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A Few Notes on Conversational Patterns in Germany and Austria

Abstract

48 Germans and 38 Austrians have been asked on typical patterns for different situations. It can be observed that the set of communicative strategies that (west) Austrians consider typical is smaller than the Germans' set. But both Germans and Austrians are on the one hand rather reserved, on the other hand they abstain from indirect strategies. Small talk is not very common, but if it is used the most typical topic is the weather; the majority of Germans also see talking about sports and hobbies as typical, the majority of Austrians rather talking (mostly negatively) about politics or politicians. Offers are meant literally in both countries. When Germans and Austrians want to turn an offer, they use a vague excuse like "No, I don't have time." or "No, I have something else to do.", give a concrete brief and true excuse or a phrase like "I'll let you know", though they will surely not contact the person again, or, if need be, invent excuses. In order to express disagreement, Germans and Austrians use the pattern "Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ..." and "Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn't you also think that ...", Germans also the patterns "(No), I disagree.", and "No". When they want to end a conversation, Germans and Austrians typically say truthfully that they have something to do now (and maybe also what this is), Germans also use phrases of the type "It's already late now".

Sommaire

On a demandé à 48 Allemands et à 38 Autrichiens ce qu'ils comprenaient par des stratégies typiques dans certaines situations de communication. Les résultats montrent que la quantité de stratégies que les Autrichiens (occidentaux) considèrent typiques est moins large que celle des Allemands. Pourtant, tous les deux groupes, les Allemands ainsi que les Autrichiens, sont, d'un côté, très distants, de l'autre côté, ils sont plutôt directs et évitent des stratégies indirectes. Le Small Talk n'est pas très répandu, mais dès qu'il est pratiqué, on parle du temps; la plupart des Allemands regardent aussi les hobbies et le sport comme sujets typiques, la plupart des Autrichiens la plainte de la politique/des politiciens. Les offres sont à prendre littéralement. Quand les Allemands et les Autrichiens ont l'intention de décliner une offre, ils se servent d'une courte explication, comme « Non, je n'ai pas le temps » ou « Non, j'ai autre chose à faire » ou donnent une raison concise, courte et vraie ou une phrase telle que « Je te donnerai réponse un de ces jours » bien qu'ils soient sûrs de ne plus contacter l'autre, ou, à la rigueur, ils donnent aussi une raison inventée. Pour exprimer un désaccord, les Allemands et les Autrichiens recourent à la phrase « Oui, je comprends ce que tu veux dire, mais je pense que... » ou « Oui, je comprends ce que tu veux dire, mais est-ce que tu ne penses pas aussi que... », les Allemands aussi aux formes « (Non), je ne suis pas de ton opinion » ou « Non ». S'ils veulent terminer une conversation, les Allemands et les Autrichiens disent selon la vérité ce qu'ils ont à faire maintenant ou disent vaguement « Il faut que j'y aille, j'ai autre chose à faire »; alternativement, les Allemands se servent d'expressions du type « Il est déjà tard ».

Zusammenfassung

48 Deutsche und 38 Österreicher wurden nach typischen Gesprächsmustern in verschiedenen Situationen gefragt. Es kann beobachtet werden, dass die Menge an Gesprächsmustern, die (West-)Österreicher als typisch ansehen, kleiner ist als die Menge der Deutschen. Doch sowohl Deutsche als auch Österreicher sind einerseits sehr distanziert, verzichten andererseits aber auf indirekte Strategien. Small Talk ist nicht sehr verbreitet, aber wenn er betrieben wird, dann ist das Wetter das typischste Thema; die Mehrzahl der Deutschen findet auch Sport und Hobbys typische Themen, die Österreicher eher das (meist negative) Diskutieren über Politik und Politiker. Angebote sind wörtlich zu verstehen. Wenn Deutsche und Österreicher ein Angebot ablehnen wollen, verwenden sie eine vage Begründung wie "Nein, ich habe keine Zeit" oder "Nein, ich habe etwas anderes zu tun" oder geben einen konkreten kurzen und wahren Grund oder eine Phrase wie "Ich gebe dir noch Bescheid", obwohl sie den anderen sicherlich nicht mehr kontaktieren werden, oder sie erfinden notfalls auch einen Grund. Um auszudrücken, dass man anderer Meinung ist verwenden Deutsche und Österreicher die Muster "Ja, ich verstehe, was du meinst, aber ich denke..." und "Ja, ich verstehe, was du meinst, aber meinst du nicht auch, dass...". Deutsche auch "(Nein), ich bin anderer Meinung" und "Nein". Wenn sie ein Gespräch beenden wollen, sagen Deutsche und Österreicher wahrheitsgemäß, dass und was sie jetzt zu tun haben, Deutsche auch Phrasen des Typs "Es ist schon spät".

