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# Training Wheels for Cultural Learning

## Poor Language Fluency and Its Shielding Effect on the Evaluation of Culturally Inappropriate Behavior

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This research examined the effect of language fluency on the evaluation of culturally inappropriate behavior. A series of video vignettes were created in which a nonnative speaker either followed or broke social rules while displaying varying degrees of fluency in English. Results demonstrated a *shielding* effect of poor language fluency, such that when the nonnative individual acted in a culturally inappropriate manner, poor fluency in English shielded the individual from negative evaluation.

**Keywords:** *culture; cross cultural; language fluency; faux pas; rule violation; interpersonal evaluation*

In recent years, scholars have begun to explore the challenges of adapting one's behavior to fit novel expectations for appropriate behavior in foreign cultural contexts (Earley & Ang, 2003). A key insight from this work has been the importance of producing behavior that matches expectations for appropriateness in the foreign setting (Thomas & Ravlin, 1995). When individuals produce behavior that is consistent with culturally based expectations for appropriate behavior, they are positively perceived, and when they violate cultural rules, they are evaluated quite negatively. The importance of accommodation has long been a hallmark of work on communication accommodation theory (see Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, for a review). When people converge their speech and behavior to match the expectations of a conversational partner, they are perceived more positively than when their behavior

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diverges from expectations (Hornsey & Gallois, 1998; Jones, Gallois, Callan, & Barker, 1999).

Although research has impressively documented the benefits accruing to those who accommodate, relatively little research has explored the dynamics of unsuccessful adaptation, which, of course, is not an unlikely outcome for nonnatives interacting abroad with an imperfect command of the foreign culture and language (Molinsky, 2005). The focus of the present article is on the perception of individuals who engage in culturally inappropriate behavior and, particularly, on the impact of nonnatives' fluency in the foreign language of a new culture on the perception and evaluation of their behavioral faux pas. Language fluency is a naturally occurring facet of cross-cultural interaction and part of the struggle nonnatives must deal with in the process of cultural adaptation. Language fluency is also a well-established variable in the person perception literature. We know, for example, that nonnatives with low levels of fluency in a foreign language tend to be judged quite negatively by native speakers (Giles & Pierson, 1988; White & Li, 1991; Wible & Hui, 1985).

Given such findings about the effect of poor fluency on person perception, one might naturally conclude that in cases where nonnatives break cultural rules of interpersonal politeness and act in a discourteous manner, these individuals would be even "more" negatively perceived the "worse" their fluency in the language of the target culture. An alternative possibility, one that we test in this article, is that the combined effect of two negatives is not additive but interactive. Instead of giving rise to a doubly negative perception, adding one wrong thing (discourteous behavior) to another (poor language fluency) actually gives rise to an outcome perceived to be less "wrong" or negative than if either of the individual negative components were considered alone.

The present research considers this possibility by examining the effect of fluency on the evaluation of both culturally appropriate behavior *and* culturally inappropriate behavior. Although previous research has focused mainly on the culturally appropriate condition, concluding that poor language fluency has a negative effect on person evaluation, little research has explored how poor language fluency influences the evaluation of cultural faux pas. Our prediction is that poor language fluency will shield nonnatives from negative evaluation when engaging in culturally inappropriate behavior. This prediction is consistent with communication accommodation theory, which suggests that when perceivers attribute rule violators to have "high effort, high choice, and malevolent intent," they are more likely to make negative attributions regarding their rule-violating behavior compared to cases in which violators are judged to have had minimal effort, choice, and benign intent (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995, p. 146). Poor language fluency in this case may serve as a cue for "minimal choice," as it signals a nonnative's "foreignness" and presumed lack of understanding of the new cultural rules. This prediction is also grounded in research on discounting (Kelley, 1973; Morris & Larrick, 1995), which suggests that perceivers will discount any one potential cause for an event to the extent that other potential causes are also available (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Although

discounting research has traditionally considered how elements external to individuals influence how others interpret and evaluate their actions, it is proposed here that fluency in a foreign language—a cue emitted from individuals themselves—will serve a similar purpose. Instead of adding more negativity to an already negative impression, substandard fluency will, instead, shield individuals from the negative evaluative brunt of their cultural faux pas.

