



2014

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Beata Gallaher

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### Recommended Citation

Gallaher, Beata (2014) "Politeness and Sociocultural Values in American and Russian Cultures Emerging from the Speech Act of Complaint; Pragmatic Competence of L2 Learners of Russian," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 64: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol64/iss1/10>

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## **Politeness and Sociocultural Values in American and Russian Cultures Emerging from the Speech Act of Complaint; Pragmatic Competence of L2 Learners of Russian<sup>1</sup>**

*Beata Gallaher*

### **Introduction**

In the last two decades, there has been an increasing number of empirical studies on complaints that explore the effects of sociocultural values and linguistic politeness on the language performance of native- and non-native speakers of English (Kasper 1981; Piotrowska 1987; Olshtain and Weinbach 1987, 1993; Trosborg 1995; Arent 1996; Murphy and Neu 1996; Kraft and Geluykens 2002, 2007; Tanck 2002; Umar 2006; Prykarpatska 2008). However, the empirical data on complaints by Russian native and non-native speakers remains scarce (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993; Gershenson 2003; Kozlova 2004; Perelmutter 2010). The research on complaints is particularly important for studying the impact of cultural values on speakers' linguistic choices in problem negotiations within and across cultures.

Given the limited research on both intercultural differences in the realization of complaints as well as interlanguage complaints in Russian, the present study investigates empirical data on complaints as performed by American first language (L1) speakers of English (ASs), Russian native speakers of Russian (RSs), and American learners of Russian as a foreign language (L2) who studied abroad. A complaint is an illocutionary act in which the speakers convey negative feelings about their current situation, for which they hold the hearer directly or

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Dan Davidson for his support and guidance with my research. I am very grateful to Prof. Irina Pavlovna Lysakova, the ACTR staff members, and resident directors in Russia for their assistance in data collection. I also would like to thank the editorial team of RLJ, two anonymous reviewers, and Victor Frank for their valuable and detailed comments on my article. I thank Mary Zaborskis for her proofreading in English. Any remaining errors are my own.

indirectly responsible (Trosborg 1995, 311-12). In a complaint, speakers show their displeasure at something that they believe the hearer did, failed to do, or is still doing (311). Boxer (1993, 106-7) identified complaints that speakers address toward hearers as direct, as opposed to indirect complaints when speakers convey dissatisfaction about themselves, someone that is not present, or something, such as circumstances. Following Boxer's (1993) classification, this study explores direct complaints. Brown and Levinson ([1978] 1987, 65) classified complaints as inherently *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) because their performance may threaten the speaker's and hearer's face. They defined face as a public self-image that speakers want to maintain in social interactions. To carry out a complaint, speakers may use a certain strategy depending on the degree of face threat, which can be estimated by an interaction of three social factors: social power, social distance, and the degree of imposition (76). According to Brown and Levinson, this estimation determines the degree of linguistic politeness that speakers employ in FTAs. If face threat is high, speakers may decide to opt out of performing a FTA and not say anything at all.

The present study offers a systematic analysis of empirical data based on the participants' opt-out behaviors as well as on their complaints with a focus on linguistic politeness and the sociocultural values underlying American and Russian cultures. The analysis also provides insights into the pragmatic competence of American L2 learners of Russian at the Intermediate and Advanced proficiency levels and with study abroad experience.

### **Literature review**

Cross-cultural studies on American and Russian cultures have indicated that ASs place a great value on independence, private space, individualism, self-reliance, individual responsibility, and friendliness, whereas RSs value hospitality, honesty, straightforwardness, intimacy among friends, and emotionality (Wierzbicka 1991; Kartalova 1996; Ogiermann 2009). Studies have shown that cultural values in American and Russian cultures affect the speakers' perception of linguistic politeness, which may cause miscommunication across cultures. ASs avoid directness and prefer indirectness in social interactions because they do not want to impose upon interlocutors out of respect for their

independence and private space (Wierzbicka 1991). Unlike ASs, RSs do not perceive directness as an imposition, but as a reflection of sincerity and closeness (Wierzbicka 1991; Ogiermann 2009). RSs also value advice from interlocutors and expect to be morally evaluated by others. Sometimes they even “require from others moral evaluation of mutual loyalty, respect, [and] sincerity” (Bergelson 2003, 3). ASs who value individualism may perceive such behavior as an intrusion into privacy. RSs also openly express their emotions because they associate it with truthfulness and solidarity, whereas ASs may perceive emotionality as imposition upon the freedom of the interlocutor (Wierzbicka 1991; Kartalova 1996). The differences in cultural values are particularly important for the present study that explores linguistic behavior of ASs and RSs in problem negotiation.

Cross-cultural research on direct complaints has shown that cultural values affect the linguistic choices of the speakers within culture and can cause miscommunication across cultures. Gershenson (2003) in her study on complaints performed by Israelis, Russians and Russian immigrants in Israel found that Russian and Hebrew speakers employed different linguistic strategies in a complaint situation, which reflected their cultural values. The differences in cultural values led to cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts between these two language groups. Olshtain and Weinbach’s (1993) study showed that Russian and Moroccan immigrants in Israel differently structured their complaints related to money, friendship, and parking, which reflected their respective culture-specific values. However, in another study, Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) found that American speakers, British English speakers, and Hebrew speakers employed similar strategies (warning, complaint, and disapproval) when complaining in situations that are socially unacceptable in all three cultures. The authors asserted that the situation itself, and not language- or culture-specific norms, was a significant factor in the strategy selection across cultures.

