

Communicative incompetence and the non-fluent bilingual

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the evaluative reactions during a communication experiment of native speakers of English who have moderate but non-fluent speaking abilities in French. Subjects had to speak to interlocutors in either English or French using either a casual or formal speech register. It was found that subjects evaluated their interlocutor less favorably when using their second language if the socio-linguistic demands of the communication situation required the use of a casual rather than a formal speech register. The reverse pattern was observed when subjects used their native language. The results are discussed in terms of self-perception theory and a communicative competence approach to first and second language learning.

Macnamara (1973) suggests that an important feature of a language learning situation is the learner's cognitive need to communicate particular information. He suggests that where this need is relatively artificial (e.g., in the classroom) learning is less successful than where real communicative needs are involved (e.g., language learning on the street). The present paper examines a complementary aspect of communication: the need to fulfil the socio-linguistic requirements of the communicative situation (Hymes, 1971; Segalowitz, in press). Specifically, the study examines the reactions of adult bilinguals who are capable of fulfilling the cognitive requirements of the communicative situation but not the socio-linguistic ones. It is hypothesized that such people may find themselves somewhat socially isolated from the interlocutor because of their inability to interpret fully the non-cognitive social messages conveyed to them by means of speech style variation, and because of their inability to respond appropriately by altering their own speech style to meet the socio-linguistic demands of the situation.

Normally, the selection of speech style is guided by the demand characteristics of the communicative situation. Therefore, one can expect that

This research was supported by a grant from the Canada Council. The author thanks Drs Annabeth Doyle and Dorothy Haccoun for their constructive comments on previous drafts of this paper. This study was presented to the Eastern Psychological Association Regional Meeting 4 April 1975. Reprint requests should be sent to Norman Segalowitz, Psychology, Concordia University, Sir George Williams Faculty of Arts, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. West, Montreal, Quebec.

CANAD. J. BEHAV. SCI./REV. CANAD. SCI. COMP., 8(2), 1976, 123-131

the second language speaker will encounter difficulties if the situation requires some linguistic behavior (e.g., the use of a casual rather than a formal speech register) outside his repertoire. If, as a result, he feels uncomfortable he may incorrectly attribute his difficulty to an external source such as the interlocutor (Bein, 1972) rather than the true source, namely, an inability to fulfil the socio-linguistic demands of the situation because of poor skill with speech style. The above reasoning led to the hypothesis that under certain circumstances moderately skilled bilinguals will find second language interaction with native speakers uncomfortable and will consequently develop negative reactions regarding second language communication, including, possibly, the denigration of their interlocutors.

In this study native English-speaking Montrealers with only moderate French language abilities were asked to interact in the laboratory with an unseen French interlocutor who used very formal and careful speech in one condition and a relatively casual and informal speech style in another. Formal speech corresponds most closely to the classroom register with which the subjects were familiar, while casual speech departs in certain important ways in pronunciation from the formal code (Morin, Picard, Pupier, & Santerre, 1974). Several recent studies have indicated that a speaker's selection of an appropriate or inappropriate speech style can affect listeners' reactions to the speaker (Bourhis, Giles, & Lambert, in press; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973; Simard, Taylor, & Giles, in press). An extrapolation of these results suggested that under some circumstances it may normally be appropriate for interlocutors of equal social status to attempt to use similar registers (to accommodate to each other's speech style). Thus, the use of a formal or casual register by the stimulus interlocutor was intended to encourage the subject indirectly to feel it appropriate to use that speech style himself. Secondly, the topic was varied across conditions so that either a topic appropriate to formal speech (discussion of an important social issue) or a topic appropriate to casual speech was used (description of a frightening experience) (see Labov, 1971). Thus, the demand characteristics of the communicative situation were manipulated by varying the topic and speech of the interlocutor in order to make formal or casual speech the appropriate mode of response by the subject. Subjects were not told of this manipulation or given any other indication this was a study directly concerned with formal and casual speech. For comparison purposes the experimental subjects also interacted with an English speaker. Measures were taken of subjects' feelings about their performance, perceptions of their interlocutors, and beliefs about the impressions they conveyed to their interlocutors. The data were compared to the reactions of control subjects who only listened to these stimulus interlocutors.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 32 male native speakers of English with medium French speaking abilities. Subjects were university undergraduates invited at random from the student lounges by a French Canadian female research assistant. French speaking skills were assessed *post-experimentally* in order not to make them unduly self-conscious about their speaking ability during the actual experimental sessions. In all, 41 subjects were tested to obtain a sample of 32 medium ability subjects. The assessment consisted of a voice comparison task in which the subjects compared their ability with that of three prerecorded Anglophones to retell a simple story in French. These prerecorded samples had already been judged by Francophones to lie at points 2, 4, and 6 with non-overlapping distributions in the ratings on a seven point scale ranging from *cannot express any ideas in French at all* to *can express ideas in French as well as a native speaker*. Subjects indicated whether they believed they would do worse than, about the same as, or better than each of the taped Anglophones. This method produced better predictions of how Francophones judge subjects from recordings of their actual attempts to retell a story than did the self-rating method advocated in Macnamara (1967). In this experiment subjects who rated themselves better than the worst sample but no better than the best (points 3 to 6 on the scale) were included in the final analysis.

