Research Issues and Language Program Direction

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Editor

5

6

APPLICATIONS OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL RESEARCH TO THE FRENCH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Introduction

All foreign language teachers are faced with the fact that it is virtually impossible to present the entire target language (TL) to their students. No matter how many hours a language class meets each week, there are only so many aspects of the TL that a teacher has the time to foreground. Therefore, no matter what acquisitional theory or theories inform one's teaching methodology, all language teachers serve as TL filters for their language students, first, by deciding which elements to include and which to exclude in their class and, second, by deciding how to contextualize the elements that they have chosen to include in their class. This decision-making process, then, is the foundation upon which foreign language textbooks, programs, and even specific classes are built. How are these decisions of inclusion and contextualization typically made? And more importantly, how should they be made? This article will argue the importance of sociolinguistic and sociocultural research in this decision-making process. It will be demonstrated that such empirical research can help us to understand the many ways in which language form, function, and social use are interconnected and, in so doing, help us to determine which types of forms and structures to include in a language class and how best to contextualize them.

The Importance of Sociolinguistic Research to Language Teaching

When we interact with another person, our ability to appropriately convey our intentions and understand the intentions of the other depends, in large part, on the degree to which we both share the same expectations with respect to how that communicative act will unfold. Which linguistic forms will one hear? How are different expressions to be interpreted in a particular exchange? What constitutes conventional behavior (standardized form-function relationships in a given context), and what might fall outside of the range of conventional behavior and be subject to marked (negatively or positively) social evaluation? In order to acquire a foreign language, students must understand that language is inextricably bound to context, that there are conventional associations between linguistic forms, functions, and genres that underlie all of our communicative exchanges. In order to do this, language teachers must:

1. highlight for students patterns of target language use, prioritizing structures by their frequency and productivity in the language and linking structures with particular functions and social contexts;

2. help students to develop hypothesis-formation skills (regarding target language structures and their functions) that will allow them to continue learning beyond the language classroom; and

3. show students the importance of examining their own language norms in order to understand how to go beyond their native language and culture and acquire new norms of communication.

But how can a language teacher or textbook author achieve these goals? Certainly using one's intuitions about the structural nature of the target language, its use in different social contexts, and the foreign language acquisition process is one possible route to take. Whether a native or non-native speaker, each language teacher comes to the classroom with invaluable personal experiences that can be used to help students to discover patterns of form and contextualized use. Unfortunately, numerous research studies have demonstrated that intuitions about language use are often far removed from actual language use (Kennedy 1987; Labov 1972;

Roulet 1974). And even if one's intuitions about actual language use were accurate, there is not one language teacher or team of textbook authors who has complete knowledge of all of the structural, functional, and social patterns of the TL. From the perspective of an individual tree or even clump of trees, it is impossible to see the nature of the forest. In order to see the nature of the forest, one needs to examine many individual trees and the relationships between and among individual trees and clumps of trees. It is here that empirical research is invaluable.

In order to see general patterns of linguistic structure and contextualized TL use, one must analyze the TL as it is used by native speakers in a wide variety of contexts. Even if one's goal is to focus on only the "standard language," the variety of spoken and written genres that must be considered is noteworthy. If one looks at the written language—literary works, certain types of popular non-literary works, journalistic speech, formal correspondence, folklore and fairy tales, travel guides—all are genres that one could consider representative of the "standard language." As for the spoken language, formal interviews and presentations, news broadcasts, conversations among educated native speakers in a semi-formal context, and commonly occurring speech acts (for example, greetings, complimenting, inviting norms) could also all be considered representative of the "standard language." Consequently, in order to understand which structures are most frequent and most productive in the TL and how these structures are linked to particular functions and discourse contexts, one would need to both quantitatively and qualitatively analyze the language used in these spoken and written genres.

Quantitative studies of language within and across genres and in various interactive speech contexts have increased dramatically over the past several years, aided more recently by technological advancements in taping procedures and computerized data manipulation programs as well as by theoretical advances in examining discourse in general and speech acts in particular. This article will examine the results of some of these sociolinguistic and sociocultural research studies and will demonstrate why such research is essential to consider when designing foreign language teaching materials. The focus here will be on studies conducted on French, although, in some cases, similar work has been done on other languages (for example, English and Hebrew: Blum-Kulka 1983; Spanish: Glisan and Drescher 1993).