Cross-cultural studies have also indicated that speakers across cultures differently perceive social variables of distance and power, which affects their linguistic behavior. Hebrew speakers in Olshtain and Weinbach’s (1993) study opted for less severe strategies with a person of a higher status than with a person of a lower status. Similarly, native speakers of English in Trosborg’s (1995) study employed more indirect

strategies (hints) with an authority figure to be polite. However, native speakers of Danish did not select more indirect strategies when the status was unequal, but they used significantly more supportive moves than English speakers. Trosborg concluded that Danish and English speakers differently perceive the parameters of social status. She also found that social distance was a *negative predictor* for strategy selection in both language groups because speakers put the least amount of effort into structuring and modifying their complaints when social distance was considered (372).

Studies on direct complaints that investigated learners' pragmatic competence<sup>2</sup> at the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic levels<sup>3</sup> have shown that learners' pragmatic inappropriateness may result from limited linguistic competence and different sociocultural norms across cultures. Piotrowska's (1987) study showed that Cantonese learners of English made different linguistic and strategic choices than native speakers when social distance and situational context were considered. Piotrowska attributed the differences to sociocultural norms in both language groups. Arent (1996) made similar observations in his study on Chinese speakers of English as L2. He found that there is "a strong relationship between linguistic and cultural background and sociopragmatic failure" (138). Some studies have shown that learners made inappropriate linguistic choices, which native speakers perceived as a critique, not a complaint (Murphy and Neu 1996), or led to

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, there have been several empirical studies exploring pragmatic competence of American L2 of Russian in interlanguage request (Owen 2001; Frank 2002, 2010) and apology (Shardakova 2009). Although these studies do not refer to complaints, they provide valuable insights into the inter-relationship between learners' pragmatic and grammatical competences in the domestic classroom (Frank 2002, 2010) and study abroad program (Frank 2010), as well as the development of learners' pragmatic competence in relation to their proficiency level and study abroad experience (Owen 2001; Shardakova 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Pragmalinguistics refers to linguistic strategies like directness, indirectness, language routines, and linguistic forms employed by speakers in communicative acts while sociopragmatics describes the social conditions in which language use is appropriate (Leech 1983; Thomas 1983). Scholars in sociopragmatics investigate social factors, such as social distance, relative social power, and the degree of imposition as well as cultural values, which determine rights and obligations in each specific culture.

pragmatic failure<sup>4</sup> (Kasper 1981; Gershenson 2003). Tanck's (2002) study on direct complaints and refusals of non-native speakers of English showed that learners may produce grammatically correct utterances in complaints, but they may be socially and culturally inappropriate, revealing their lack of pragmatic competence. The studies mentioned above indicate that learners need to acquire sociocultural norms in order to improve their pragmatic competence and effectively negotiate a problem with native speakers.

Some researchers have attributed learners' divergence from native norms to transfer of their L1 and their native culture (C1) (Kasper 1981; Gershenson 2003; Umar 2006). Gershenson (2003) found that complaints of Russian L2 learners of Hebrew in Israel were more verbose, indirect, and playful than those of Hebrew speakers, which she attributed to learners' L1 transfer (285). Umar (2006) found that advanced Sudanese learners of English differed from native-speakers' norms at the linguistic and sociopragmatic levels when social distance and severity of offense were considered. Umar attributed these differences to cultural norms (the value of friendship), pragmatic transfer (the use of the imperative), and limited linguistic competence (34).

As the above-mentioned studies indicate, speakers across cultures differently negotiate problems based on language- and culture-specific norms, which, in turn, affect the learners' linguistic behavior in the target language. As evidenced from the foregoing, learners' complaints differ from native speakers' norms in terms of strategy selection and linguistic choices, which are often determined by social factors and cultural values. The differences may also result from learners' transfer of L1 and C1.

The present study expands the existing data on sociocultural norms and politeness rules underlying American and Russian cultures as well on the pragmatic competence of American L2 learners of Russian. The study provides a thorough investigation of empirical data by exploring the social variables of distance and power.

### **Methodology**

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas (1983, 91) defined pragmatic failure as speakers' "inability to understand 'what is meant by what is said,'" which can cause a communication breakdown between native and non-native speakers.

### **Research questions**

The article reports on the major findings of a study on direct complaints of ASs, RSs, and American L2 learners of Russian with reference to the following research questions:

1. What cultural values underlying American and Russian cultures are revealed in the complaints of ASs and RSs?
2. Do ASs and RSs differ in their assessment of social power and social distance in a complaint situation?
3. To what extent do the complaints of American L2 learners of Russian reveal transfer of their L1 and C1, and to what extent do they reflect native speakers' norms?

### **Participant profile**

This study is based on data obtained from 30 ASs, 30 RSs, and 37 American L2 of Russian at the Intermediate and Advanced proficiency levels with study abroad experience.<sup>5</sup> ASs were randomly recruited at Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges in Pennsylvania. They were in the age range of 18 to 22. The data from RSs was collected at Moscow State University in Moscow and Herzen State Pedagogical University in Saint Petersburg, Russia. This group encompassed students in the age range of 17 to 24.

The group of American L2 learners of Russian consisted of students who participated in the study abroad program in Russia under the auspices of the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR). The L2 learners were enrolled in the language program for the fall semester of 2010 and the spring semester of 2011 at Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia in Saint Petersburg, Moscow International University in Moscow, and the Center for Russian Language Study (CORA) in Vladimir. The learners' proficiency levels were established for ACTR by certified testers who administered the OPI to students before their departure to Russia, except for three male students, whose proficiency levels were based on their in-country OPI.