To examine the effect of language fluency on the evaluation of culturally appropriate and inappropriate behavior, we filmed a series of short (5-7 s) scenes from everyday life in a workplace setting in which the same individual engaged in culturally appropriate or inappropriate behavior. There were six scenes in total, five in which the nonnative in the scene broke social rules and, as a result, behaved in a culturally inappropriate manner, and a sixth scene in which the nonnative's behavior was culturally appropriate. Each of the rule-breaking scenes entailed a violation of cultural norms regarding polite behavior in everyday interaction. In one scene, the male character refused to make small talk with the female character. In another scene, he denied a reasonable request to temporarily move his car. In a third scene, the male character refused a polite and simple request to help move some boxes. In a fourth scene, he impolitely informed the female character that he needed to use the copy machine. In a fifth scenario, the male character told the female character that she looked fat in her new dress. The sixth scene was a version of one of the five rule-breaking scenes with a culturally appropriate ending substituted for the culturally inappropriate ending.

The reason for creating multiple scenes showing inappropriate behavior was to make sure we were testing the effect of culturally inappropriate behavior in general, rather than the idiosyncratic dynamics of any one particular scene. To examine the effect of fluency on person evaluation, two fluency versions of each of these six scenes were created: a "good" fluency version and a "poor" fluency version. Following Brown, Giles, and Thakerar (1985), good fluency was operationalized as speech characterized by smoothness, fluency, and lack of hesitation, with poor fluency being the opposite.<sup>1</sup>

Each scene was carefully scripted so that the actors' verbal dialogue and nonverbal behavior were kept constant across all versions. Also, the same two actors acted in the same roles across all versions: a foreign, 19-year-old man behaved inappropriately or appropriately towards a native speaking 24-year-old woman whose reaction was kept constant across all versions.<sup>2</sup> The nonnative actor was specifically selected from an ethnicity (Hungarian) with a cultural background and origin of accent that are not easily identifiable, so participants would not have preexisting stereotypes of the actor's ethnicity.

Participants were 112 North American university students (67 women), all native speakers of English who received course credit or US\$7 for their participation. Each participant watched one scene, and evaluated the nonnative male character in the scene by marking either yes or no to a list of 13 positive trait adjectives (such as "likable," "warm," and "nice") and 11 negative trait adjectives (such as "rude,"

“discourteous,” and “obnoxious”). Next, participants completed a short, 5-item, 7-point Likert-type scale questionnaire measuring their interpersonal evaluation of the actor. This questionnaire included items such as “I would like to work with the male character in the scene” and “I would feel comfortable asking a favor from the male character in this scene.”

We also recruited a separate group of 122 North American university students (87 women), who were all native English speakers, to conduct a post hoc manipulation check on the fluency and appropriateness of the nonnative’s behavior, and to also test whether participants could detect the nonnative’s country of origin.<sup>3</sup> In terms of appropriateness, a 2 (scene: appropriate, inappropriate)  $\times$  2 (fluency: poor, good), between-participants ANOVA on participants’ appropriateness judgments revealed a main effect of scene, indicating that the nonnative in the inappropriate condition was perceived to be significantly more culturally inappropriate ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) than the nonnative in the appropriate condition ( $M = 6.26$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $F(1, 118) = 49.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . The same analysis on the fluency judgment revealed a main effect of fluency, indicating that the nonnative in the good fluency condition was perceived to be significantly more fluent ( $M = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) than the nonnative in the poor fluency condition ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $F(1, 118) = 61.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . No other effects were significant. These results indicate that the fluency and appropriateness manipulations were successful.

This group of participants was also asked to guess the cultural background of the nonnative actor and to indicate their confidence in this evaluation. Of the 122 participants, only 16 estimated that the actor was from an Eastern European background, and only one guessed that he was Hungarian. In addition, participants had little confidence in their estimates. The mean confidence in their estimates of the actor’s cultural background was very low ( $M = 2.78$  on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 = *not confident at all* to 7 = *very confident*), confirming our assumption that participants could not easily identify the nonnative’s cultural background and therefore likely did not judge the actor based on preexisting stereotypes.