1. Background

Based on existing literature of various kind, a first attempt of an encompassing contrast of communicative strategies, or speech-act realization patterns, was set up by Grzega (2006: 193-254). If you check the MLA, 150 studies on speech acts of the German language have already been published; the list doesn't seem complete, the large volume by Wagner (2001)¹ is missing, for instance. Despite this comparatively large number, many speech acts have not been investigated yet. Since 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialog, this is the perfect opportunity to concentrate on such speech acts that still need analyzing. This study forms part of a larger project that aims at writing a European "language guide", dealing with a number of communicative situations that shall allow readers to see differences and similarities between Europeans. The communicative phases that are highlighted in this paper are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation.

Two methods have become classical in collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis: the *discourse completion task* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997). In a DCT, informants, after being presented with the description of a dialogic situation, have to complete a dialog. However, this way the researcher only gets the most typical answer that comes to an individual's mind. Therefore, the metapragmatic judgment test (MPJT) has been invented as a supplementary method. In a MPJT all answers gathered in a preceding DCT are listed, and informants are asked to rank the adequateness of the answers. Both methods also require a large amount of informants. Since the *JELiX* editors' aim is a more general and more abstract one, they have designed an alternative data-eliciting method that also requires fewer informants than in a DCT and MPJT: the semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS). Such an interview, in form of a questionnaire, asks informants not for their own personal communicative behavior and judgment, but for the typical linguistic behavior in their nation, as told from the perspective of someone who has to describe to a foreigner. Informants are regarded as ethnographic semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the community. This will especially be true of people who have to do with language professionally (such as students of language, linguists, journalists); they should therefore be preferred as informants. While a DCT presents a situation and asks for one's typical behavior, the SICS presents typical situations and asks for possible and impossible behavior. The informant can both select from a list of communicative patterns and convey additional patterns. This way a SICS resembles more a MPJT, but it requires from the informants reflection on a more abstracting and generalizing level.

The following study also aims at contributing to the field of variational pragmatics by including informants from Germany and Austria and contrasting communicative patterns in these different national/regional varieties of German².

2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire can be found in the introductory article to this special

¹ Wagner describes the illocutionary features of 500 speech acts and presents 200 "scripts"; unfortunately, these "scripts" hardly reveal formal features and if they do, it is not said how prominent certain formal features are. The study is entirely qualitative.

² Studies that have contrastively analyzed pragmatic differences between Austria and Germany are those by Glück/Koch (1998), Grzega (2000, 2001, 2003) and Muhr (1987/1990a, 1987/1990b, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2008).

issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire was distributed among German language students and language teachers and eventually filled out by 48 informants. The informants come from a vast range of regions, particularly from Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, but also from Hesse, Lower Saxony, Berlin, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Northrhine-Westphalia and Bremen. 32 of the informants were female, 16 were male. Their ages vary from 20 to 40, with an average of 24.6. Originally, a colleague offered to help me get questionnaire from Austrian informants. But since I had received not even one article by early November, I was compelled to produce a shorter version of the SICS to hand it out and work with it during a guest lecture in Innsbruck³; the other colleague could finally get a few copies of the full SICS from her students⁴. This way I received 29 plus 9 questionnaires. The informants came mainly from Tyrol and Salzburg, but also from Vorarlberg, Upper Austria, and Vienna, i.e. mainly from the western part of Austria—this has to be kept in mind when drawing any conclusions. 32 of the informants were female (84.2%), 6 were male (15.8%). Their ages vary from 20 to 63, with an average of 26.2.