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<sup>5</sup> An additional thirty-three participants were excluded from the final analysis because they did not complete the questionnaires appropriately or were bilingual.

**Elicitation of the data**

A combination of an open-ended oral discourse completion questionnaire (DCQ) and an assessment questionnaire was used to elicit data. Although the validity of DCQs has been widely criticized, some researchers emphasize that this method of collecting data is a good instrument for exploring cultural values reflected in speech acts (Beebe and Cummings 1996) as well as semantic strategies and linguistic structures frequently employed in speech act realization (Beebe and Cummings 1996; Kasper and Roever 2005). Therefore, this study utilized DCQs to elicit data.

Participants in the present study did not interact with another speaker, which may have altered their natural linguistic behavior. However, role-plays were not considered as a method to collect data because, as some studies have indicated, the tester's age, gender, and social status may affect participants' responses, and, consequently, the results of the study (Owen 2001; Shardakova 2009). Natural settings that may provide more authentic data than experimental methods were also not considered as an alternative method because some variables (e.g., age, social status, severity of offense, the sample population) are difficult and even impossible to control in natural environments (Beebe and Cummings 1996; Cohen 1996).

In the present study, participants in each language group first reacted orally to fifteen situations, twelve of which triggered complaints (see Appendix), and then filled out an assessment questionnaire, in which they rated on a 3-point scale the degree of offense and the obligation to express complaints. The scenarios were provided in English for ASs, in Russian for RSs, and in both languages for L2 learners to ensure their understanding.<sup>6</sup> Scenarios varied in the degree of imposition/offense (severe or moderate), social distance (the degree of familiarity), and the relative social power between the speaker and the hearer (social status) by featuring communication with a friend, a stranger, and a person of an unequal status (see Table 1).

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<sup>6</sup> The situations were adjusted to each culture, which resulted in some differences in the translation. For example, spilling coffee in the subway in American culture was replaced with dropping ice cream in Russian culture.

**Table 1. Distribution of social variables in situations featuring complaints**

Social distance	Interaction with a friend	Interaction with a stranger	Interaction with a professor	Interaction with a person whom the speaker hired
Social Power	S = H (the same social status between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H))	S = H (the same social status between the speaker and the hearer)	S < H (the social status of the speaker is lower than the status of the hearer)	S > H (the social status of the speaker is higher than the status of the hearer)
Degree of Imposition	severe/moderate	severe/moderate	severe/moderate	severe/moderate

Each participant was instructed on how to complete the oral and written tasks and was left alone in the room. The participants were asked to carefully read each scenario and to voice their reaction into a tape recorder. They were instructed to react spontaneously, but they were not told to complain. They also had a choice of saying nothing if in real life they would not give any response. The participants were instructed not to use indirect strategies, such as *Я бы сказал* (*a*) or *I would say*, but direct strategies, as if they were talking to the interlocutor. Participants who used indirect strategies were excluded from the final analysis.

The recorded data was transcribed. In addition, the researcher transcribed the explanations participants gave when they chose not to react to a scenario. The data obtained from L2 learners was also evaluated for linguistic and cultural appropriateness by two native speakers who were graduate students in philology at Herzen State Pedagogical University in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

### Coding

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part of the investigation is based on the situations to which the participants in each language group decided not to react and on the explanations that they provided to their opt-out behaviors (cf. Bonikowska 1988). To analyze the participants' choices, descriptive statistics and qualitative analyses were conducted.

The second part of the investigation is based on the reasons that the speakers in each language group provided most frequently to justify their complaints. The study investigated the following reasons: 1) the speaker's appeal to the hearer to take responsibility; 2) the speaker's appeal to the hearer to respect his/her private territory and independence; 3) the speaker's justification of the hearer's behavior; 4) the speaker's appeal to the hearer's moral consciousness; 5) and the speaker's appeal to the hearer by lecturing him or her about how they should behave. Although category 2 was absent in complaints of RSs, and category 4 was not present in complaints of ASs, both categories were used to code the data because of their high frequency in their respective groups.

The second part of the investigation also includes an analysis of the speakers' linguistic choices in terms of linguistic politeness by considering face threat. To assess the directness level of complaints, a taxonomy of directness was established based on the CCSARP perspectives of directness (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) as well as Owen's (2001) coding system to capture the linguistic reservoir in Russian. The following taxonomy of directness was used in the present study:

1. *Speaker-oriented* - I or я<sup>7</sup>

The speakers identify themselves as complainers, and, at the same time, they take responsibility for expressing a complaint by using the personal pronoun in the first person singular.

2. *Hearer-oriented* – you or ты (informal) / вы (formal)

The speakers explicitly refer to the hearer as responsible for the wrongdoing by using the personal pronoun in the second person singular or plural. In both languages, the *hearer-perspective* is an open-face threatening act that causes damage to the speaker's and to the hearer's face.

3. *Speaker- and hearer-oriented* - we or мы

The speakers use the personal pronoun in the first person plural that minimizes the imposition upon the hearer. By employing the first person

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<sup>7</sup> According to statistical analyses, in all interactions, L2 learners were more likely to use speaker-oriented strategies than RSs ( $p = .004$ ), which was attributed to their L1 transfer. RSs, in turn, most frequently used hearer-oriented strategies ( $p = .004$ ).

plural, the speakers reduce the risk of losing their face by reducing their role as a complainer through the hearer's involvement, which leads to the speaker and the hearer sharing responsibility for a wrongdoing.