Design

There were two groups of 16 subjects: speakers and listeners. Each group participated in two Language conditions (native, second) and two Style conditions (formal, casual) with order of presentation of the four language-by-style combinations counterbalanced across subjects. The use of English (E) or French (F) was always alternated and counterbalanced so that subjects had either the EFEF or FEFE pattern. A matched guise design (same stimulus speaker performing in both languages as well as both styles) could not be used because it was not possible to find bilinguals who sounded native-like in two registers in both languages. The listeners group provided an alternative method of controlling for effects caused by idiosyncratic properties of the stimulus voice.

Procedure

The procedure for speaking subjects was as follows. (1) Subjects were first told that the experiment concerned the impressions people develop of others from verbal communication. They were told that in the adjoining room there were an Anglophone and a Francophone who would take turns speaking on an assigned topic: "An Important Social Issue" or "Frightening Experience." (2) After each presentation the subject himself was to respond on the same topic for about two minutes in the interlocutor's language. (3) Following each presentation he was to fill out the questionnaire recording his impressions of the interaction. This procedure was to be repeated twice with each interlocutor for a total of four interactions. The listening control subjects received the same information except for item (2).

Subjects were encouraged to prepare a few notes before the experiment to guide them when speaking. They were permitted to say the same thing in French as they said in English.

Subjects saw the questionnaire they were to fill out before the experiment began and

the speaking subjects were led to believe that their interlocutors would be filling out similar questionnaires about them. Subjects knew that everything was being recorded.

Since, in fact, the adjoining room contained only a research assistant with stimulus tapes of the Anglophone and Francophone "interlocutors," steps were taken to minimize the artificiality of the situation. Subjects were told that their microphone and the one in the adjoining room could not be live simultaneously (ostensibly to avoid audio feedback) and therefore it was not possible to converse with the other person. As well, subjects could hear the research assistant pretending to talk to the non-existent other person, shuffling papers, coughing, and so on, in order to convey the impression of a live performance. Just before the Francophone was to speak for the first time, the bilingual research assistant pretended to say to him, in very slow and distinct French, words to the effect that "The subject in the other room is an Anglophone but he knows some French. You should however speak French as you would normally to a French person." This step was taken to avoid having subjects react negatively towards the Francophone for not accommodating to the fact that French is their second language by using simplified French (see Simard, Taylor, & Giles, *in press*).

After the four interactions, the subjects filled in a language background questionnaire and performed the self-rating language ability task.