3. Results

3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

As a general rule, like most other Europeans, Germans and Austrians have an informal pronoun and a formal address pronoun, a T-form and a V-form in Brown and Gilman's 1960 terminology, namely *du* (grammatically the 2nd person sg.) and *Sie* (grammatically the 3rd person pl.). The distribution of these pronouns according to the informants is like this:

- (1) All German and Austrian informants agreed that children would use the T-form for their parents.
- (2) Except for one German informant, all other German and Austrian informants agreed that children use T to address older relatives.
- (3) All German and Austrian informants agreed that administration officials are typically addressed by V.
- (4) Although there may be some exceptions among younger persons, clerks and customers use V to address each other in Germany; likewise, strangers in the street are normally given V. The latter holds also true for Austria. As far as conversations between clerks and customers are concerned, the 9 Austrian informants who completed the large version of the questionnaire saw this constellation as a typical V-V-situation
- (5) Students typically address their teachers by V—according to 5 German informants, T can also occur at primary school. Teachers, in contrast, typically use T as long as the students are not 16-18 years old yet; from this age on, teachers might switch into V.
- (6) Depending on the business and the size of a company, employers and employees as well as colleagues among each other, may sometimes use T, sometimes V—although it seems slightly more typical for employers and employees to use V, almost always reciprocally, while colleagues more typically use T among each other. The concrete figures of the German informants were as follows
 - colleagues at work among each other: 26 = T or V (54.1%), 21 = T (43.8%), 1 = V (2.1%)
 - employees to employer: 35 = V (72.9%), 13 = T or V (27.1%)
 - employer to employees: 30 = V (62.3%), 18 = T or V (37.8%)
 The Austrian figures are slightly different:
 - colleagues at work among each other: 7 = T (77.8%), 2 = T or V (22.2%)
 - employees to employer: 7 = V (77.8%), 2 = T or V (22.2%)
 - employer to employees: 7 = V (77.8%), 2 = T or V (22.2%)

³ I would like to thank Wolfgang Pöckl for this opportunity.

⁴ I would like to thank Gudrun Bachleitner-Held for collecting these additional questionnaires.

- (7) With business partners it seems more typical to use V (33 German informants, 7 Austrian informants), but 14 German and 2 Austrian informants said that V or T is possible. Only 1 German informant claimed that T is typical.

In brief: Germans and Austrians are rather reluctant with the T-form.

In the reduced questionnaire for the Austrian informants, this question was not included, but from preliminary drafts of the SICS (where we had questioned people from Vienna, Lower Austria and Graz) we can conclude that Austrians (at least from Vienna, Lower Austria and Graz).

There is no uniform telephone opening⁵ in German private situations, but “last name” (mentioned by 30 informants = 62.5%) is the most typical. 11 informants also gave “first name + last name”; 14 informants also consider a pure *Hallo?* as typical, but some may label it impolite (like 2 of the informants). A similar picture can be drawn on the basis of the 38 Austrian informants; five of them explicitly describe *Hallo?* as appropriate for mobile phones and “(first name +) last name” as appropriate for fixed lined network. A feature that was not too rare among Austrian informants and Germans from Bavaria (not in other parts of Germany) is the sequence “last name + first name”. 6 Austrians (15.8%) and 4 Bavarians (23.2% of the Bavarian informants = 8.3% of all German informants) listed this option.

In business telephone openings, the pattern “company’s name + last name + ((greeting) + phrase such as ‘How can I help you?’)” seem to be the most typical in both Germany and Austria.