4. *Impersonal (in English) - one, people, it and Non-Personalized (in Russian)*<sup>8</sup> - passive structures and *он (a), оно* [he/she/it], and *они* [they] with reference to external elements as a source of the complaint, for example, *Опять посуда грязная*. [The dishes are dirty again.]

In Russian, this category includes passive structures and structures with third person singular and plural referring to external sources but not people as a source of the complaint. By shifting to the third person singular or plural, the speaker changes the focus from the wrongdoer to the wrongdoing, which, in turn, minimizes the risk of losing face by the speaker and the hearer.

5. *Subjectless sentences in Russian* - expressions of type *не получилось* [(it) did not work out], or *пришлось* [(it) was needed], and expressions with *generic subjects* in the third person plural (Shardakova 2009, 59), for example, *в библиотеке сказали* [in the library (they) said].

By avoiding the subject in the nominative case, Russian speakers shift the focus from the speaker or the hearer to an unspecified source of control over the situation, which minimizes the risk to the speaker's face and the hearer's face.

## **Analysis and discussion of the findings**

### **Results based on opt-out behaviors**

Striking cross-cultural differences between ASs and RSs arose from the situations to which the speakers decided not to react. The most significant differences were observed in public behavior between ASs and RSs, as well as L2 learners (see Figure 1). Most frequently ASs and L2 learners did not react in the "Subway" and "Cutting Line" scenarios: 32.4% of learners decided not to say anything to a woman who cut in line in front of them in the grocery store, and 48.7% did not address a woman who stained their white shirt with ice cream in the subway. In

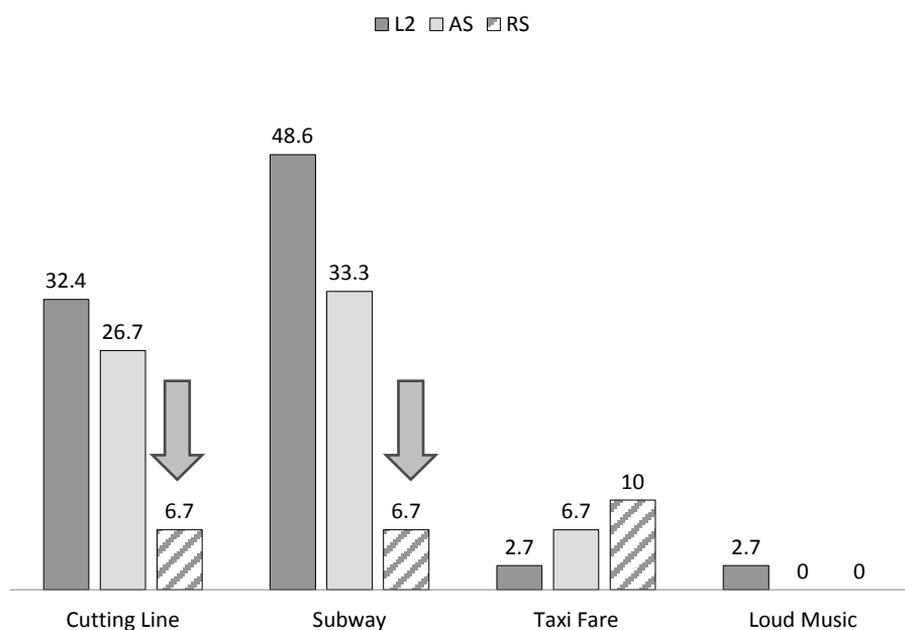
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<sup>8</sup> The category impersonal has been renamed as non-personalized to reflect the linguistic features of the Russian language.

the group of ASs, 26.7% of the participants decided not to say anything in the store and 33.3% did not react in the subway, while among RSs there was only one female and one male speaker who did not react in the grocery store and in the subway. It should be noted that the same Russian female did not react in the subway and in the grocery store.

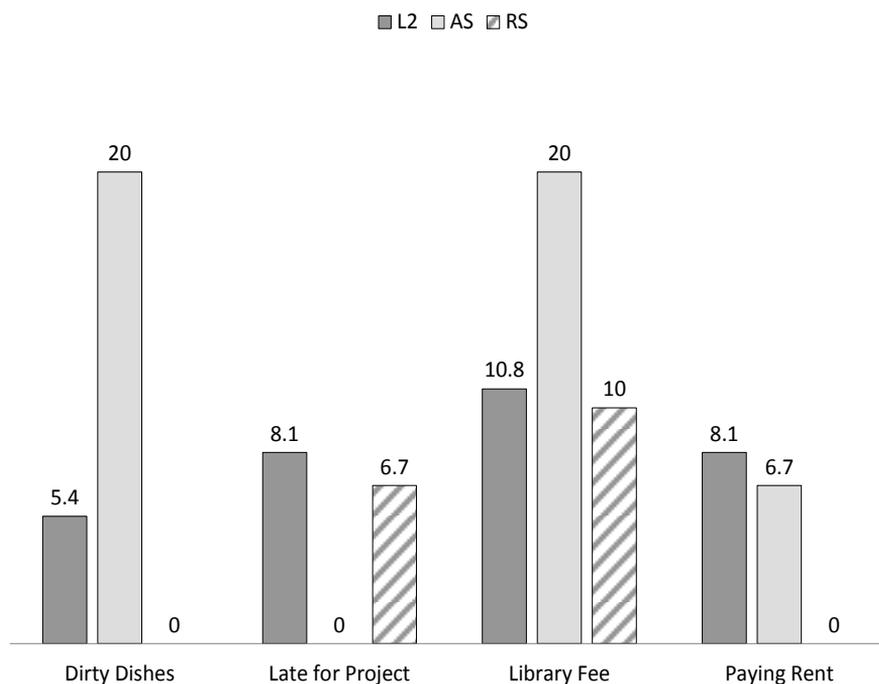
The speakers' explanations of their opt-out behaviors in public offered valuable insights into sociocultural values underlying both cultures. The explanations indicated that ASs avoided confrontations in public and justified the hearer's behavior in order to save their own face and the hearer's face. RSs, in turn, took into consideration teaching strangers how to behave and referred to the wrongdoer's conscience; thus, they were less concerned about losing face. The learners' behavior revealed various reasons behind their decisions, and some of them were attributed to transfer of sociocultural norms from their L1, such as justification of the hearer's behavior and avoidance of conflict in public. Some, on the other hand, reflected a high degree of awareness of American-Russian cultural differences and of their linguistic limitations as L2 speakers.