Questionnaires

All questions were of the semantic differential type in which subjects marked a 100 mm continuous line bounded by a pair of adjectives or phrases. Questions answered by all subjects concerned (1) ease of understanding the interlocutor; (2) personality judgments of the interlocutor: friendliness, intelligence, cooperativeness, self-confidence, and patience; (3) judgments of how the other person felt while speaking (relaxed-tense); and (4) perceived characteristics of the other's speech (formal-casual, plus distractor items not analysed). In addition to these, speaking subjects answered questions concerning (5) their own feelings while speaking (relaxed-tense); (6) ease and clarity of their own presentation; and (7) impression they conveyed of themselves to the other person (friendly, intelligent, cooperative, self-confident, patient).

RESULTS

Effectiveness of the Experimental Manipulations

A post-experimental interview revealed that no subjects actually guessed that their "interlocutors" were tape recordings or that the experimental manipulation concerned the switch between formal and casual speech. Secondly, the results show that subjects in the two groups felt they understood the French material and that they did so equally well. Moreover, the experimental manipulation of speech style was correctly perceived by subjects in all conditions as revealed in differential ratings between formal and casual conditions of the taped interlocutors on the formal-casual and relaxed-tense questions. Finally, the interactions between speaking and listening subjects discussed below indicate that the results were not attributable to idiosyncratic differences in the stimulus materials in the different conditions.

Judgments about the Interlocutor

The result of primary interest concerns the effect of the speech style change on the speaking subjects' evaluations of their interlocutors. Since preliminary analyses showed no significant differences between the ratings on the five personality characteristics, these scores were averaged for each subject to form one overall personality rating (scores were the distances marked on the continuous line in millimetres from the negative end) (see Table 1). These grouped data were subjected to a three-way analysis of variance with factors being Group (speakers, listeners), Language (native, second), and Style (formal, casual) with repeated measures over the Language and Style factors. The analysis yielded a significant Group \times

TABLE 1

Mean personality ratings of interlocutors by speakers and listeners

Style	Language			
	Native		Second	
	Formal	Casual	Formal	Casual
Group				
Speakers	68.7	74.8	67.6	64.8
Listeners	60.1	67.4	57.4	65.0

Note. Maximum score (favorable rating) = 100

Language \times Style interaction effect, $F(1,30) = 7.90$, $p < .01$, indicating that in the second language condition the speaking subjects rated their interlocutor less positively in the casual condition than in the formal condition, whereas this difference was reversed when they used their native language. This interaction indicates that this language and style pattern for the speaking subjects differed significantly from the pattern for the listening subjects who reacted more positively in the casual condition in both languages.

Figure 1 presents this interaction in a modified form to assist interpretation. The figure shows the differences in mean personality rating (with the formal score subtracted from the casual score) in the native and second language conditions for each group.

In response to the question concerning how relaxed the stimulus speaker appeared to be, speaking subjects reported the stimulus interlocutors to be more relaxed than did the listening subjects (66.9 vs 56.7), $F(1,30) = 6.70$, $p < .02$. As well, all subjects perceived the interlocutor to be more relaxed in the native language condition than in the second language condition (65.7 vs 57.8), $F(1,30) = 9.59$, $p < .005$ and to be more relaxed in

the casual than the formal condition (66.2 vs 57.3), $F(1,30) = 5.82$, $p < .03$. There were no significant interaction effects ($F < 1$ in all cases).

Judgments about the Speech

Analyses of the question concerning comprehension of the stimulus material indicated that the listening group reported slightly but significantly better overall comprehension of the stimulus tapes than the speaking subjects (mean score of 69.0 vs 60.1), $F(1,30) = 4.18$, $p < .05$, and that, as would be expected, comprehension was superior in the native language condition (60.1) than in the second language condition (38.1) for both groups, $F(1,30) = 128.82$, $p < .001$. Neither the Style factor nor any of the interactions were significant ($F < 1$ in all cases).