Linking Form, Function, and Context in French

A recent study (Di Vito 1997) of five grammatical structures in a large spoken and written French database indicates numerous form-function-genre patterns that have clear implications for French language teaching. The subjunctive, relative constructions, the narrative past tenses (*passé composé*, *imparfait*, and *passé simple*), interrogative structures, and object pronouns were examined in a corpus of 53,265 independent, subordinate, and relative clauses. The written corpus included eighteenth-twentieth century literary works, folklore and fairy tales, detective novels, travel guides, official correspondence, and magazines. The spoken corpus included academic conferences, news broadcasts, televised interviews, and conversations. A summary of the patterns found for each structure in the spoken and written database as well as their relevance for French language teaching will be outlined in the following section.

The Subjunctive

What French language teacher has not spent long hours deciding how to present the forms and uses of the subjunctive? Most intermediate-level, and even some beginning-level, textbooks devote numerous pages to the many irregular subjunctive verb forms and provide long lists of contexts in which the subjunctive may be used. These lists are typically followed by elaborate drill and practice–type exercises whose goal is to help students assimilate these forms and contexts. But are all of these subjunctive forms and contexts of use equally frequent in native speaker discourse? To what extent does the traditional exhaustive presentation of the many subjunctive forms, tenses, and usage categories help students to grasp contemporary native speaker use of the subjunctive?

Results of the quantitative study of 53,265-clause database clearly indicate that not all subjunctive forms or contexts are equally common in the spoken and written French database. First, it should be noted that only 1% of all spoken clauses and only 2% of all written clauses in this large database contain examples of marked subjunctive forms. (For many verb types, the subjunctive and indicative verb forms are the same. For example, the first-person subjunctive forms [*je, tu, il*] and third-person plural subjunctive form [*ils*] of -*er* verbs are the same as the corresponding indicative forms.) In addition, in the spoken language, there are only four marked subjunctive forms used with any notable frequency: /swa/ (*être*),

/pɥis/ (*pouvoir*), /fas/ (*faire*), and /E/ (*avoir*). In both the spoken and the written language, the first and third person singular and third person plural forms (*je, il,* and *ils*) make up 90% of all subjunctive forms. And in both modes, the present subjunctive predominates. More than 90% of all subjunctives in the spoken language and a great majority of all subjunctives in magazines, plays, and official correspondence are in the present subjunctive. In literary prose, on the other hand, the imperfect subjunctive is commonplace. In the twentieth-century texts examined, present tense subjunctives account for 43% of all subjunctive forms and imperfect subjunctive forms account for a surprising 40% of all subjunctive forms.

These data clearly demonstrate the need to focus on particular forms and particular tenses of the subjunctive when building spoken or written proficiency in French. While certainly the entire subjunctive system could be presented to students, the overwhelming frequency of the forms /E/, /swa/, /pɥis/, and /fas/ in the spoken language suggests that aural and oral exercises should primarily highlight these forms. On the other hand, the common use of both present and past subjunctive forms across written language contexts justifies recognition exercises for both of these tenses. In addition, the high percentage of imperfect subjunctive forms in contemporary literary prose suggests that exercises should be designed to help students recognize imperfect subjunctive forms and their meanings as soon as tne reading of literary prose is introduced in the curriculum.

While understanding which subjunctive tenses and verb forms should be highlighted for spoken and written French will surely make class time more efficient and effective, perhaps the most time-consuming and complicated part of presenting the subjunctive to students is dealing with the many contexts for its use and the semantic differences between the subjunctive and the indicative in contexts where both are possible. With respect to the issue of semantic nuancing through use of the subjunctive, analysis of the 53,265-clause database shows that such cases are virtually non-existent in actual French usage. For example, in all instances with *croire, penser, espérer,* and *trouver* in the independent clause, use of the subjunctive in the dependent clause was entirely linked to grammatical factors:

—was the sentence a VS interrogative or not?
—was the verb in the independent clause accompanied by a negative particle or not?

—was the verb in the dependent clause in the past or not?

In other words, particular linguistic contexts seem to trigger use of the subjunctive. So although both modes may be possible in a specific context, native use indicates that speakers tend to follow certain patterns of use that are determined by linguistic or lexical cues. For example, the structures that most frequently trigger subjunctive use in both the spoken and the written language are:

1. the verbs *falloir que, vouloir que, aimer que,* and "to be" + adj./adv./noun of opinion *que;* and