**Figure 1. Distribution of opt-out behaviors in public (percentage)**



Significant cross-cultural differences between ASs and RSs were also observed in their interactions with friends. As Figure 2 exhibits, while all RSs addressed a roommate who did not do the dishes, 20% of ASs decided not to say anything in this situation because dirty dishes are not an important reason to confront friends. Similarly, in the situation “Library Fee,” 20% of ASs, as compared to 10% of RSs, decided not to address a friend who did not return a book on time. The explanations of ASs and RSs revealed different cultural values: the speaker’s discomfort in talking about money, even among friends, in American culture, and the speaker’s uneasiness to address money because of friendship with the hearer in Russian culture. Learners’ explanations showed that their perceptions of friendship and money are similar to the behavior of ASs, which indicates transfer from their L1 at the sociopragmatic level.

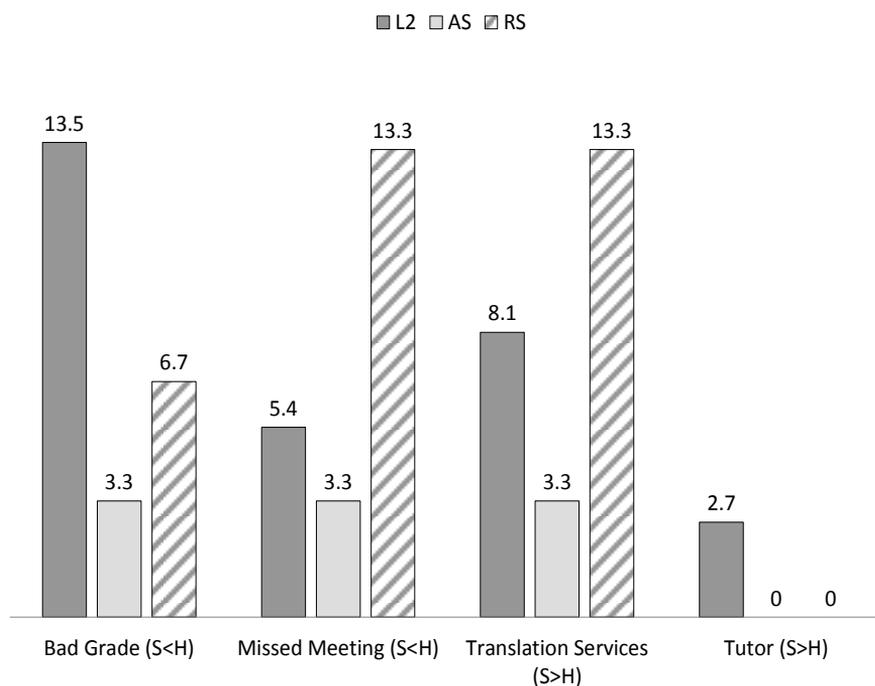
**Figure 2. Distribution of opt-out behaviors with friends (percentage)**



The analysis also revealed important cross-cultural differences regarding the impact of social status on interactions in both cultures. RSs who opted out of the situations “Bad Grade” and “Missed Meeting” explained that they would not negotiate a grade with a professor or ask

about his absence in a meeting due to their upbringing and because they would never question the professor's authority. One participant also said that a professor is kind of *святой* [sacred] and she would not confront him in order to avoid damaging the relationship. ASs and L2 learners gave as explanations their previous bad experiences negotiating a grade and the fact that they themselves are responsible for their grades. The explanations have shown that the hearer's higher status affects the behavior of native speakers in Russian culture who are more reserved and respectful toward professors in Russia, while the hearer's status has less of a constraining effect for both L1 speakers of English in American culture and American L2 learners of Russian.

**Figure 3. Distribution of opt-out behaviors with a person of a different social status (percentage)**



Moreover, the analysis of opt-out behaviors indicated that speakers in both cultures behaved differently toward a hearer of a lower social status (see Figure 3). In the situation "Translation Services," 13.3% of RSs decided not to address a student who did not return his part of a large project on time as compared to 3.3% of ASs. The explanations provided by ASs indicated that they have higher expectations and are

more demanding toward a person whom they hired than RSs. With regard to L2 learners, their explanations were closer to those of their American peers, which was attributed to transfer of L1 sociocultural norms.