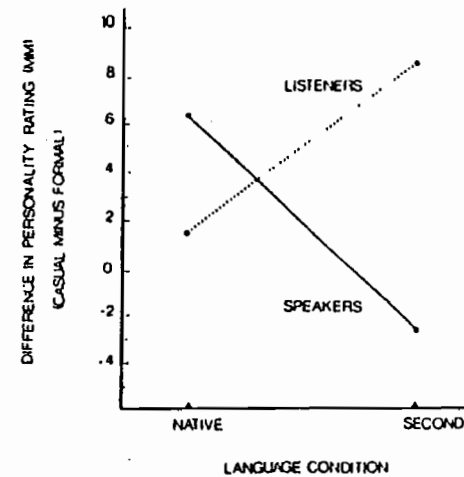


FIGURE 1

Comparison of the differences between the casual and formal conditions in the speaking and listening subjects' overall personality evaluation of the interlocutor as a function of language used.

Separate analyses of speaking and listening subjects' ratings in the native and second language conditions showed that the difference between formal and casual speech was correctly perceived (Wilcoxon two-tailed tests, $p < .02$ or better in the four cases).

Subjects' own Feelings

Two-way analyses of variance with repeated measures of the responses to the questions given only to the speaking subjects revealed the following.

Subjects felt more relaxed speaking in the native language condition, $F(1,15) = 8.94, p < .01$. However, a significant Language \times Style interaction, $F(1,15) = 6.44, p < .025$, indicates that when using their native language subjects felt relatively more relaxed in the casual condition than in the formal (58.7 vs 44.9), whereas there was no difference (reversed if anything) when using the second language (36.4 vs 37.4).

Analysis of responses to questions concerning ease of speaking yielded a significant Language \times Style interaction, $F(1,15) = 8.76, p < .01$. The data show that the speaking subjects felt it was easier to express themselves in the casual condition than in the formal condition when speaking in the native language (65.1 vs 46.5), whereas the reverse was true in the second language condition (23.4 vs 33.5). A similar two-way interaction was found with responses to the question about how well subjects thought they were understood by the interlocutor, $F(1,15) = 17.33, p < .001$, indicating that subjects believed they were better understood in the casual condition than in the formal condition in their native language (70.0 vs 47.4) but vice versa in the second language condition (29.7 vs 39.3).

Finally, analysis was made of the impression subjects believed they conveyed to their interlocutor. Two significant Language \times Style interactions were found indicating that: (1) Subjects believed that they appeared less intelligent in the casual condition than in the formal condition while speaking their second language (42.1 vs 50.0) but the reverse in their native language (64.1 vs 51.9), $F(1,15) = 19.84, p < .001$; (2) Subjects believed they appeared slightly less self-confident in the casual condition than in the formal condition when speaking in their second language (40.1 vs 43.7) but the reverse in their native language (47.6 vs 38.1), $F(1,15) = 6.67, p < .025$. As well, a significant Language effect was found indicating that subjects felt they appeared less friendly when speaking their second language (56.7) than when using their first language (60.3), $F(1,15) = 5.85, p < .05$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions on variables concerning the impressions subjects believed they conveyed to their interlocutors.

DISCUSSION

The first set of results to consider is the relative difficulty speaking subjects experienced in the casual second language condition compared to the formal condition. In the casual native language conditions subjects felt more relaxed, believed they were better understood, and found it easier to express themselves compared to the formal native language condition, while in the second language condition the pattern was reversed. More-

over, subjects' evaluations of the impression they conveyed to their "listener" show the same patterns of interactions. Subjects thought they appeared relatively less intelligent and self-confident in the casual second language condition compared to the formal condition, whereas the pattern was reversed in the native language condition. These results support the first part of the hypothesis that moderately skilled bilinguals will experience communicative difficulties when the socio-linguistic demands of the situation require them to use a speech style outside their repertoire.

The most interesting result, however, concerns the comparison of the speaking and listening subjects' reactions to the casual-formal difference in the native English and second French language conditions (see Fig. 1).

