in these areas are more likely to derive from differences in certain culture-specific norms and expectations on how conversational interaction should proceed. Admittedly, it can be very difficult and even dangerous to assume that certain features of non-native speech are manifestations of the speaker's cultural background, because a cross-cultural encounter need not be essentially different from an encounter between two "natives" (in fact the latter may contain even more misunderstandings!). All we can

try to do is to map out some of the features of the social competence of Finnish learners of English, and suggest how this area might be taken into greater account in language teaching.

NOTES

1. Our inspiration for collecting data in this way came from the project conducted at Bochum University by Edmondson, House, Kasper and Stemmer, and also from the project at Århus University; cf. Edmondson et al. 1984.

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