### **Analysis of complaints**

The analysis of complaints revealed major cross-cultural differences between ASs and RSs in their interactions with friends, strangers, and people of a higher status, which, in turn affected the L2 learners' pragmatic competence in Russian.

The data has demonstrated that in the situations in which a contract has been broken, such as "Library Fee," "Late for Project," "Paying Rent," "Dirty Dishes," and "Translation Services," speakers in all language groups asked the hearers to take responsibility and to fulfill their obligations. While confronting friends and hired persons, overall, the speakers in all language groups reprimanded and criticized the hearers about the wrongdoing, and they often lectured them about their behavior, particularly in the situations "Late for Project" and "Dirty Dishes."

However, RSs stood out from the other speakers because of a strong tendency to teach the hearer how to behave properly, which reinforces the results obtained in the analysis of opt-out behaviors. RSs reprimanded not only friends but also strangers by lecturing them about how they should behave, being judgmental about their behavior, and giving them advice about how to live, *учить жизни*, [to teach life] as one of the RSs said. They also appeal to the hearer's morality and conscience, which was absent in the data of ASs. The way RSs taught strangers how to behave can be seen in the following example:

(1) RS (Subway): *Ё-моё! Извините, ну пожалуйста: поаккуратней! Я понимаю, очередь, много людей в метро, давка, но надо было бы хотя бы доесть мороженое в метро или не открывать его, и сейчас съесть, когда вы выйдете из метро. Предусмотрите пожалуйста ситуацию на пару ходов вперёд.*

"What the hell! Excuse me but please: (be) more careful. I understand there is a line, many people in the subway, crowds, but (you) should have at least finished eating the ice cream in the

subway or not have opened it and eat it now when you get off the subway. Please foresee the situation by a few moves ahead.”

RSs preferred to directly address the wrongdoer and openly show the negative emotions triggered by the hearer’s behavior. Sometimes, they sounded angry and rude as exemplified by their emotionally loaded vocabulary. They were judgmental about the hearer and rarely justified the hearer’s wrongdoing in public: only three speakers showed understanding toward the woman’s behavior in the subway.

In contrast, ASs and L2 learners hardly ever reprimanded strangers because, as demonstrated in the previous section, they avoid criticism of people they do not know and because they do not want to have public confrontations. Unlike RSs, ASs and L2 learners preferred to express their frustration in exclamations and not to address the wrongdoer in public: only 13.3% of ASs openly addressed the woman about the spilled coffee and only 24.3% of the L2 learners held her responsible for the wrongdoing. The majority of ASs and L2 learners excused the woman’s behavior in the subway, and a few speakers even felt responsible for what had happened because they felt they should have been more careful. This sense of mutual responsibility was absent in the Russian data. The following examples demonstrate the behavior of ASs and L2 learners in public:

(2) AS (Subway): *Hey! Don’t worry about it! Um: not a problem! Let me help you clean it up.*

(3) L2 (Subway): *Ой! Ой! Боже мой! Ну ничего ээ- вы не виноваты. Ой! Надо было наверно быть более осторожно.<sup>9</sup> Ну ничего! Наверно я тоже торопюся. Ну (вздых) всё хорошо.*

“Oh! Oh! My god! Well it’s nothing, um: it’s not your fault. Oh! You perhaps should have been more careful. Well it’s all right. Perhaps I am also in a hurry. Well (sigh) everything is fine.”

It appears that ASs and L2 learners were more linguistically restrained in their reactions in public than RSs. Their strategy selection indicated that they tried to save their own face and that of the hearer, while RSs were less concerned about saving their face.

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<sup>9</sup> Learners’ errors are underlined in this article. The errors in pronunciation, stress and intonation are indicated by capitalized letters.

With regard to learners' behavior in public, in the opinion of two Russian speakers who evaluated the learners' data, learners' reactions were often "too soft," which is unusual for Russian culture. The learners were too apologetic and often justified the hearer's behavior, while, according to the evaluators and to the researcher's own analysis, RSs would either reprimand the wrongdoer in public or would not say anything. Apparently, some L2 learners would pragmatically fail while confronting strangers in Russian culture because RSs would not understand their overly polite behavior in Russian as a complaint.

The situations with friends in which money was involved, "Library Fee" and "Paying Rent," triggered some differences in strategy selection among the speakers across cultures. In general, in the situation, "Library Fee," the speakers in each language group asked the wrongdoer to pay or to help pay the fine and not to do this anymore in the future. However, the speakers in both cultures expressed it differently: while most ASs avoided directly addressing the wrongdoer and instead referred to the fine or the lateness of the book, nearly all RSs directly held the hearer responsible for the wrongdoing. By referring to the wrongdoing, ASs tried to reduce the imposition upon a friend, whereas RSs did not try to minimize or spare the feelings of a friend. The linguistic behavior of the speakers shows their different involvement in face-saving strategies in both cultures.

The learners displayed behavior similar to RSs: nearly all learners held the hearer responsible for not returning the book on time by using the 2nd-person singular. Their linguistic choices may reflect their acculturation process in adopting Russian behavior that could have been triggered by frequent interactions with Russian peers and their host families. However, more research is needed to make generalizations about the acculturation process of L2 learners because in other situations they behaved similarly to ASs by referring to the wrongdoing or using first-person singular to take responsibility for expressing a complaint.