In comparison to the listening subjects, speaking subjects had a different pattern of perceptions of their interlocutor across the formal-casual and native-second conditions. This supports the hypothesis that the speakers' perceptions of the situation would be affected by an inability to fulfill the socio-linguistic demands of the situation (here, to speak in a more casual manner). But perhaps a more interesting aspect of the data is that the speaking subjects showed a less positive reaction towards the interlocutor than the listening subjects. This result may be understood in terms of a theory that holds that subjects misattributed the source of their feelings of uncomfortableness. For example, the subjects perceived their interlocutor in the casual condition to be speaking in a relatively relaxed and easygoing manner about a personal experience. Their normal reaction in this situation might be to accommodate their own speech style in return. However, the French speech skills at their disposal were insufficient for this; they were compelled to speak in the same manner in which they pontificate about an important social issue. This incongruity between what was perceived to be appropriate and what they could actually do might have created some feelings of awkwardness. In fact, subjects did report having relatively more trouble expressing themselves in the casual condition even though when speaking in English they reported relatively less difficulty in the casual than in the formal condition. Their attributions of failure in communication to the interlocutor can be understood according to Bem's (1972) self-perception theory. The subjects perceived that they spoke in a poor manner to the interlocutor and that they felt uncomfortable; and they therefore concluded that they must not have liked him. In some respects the present results also accord with those of Luginbuhl, Crowe, and Kahn (1975) who discuss the attribution of failure and success in terms of factors over which people do or do not have control, such as luck, ability, effort, and task difficulty. As in the present study, they found that subjects attributed failure to factors not under their control, but in contrast to the present results they found subjects making strong

attributions of failure to internal stable sources such as lack of ability rather than external variable sources (see also Weiner, Freize, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1971). The present results, however, suggest that subjects did attribute failure in communication to an external variable factor – the interlocutor – but it is not clear at the moment how one is to explain these differences in results.

These results have several important implications. First they provide an interesting profile of the moderately skilled bilingual who is able to convey basic information adequately in the second language but is unable to handle the socio-linguistic requirements of a situation. In the present study, where those requirements involved the use of casual speech, the subject perceived his interlocutor relatively unfavorably and felt that he himself appeared to be less intelligent and self-confident than he might otherwise appear. There was even a small but significant result suggesting speakers felt they conveyed a less friendly image of themselves in the second language than in the native language. Taken together, these findings suggest that second language communication can be an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience for the moderately skilled bilingual for reasons that have little to do with primary vocabulary, phonological, or syntactic skills. This can have serious consequences in a setting where there are many different situations that require the use of the second language as, for example, in obtaining information on the telephone, speaking to officials and superiors, casual talk in buses and cafes, or speaking with workmates and colleagues. Each situation carries its own socio-linguistic demands and, until the speaker learns how to handle them, he may shy away from those that make him uncomfortable.

In the light of the present results it would also be useful to know more about the child's acquisition of socio-linguistic competence with speech variation and the role of such competence in the acquisition of other linguistic skills. For example, it is possible that the young child needs to maintain during a conversation a certain measure of social contact with the interlocutor for communication at other levels to be possible. Macnamara (1973) suggests something along this line when he indicates that young children learn first and second languages in the context of fulfilling psychologically real communicative needs for information exchange. I am suggesting that Macnamara's concept of communicative need fulfilment be extended to include the social needs inherent in the communication act. The study of how the child acquires both cognitive and socio-linguistic skills at the same time is not only interesting in its own right. It may also indicate how the language learning contexts of older language acquirers can be improved to promote more successful second language learning.

RÉSUMÉ

Etude des jugements portés par des sujets engagés dans une expérience de communication entre des sujets de langue maternelle anglaise pouvant parler le français, mais non contrairement. Les sujets ont à parler à des interlocuteurs en anglais ou en français sur un ton familier ou plutôt magistral. Les résultats montrent que les sujets portent un jugement moins favorable sur leur interlocuteur quand ils utilisent leur langue seconde si la situation de communication exige un ton de voix familier. L'inverse s'observe quand les sujets ont à parler dans leur langue maternelle. La discussion fait intervenir la théorie de la perception de soi et présente une interprétation fondée sur la compétence sociolinguistique dans l'apprentissage d'une langue seconde.

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First received 14 April 1975