3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation

Small talk can be understood as the elements of a conversation that are not the greeting, the closing and leave-taking phase and the proper motive for the conversation (cf. also Malinowski 1923, Laver 1975, Ventola 1979). As the SICS shows, there are not very clear rules for small-talking in Germany and Austria; small talk does not seem generally common. For no single situation is small talk considered typical by a majority of our informants. 21 of the German informants regard common meals (which was given as an option) as a typical small talk setting. The situation “party/reception” was added by 9 German informants. 13 of the Austrian informants regarded waiting rooms as typical small talk settings (on the other hand, waiting rooms were considered taboo areas for small talk by 4 Austrian informants), 11 Austrians ticked meals and 10 Austrians stores as typical small-talk situations. 5 Austrians added “the hairdresser” as a typical small-talk place; the situation “party/reception” was added by 4 Austrians.

This lack of rules is, in a way, also reflected by the question of taboo situations. For no single situation is small talk considered taboo in Germany. 22 German informants consider elevators and 20 Germans consider public toilets as taboo areas for small talk; 14 German informants have listed public transportation. The picture is slightly different in Austria. Here, 24 of the 38 Austrian informants (63.2%) see toilets as taboo settings for small talk, 19 informants (50.0%) elevators; the other situations given are ticked by less than half of the informants.

The most prominent small talk topic of all—and 9 of the German informants have stated this explicitly—is the weather. 41 German informants (85.4%) and 35 Austrian informants (92.1%) considered this theme typical (or labelled it even very typical). Other topics considered typical for small talk by a majority of the German informants are sports (33 =

⁵ The classical studies on phone conversations that many other studies relate to are the ones by Schegloff (1979) and Hopper (1992).

68.8%), hobbies (25 = 52.1%), and the general complaint about politics or politicians (24 = 50.0%). Topics given by more than half of the Austrian informants are the general complaint about politics and politicians (23 = 60.5%), discussions about the latest political news (19 = 50.0%) and travel experiences (19 = 50.0%). Apart from the topics listed 4 Austrians added “the latest gossip”, another 4 “current topics in the media”.

Clear taboo topics for Germans are salary and other money issues (35 = 72.9%). Only 2 Austrians listed salary as a taboo topic specifically, but 28 of them (= 73.7%) marked money as a taboo topic (5 of them even as a very typical one). The following topics were added by some Austrian informants: sex (9), dying/death (6), diseases (4)

There is also no rule in Germany for the percentage of small talk in private and business conversations. Half of the informants claim that Germans do more small talk in private conversations than in business conversations; the other half claims the opposite or that there is roughly the same percentage of small talk in private and in business conversations. This question was not included in the reduced version for the Austrian informants; but from the results of the 9 informants who filled in the complete version of the SICS we can safely assume that there will also be no clear picture given as this was already the case in the first two questions on small topic behavior.

3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation

How do Germans typically present their opinion on a topic? Luckily, the informants commented their selection of strategies for this speech act with the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes” and “rarely”. If we convert these labels into points from 4 to 1 and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks, then we get the following picture (p. = points). According to the informants, the most typical strategy is “first you say your opinion, then you give reasons related to the issue” (150 points, 38 informants viewed this strategy as present at least occasionally).

This question was not included in the reduced version of the SICS for the Austrian informants. From the 9 informants who answered the full version of the questionnaire we would have to conclude that the two most typical strategies are “first you say your opinion, then you give reasons related to the issue” (18 points, 6 informants considered this strategy frequent) and “you present different opinions and arguments, then you give your own opinion” (16 points; 5 informants viewed this strategy as present at least occasionally). But more informants are needed to consolidate this.