Recall that our prediction was that poor language fluency would shield the nonnative individual from harsh judgment when acting in a culturally inappropriate manner. Results from both the trait evaluation and the interpersonal evaluation measures supported this prediction. Results from a 2 (scene: appropriate, inappropriate)  $\times$  2 (fluency: poor, good) between-participants ANOVA on the trait evaluation index (combining the 13 positive and the 11 negative traits after reverse coding the negative traits,  $\alpha = .91$ ) indicated a significant main effect of scene,  $F(1, 108) = 187.14$ ,  $p < .001$ , and a non-significant main effect of fluency,  $F(1, 108) < 1$ ,  $p = .624$ . Moreover, there was a significant Scene  $\times$  Fluency interaction,  $F(1, 108) = 7.48$ ,  $p = .007$ , such that when the nonnative behaved in a culturally appropriate manner, fluency had no significant effect on evaluation ( $M = .70$ ,  $SD = .14$ ; and  $M = .76$ ,  $SD = .13$ , respectively, for poor and good fluency conditions),  $F(1, 108) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .131$ , but when behaving in a culturally *inappropriate* manner, the nonnative with poor language fluency ( $M = .39$ ,  $SD = .12$ )

was judged significantly more positively than the nonnative with good language fluency ( $M = .30, SD = .19$ ),  $F(1, 108) = 5.50, p = .021$ . Results on the interpersonal evaluation measure ( $\alpha = .87$ ) also indicated a shielding effect of poor language fluency. On this measure, there were significant main effects of scene,  $F(1, 108) = 76.32, p < .001$ , and fluency,  $F(1, 108) = 4.36, p = .039$ . Moreover, there was a significant Scene  $\times$  Fluency interaction,  $F(1, 108) = 5.98, p = .016$ , such that when acting in a culturally appropriate manner, the nonnative individual was evaluated more negatively with poor language fluency ( $M = 3.92, SD = 1.08$ ) than with good language fluency ( $M = 4.84, SD = .97$ ) in the culturally appropriate scene,  $F(1, 108) = 9.59, p = .003$ . However, this harmful effect of poor fluency disappeared in the culturally inappropriate condition, where the nonnative in the poor and good fluency conditions ( $M = 2.63, SD = .97$ ; and  $M = 2.56, SD = 1.23$ , respectively) was evaluated similarly,  $F(1, 108) < 1$ .

The results from this study offer important insight into the dynamics of unsuccessful accommodation in an intercultural context. Whereas previous research has emphasized the detrimental effect of poor fluency on the way a nonnative is evaluated when communicating across cultures, this study highlights the potentially positive effects that poor language fluency can have for foreigners engaging in culturally inappropriate behavior. When nonnative individuals break cultural rules and act in a culturally inappropriate manner, poor language fluency may protect them from the negative evaluative brunt of their cultural faux pas.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. Future studies should replicate these results with multiple versions of inappropriate and appropriate behavior scenes. Future research should also empirically examine the mechanisms underlying the results reported here. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study offers important insights about the ways in which poor fluency can serve as *training wheels* for the cultural learning process. By protecting one from negative judgments, a low level of linguistic fluency in cultural learning situations can allow one to experiment with new cultural norms, without necessarily being punished for inadvertently breaking them.

## Notes

1. For each scene, we also varied accent strength (high and low strength). However, because there were no significant results for accent strength on any of the dependent measures, we dropped the variable from subsequent analyses and do not discuss this variable further. For a detailed description of the scenes, as well as for other additional methodological details, please contact the corresponding author.

2. The actors in the scenes were carefully trained to behave in a consistent manner across all versions of the scenes. The male foreign individual was the only one whose front side faced the camera (so that the woman's response would not stand as a cue for judgment of the male).

3. Results from this sample were also used to justify collapsing the five "inappropriate" scenes into a single inappropriate "condition." To do this, we conducted a one-way ANOVA (with the six scenes as a between-participant independent variable) on judgments of appropriateness, and we found a significant effects of scene,  $F(5, 116) = 22.64, p < .001$ . A Tukey's HSD (honestly significant difference) test revealed

that the behavior of the nonnative in the single appropriate scene was perceived to be significantly more appropriate than the nonnative in any of the five inappropriate scenes, all  $p < .001$ , indicating that the five inappropriate scenes were indeed perceived as more inappropriate than the one appropriate scene.

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