In the situation "Paying Rent," speakers in all language groups usually focused on their urgency to pay rent or on personal financial problems, and they rarely blamed the hearer directly for not returning the money on time. Some speakers hesitantly reminded the hearer about the money because they felt embarrassed or uncomfortable doing so. RSs often referred to the promise that the hearer made to return the

money. The speakers' reactions also reflected some underlying cultural values in both cultures: self-sufficiency in American culture (Hoffman 1989; Wierzbicka 1991) and suffering that the hearer's wrongdoing caused in Russian culture (Kozlova 2004; Larina 2009).

The situations with professors, "Bad Grade" and "Missed Meeting," provided culture-specific characteristics of relationships between professors and students in both cultures. Similar to other studies (e.g., Shardakova 2009), ASs behaved in a friendly and informal manner with the professors by using the informal greeting *hi* while all RSs behaved formally with their professors, which reflects the impact of social power on social interactions in Russian culture.

Many intermediate learners and one advanced learner behaved inappropriately by greeting the professors with *npusem* 'hi' and addressing them with *mbi*, informal you; the former one was accounted to the L2 learners' transfer of sociocultural norms from their L1, while the latter resulted from a lack of a distinction in formal and informal address forms in their L1. In their interactions with a professor who forgot about their meeting, ASs and L2 learners suggested a certain time to meet with him, while only 6.7% of RSs made a suggestion to meet on a certain day. The learners exhibited an inappropriate sociopragmatic behavior because the professor suggests a certain time to meet with a student, and the reverse situation is improper in the Russian academic environment.

The analysis also showed some unexpected findings. Contrary to other studies (e.g., Murphy and Neu 1996), 23.3% of ASs openly criticized their professor and demanded a better grade.<sup>10</sup> In the Russian data, 10% of the speakers criticized the professor. This finding confirms differences in social norms between professors and students in both cultures, which are much more formal in Russian culture than in American culture.

With reference to the L2 learners, overall, they were apologetic and indirect in expressing their disappointment by focusing on the exam

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<sup>10</sup> These results may reflect a growing trend toward emphasis on customer satisfaction rather than learning outcomes alone among American students in the US. The hierarchy of the relationships and the academic freedom in the education system in American culture open some possible areas for further research.

or on the grade, while 16.2% of the learners, most of them at the intermediate level, openly criticized the professor, like in the following example:

(4) L2 (Intermediate): *Николай Борисович! Вы на- вы включил в экзаменные билеты материал, который вы не проходили на:: семинарах а мы не проходили. А потом ты мне:: дал пла- плохую оцЕнку. Это:: но можно это (смех) я думаю, что не считается, если мы не проходили эти темы. Хочу хочу оцЕ- хочу выше оцЕнки.*

“Nikolaj Borisovich! You at- you included in the exam tickets material that you did not cover in:: seminars and we did not cover. And later you me:: gave a ba- bad grade. This:: but can this (laugh) I think that (this) does not count if we did not cover these topics. (I) want want gra- (I) want a higher grade.”

Such an inappropriate sociolinguistic behavior could be perceived as poor mannered in Russian culture, and, consequently, could prevent the learners from any further negotiations about improving their grade and could even lead to a conflict with a professor in the future. Learners at both proficiency levels were also very verbose and lengthy in their explanations, which demonstrated their uncertainty about how to negotiate a problem with a professor in Russian culture. Unlike other studies that attributed learners’ wordiness to their linguistic shortcomings (Kraft and Geluykens 2002) and pragmatic competence (Shardakova 2009), the present study to some degree attributed the learners’ verbosity to their linguistic limitations. However, this study primarily attributed learners’ verbosity to their involvement in face-saving strategies,<sup>11</sup> which they employed to minimize imposition upon the hearer.

The analysis also indicated culture-specific differences among ASs, RSs, and learners in their expression of gratitude. ASs and L2 learners expressed their gratitude toward the hearer, regardless of the fact that the hearer had let them down. They used gratitude as a face-saving strategy to minimize the offense in a complaint situation. In contrast, RSs showed their gratitude only in interactions with professors,

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<sup>11</sup> Statistical analyses showed that advanced learners were more verbose than intermediate learners based on their use of words ( $p = .458$ ) and strategies ( $p = .052$ ).

which is in line with other studies (cf. Larina 2009) that indicated that RSs express gratitude for something that has already been done in their favor and not just to demonstrate politeness, unless speakers interact with the hearer in formal settings.

### **Conclusions**

The results of the study show major differences between ASs and RSs in their perception of social distance (communication with friends and strangers) and social power (communication with an authority figure), as well as cross-cultural differences in speakers' attitude toward friendship and money (cf. Kartalova 1996). It was also found that, to some degree, the situation itself elicited similarities in the ways that the speakers in all language groups justified their complaints, while sociocultural values in American and Russian cultures caused significant differences in the speakers' strategy selection and linguistic choices in relation to politeness.

The results demonstrate that RSs show a tendency to teach (in the sense of *воспитывать* [to educate]) friends and strangers how to behave properly, give them advice, and openly judge them, and these results are in line with other studies (e.g., Bergelson 2003; Larina 2009). RSs preferred to directly address the hearer about the wrongdoing unless interacting with a person of a higher social status (Wierzbicka 1991; Larina 2009; Ogiermann 2009). The behavior of RSs in public may appear rude to ASs. However, as some scholars point out, the interactions with strangers imply less social distance in Russian culture, which Ogiermann (2009) put in the following way: "Apparently, the high social distance among strangers in Poland and Russia is quickly overcome when people become involved in a common situation – even if it takes a form of an offence" (228). These aspects of Russian culture were not present in the data of ASs. Overall, ASs were indirect, apologetic, and grateful toward the interlocutor in order to minimize the offense. They used these face-saving strategies in an effort to respect the interlocutor's private space and independence and to avoid personal judgments. Unlike RSs, their interactions with professors indicated that the hearer's higher status did not have a significant effect on their linguistic choices.