In the next question, the informants were asked whether invitations or offers made by an interlocutor can reasonably be assumed to be honest or to be just a politeness phrase. With this question, the SICS aims at finding out about the presence of ostensible invitations (cf. Isaacs/Clark 1990) and similar phenomena. 40 Germans (83.3%) and 24 Austrians (63.2%) said that one can reasonably assume that an invitation or an offer can be taken literally, as an honest offer. However, this is not as fixed a rule in Germany as in Austria: 13 Austrians claimed it depends on the persons, while only 4 Germans said this (the decisive factors being the phrasing and the level of familiarity between the interlocutors).

3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

Item #9 in the SICS says: “If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?”⁶ If we convert the labels

⁶ The MLA lists a University of Mississippi Ph.D. thesis, by Beckers (2000), comparing refusal strategies by

“very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then the picture of the most typical strategies in Germany is this:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
106	34	a concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)
105	33	a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
78	26	a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again
76	25	a concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants. So a vague excuse or a concrete brief and true excuse are clearly seen as the dominant, common, normal strategies to turn down an offer.

The results from the Austrian informants are these:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
83	27	a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again
72	24	a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
70	24	a concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)
57	19	a concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants. The difference to note between Germany and western Austria is that the strategy “Give a concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)” is not seen as a typical pattern (only 10 of the 29 informants view this as typical).

Item #10 consisted of the question “If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies in Germany:

Americans and Germans. However, only the abstract was available to me. The following observations are listed, amongst others, in the abstract: Germans vary their refusal strategies according to social distance rather than status (whereas Americans vary their refusal strategies according to social status rather than social distance); Germans use a third party for their explanations (whereas Americans rely on their own decisions for their explanations).

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
143	40	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
121	39	a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”
69	23	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”
68	23	a direct “No”

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

The Austrian strategies seem less varied:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
86	28	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
62	20	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

3.5. Section E: Ending a Conversation

As there are no useable cross-cultural pragmatic studies on closing conversations⁷, the SICS questionnaire had particularly included also this part of a conversation: “what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?”. If we convert the labels “very frequently”, “frequently” (or unmarked), “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following picture of typical strategies in Germany:

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
113	35	a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”
91	34	say what they have to do now (if there really is something)
80	26	a phrase like “It’s already late now”

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

If we take the same counting method for (western) Austria, then, again, we can note that the set of frequent strategies seems more limited:

⁷ Unfortunately the study by Otterstedt (1993) is full of factual mistakes. The first study to analyze closing strategies is the one by Schegloff/Sacks (1973).

points	persons seeing a pattern used at least “sometimes”	
85	28	a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”
69	22	say what they have to do now (if there really is something)

Other strategies were viewed as “present at least sometimes” by less than half of the informants.

After this question the next logical item was to ask for the interlocutor’s reaction. 29 of the German informants (60.4%) considered it more typical that the other person lets you go, for 4 it was typical that the other person first tries to persuade you to stay, 15 informants claimed that both are possible and typical. This question was not included in the short version of the SICS given to most Austrian informants, but 8 of the 9 informants considered letting the other person go a typical reaction.

4. Summary

Germans are on the one hand rather reserved (there are a lot of situations where the V form is preferred, small talk is uncommon), on the other hand they are rather direct and abstain from indirect or, in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) terminology, off-record strategies. The Gricean (1975) maxims of quality and manner seem particularly salient. If we want to turn these observations into a “pragmatic stage direction” for conversations with Germans, we could formulate it in the following way: “Be reserved, but when you say something be very explicit; when you want to turn down an offer, only lie if there is no true excuse.”

Austrians, too, are rather direct and refrain from indirect, off-record strategies. The Gricean maxims of quality and manner seem particularly salient as well. A “pragmatic stage direction” for conversations with Germans could be formulated in the following way: “Give reasons for what you do without hurting the other. If need be, invent a reason.”

In conclusion, we can say that in the speech acts contrastively analyzed (doing small talk, turning down an offer, expressing disagreement, closing a conversation) the set of typical communicative strategies that (west) Austrians use is smaller than the set that Germans use. Or put differently, (west) Austrian behavior is formally more strictly organized in these speech acts than German communicative behavior.

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