With regard to L2 learners, their strategy selection and linguistic choices were similar to those of ASs, which was attributed to transfer of their L1 and C1. Overall, learners preferred indirectness because they associated it with polite behavior, and they used various strategies to mitigate the offense, such as gratitude, apology, and justification and excuse of the hearer's behavior. They tried to reduce the imposition upon the hearer by using these face-saving strategies, which RSs rarely used. It appears that most learners negotiated a problem according to sociocultural norms and politeness rules that they knew from their L1 and C1. Thus, they had difficulties adjusting their responses to the parameters of social distance and social power in Russian culture. In some situations, particularly in public and sometimes with an authority figure, their inappropriate sociopragmatic behavior could prevent them from effective negotiations with Russian native speakers. However, advanced learners more successfully negotiated problems because they had better control over the linguistic devices they used to address the wrongdoer and to mitigate the offense than intermediate learners.

The findings indicate that learners at both proficiency levels, but in particular intermediate learners, would greatly benefit from classroom activities in which speakers of different social distance and status negotiate a problem that involves money, time, friendship, and breaking rules. Learners need to master the linguistic reservoir that native speakers use in various sociocultural contexts, for example, the use of (in)formal personal pronouns and hearer-oriented strategies in relation to politeness and sociocultural values, as compared to English norms (cf. Frank 2010).

Classroom activities like these would help learners to improve their pragmalinguistic competence and inform them about sociopragmatic rules in the target language so that they better understand the impact of social distance and social power on interactions in Russian culture. As some scholars point out (Thomas 1983; Shardakova 2009), it may be difficult to teach sociopragmatic rules in the L2 classroom because learners' sociopragmatic choices stem from their cultural background, and they may decide that adopting Russian cultural behavior violates their own cultural identity. Despite this fact, learners need to be made aware of sociocultural norms encoded in the target language so they can successfully communicate with native

speakers as well as be better prepared for daily encounters during their study abroad program.

### Appendix. Scenarios for the DCQ

If you decided not to say anything, please explain why.

Description of the scenarios	Title of the scenario
Ann, your friend, borrowed a library book from you that was checked out in your name. She returns it to you late, and now you have to pay the fine in the library. You say to her:	Library Fine
You have been working together with your friend Boris on a project for your statistics class that is due tomorrow. Each time, your friend comes to the meeting late. Today, you have been waiting for him for over 30 minutes. Now, in order to finish it, you will be late for your evening part-time job. Finally, he is there. You see him and say:	Late for Project
You lent your friend money that she was supposed to return at the beginning of this month. It is already the end of the month, and Sarah has not returned the money yet. You need your money back because you need to pay the rent for your apartment. You see her and say:	Paying Rent
You have already talked a few times to Andrew, your friend and roommate, about taking care of the kitchen that you share with him in the dormitory apartment. Today, he again left a pile of dirty dishes in the sink although it was his turn to take care of the kitchen. You see Andrew and say:	Dirty Dishes
You have a new neighbor next door in the dormitory. You do not know him yet. Since he moved in five days ago, he has been listening to loud music every night. You already overslept once, and you were late for work. Today, you cannot sleep because the music is loud again. It is already midnight, and you have a terrible headache. You go to your neighbor and say:	Loud Music

<p>It is Christmas time. You are in a grocery store waiting in a line for over 30 minutes. A woman cuts in line in front of you although she clearly saw you. You say to her:</p>	<p>Cutting Line</p>
<p>You are in a taxi driving from the airport to your hotel. You do not know the city, but, based on the information from the hotel receptionist, the taxi would cost you no more than 30 dollars. When you arrive at the hotel, the taxi driver asks you for almost 70 dollars. You say to him:</p>	<p>Taxi Fee</p>
<p>In one hour, you are having a job interview. Now, you are entering the subway station. At that moment, a woman also rushes to the entrance and spills coffee on your new white shirt. You say to her:</p>	<p>Subway</p>
<p>Your English professor included material on the final oral exam that was not covered in the class, and, as a result, you got a low grade on the exam, which caused you to receive a "C" instead of a "B" as a final grade. You are not satisfied with your grade, and you believe that you deserve a better one. You are coming to the professor during his office hours and you say to him:</p>	<p>Bad Grade</p>
<p>Your professor agreed to meet you 30 minutes before the class starts in order to discuss some preliminary ideas about your master's thesis. You were waiting for him, but, unfortunately, he did not come. After class, you approach your professor and say:</p>	<p>Missed Meeting</p>
<p>You provide translation services to finance your studies at the university. This month, you hired Vania, another student, because you got a large project to translate. Unfortunately, Vania did not return his part of the translation to you on time. As a result, you were not able to finish the project on time. The client got angry with you, and has decided not to use your services anymore. You see Vania and you say:</p>	<p>Translation Services</p>
<p>You hired a tutor to help you with mathematics. He knows the subject very well, but he covers the material too fast. You already asked him to do less during each meeting. Today, you again do not understand his explanation because of the amount of material covered. You say to him:</p>	<p>Tutor</p>

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