2. the conjunctions *pour que, sans que, avant que,* and *bien que.*

Therefore, instead of treating all possible subjunctive contexts as equally important, only these few structures frequent in both the spoken and the written language should be emphasized when presenting the general use of the subjunctive in French language classes. Classes focusing on either reading or formal spoken proficiency should include additional subjunctive contexts. For example, subjunctive contexts common only in the written language include the conjunctions *afin que, pourvu que, quoique, jusqu'à ce que, à moins que,* and *soit que.* Consequently, these contexts should be highlighted in classes focusing on the written language. On the other hand, subjunctive contexts prevalent in the spoken language include the conjunctions *le fait que* and *de/en sorte que,* as well as a few structurally simple constructions, such as the expression *que se soit* typically used to present hypothetical alternatives. Therefore, classes highlighting the development of speaking skills should include these contexts for subjunctive use. Even with these additional subjunctive triggers, however, it is clear that there are only a handful of subjunctive forms and contexts frequent in the spoken language. This suggests, supporting research by Lac (1982), Laurier (1989), and Poplack (1990), that the spoken subjunctive is more a syntactic or stylistic device than a productive grammatical structure with semantic meaning. At the very least, these data show that knowledge of a few subjunctive triggers and marked forms is all that is needed for students to demonstrate spoken subjunctive use similar to that of highly educated and respected native French speakers.

Although there are many other contexts in which use of the subjunctive is possible (e.g., after certain types of indefinite expressions and relative expressions), most of these other subjunctive contexts are seen in the database to be infrequent and restricted to particular types of written

discourse. The usefulness of their systematic treatment in a general French language class is, therefore, questionable.

Relative Constructions

The numerous formation and usage rules of relative constructions are another area of the French language to which teachers often devote enormous amounts of classroom time. But which of the many relative pronoun forms do native speakers commonly use? Are any of these forms associated with particular verbs, grammatical structures, or language functions?

In Di Vito's (1997) database, 21% of all spoken clauses are relative constructions, which suggests their importance at all levels of French language study. But not all relative constructions are frequent in the database. In both the spoken and written language, *qui* and *qu(e)* are by far the most commonly used relative pronouns. Together with *ce qui* and *ce qu(e)* they account for approximately 75% of all relative pronouns in the written language and more than 80% of all relative pronouns in the spoken language. In many instances, these relatives are found in presentative constructions (such as *c'est X qui* + verb) whose primary function is to highlight information. Not surprisingly, such constructions are particularly common in the spoken language and in theater texts. These data, thus, suggest that:

1. subject and direct object relative clauses should be emphasized in the French language class over other relative clause types; and

2. students should see that these relative pronouns are commonly used in presentative constructions that function to highlight information, such as the following:

   C'est lui qui a dit cela. (He's the one who said that.)
   C'est ma sœur que tu as vue hier. (My sister's the one you saw yesterday.)

Relative constructions that are fairly infrequent in both the spoken and the written language include *dont, ce dont* (virtually non-existent), and relatives following prepositions. When found, these relative pronouns are, typically, in particular expressions, such as *la raison pour laquelle, la situation dans laquelle,* and *la façon dont,* or are the object of a very common verbal expression, such as *parler de.* Finally, the relative *où* is seen in the data to be quite frequent, and is often used in lieu of a more complicated prepositional relative option.

It follows from these data, therefore, that presenting and drilling the vast array of relative pronoun forms is not only an inefficient use of classroom time but poorly reflects native speaker use of relative constructions. Instead, French native speech patterns suggest that classroom emphasis on a select number of relative pronouns (*qui, ce qui, que, à ce qu[e]*, and *où*) and expressions (*la raison pour laquelle, la façon dont, dont + parler*) would be a more appropriate way of providing students with the wherewithal to produce and understand the great majority of relative constructions common in the spoken and written language.

Interrogative Structures

Another difficult decision facing French language teachers is how to present and contextualize the three primary ways to form questions in French [SV = Subject/Verb; VS = Verb/Subject]:

(SV)? *Tu viens avec nous?* (Are you coming with us?)

(VS)?*Quelle est la date aujourd'hui?* (What's the date today?)

Est-ce que (SV)? *Qu'est-ce que tu veux?* (What do you want?)

For example, teachers must decide whether to present these structures as interchangeable or as linked to particular types of discourse. Numerous studies have shown that the SV? pattern predominates in everyday, spoken French (Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean 1987; Chevalier 1969; Désirat and Hordé 1988; Fox 1991; Gadet 1989; Grundstrom and Léon 1973; Joseph 1988; Lightbown and d'Anglejan 1985; Maury 1973; Price 1971; etc.). However, does this generalization hold true for the more formal spoken registers or for any of the written registers? And what can one say about the difference in use between SV? and *Est-ce que* SV? Again, empirical research can shed much light on these questions.

The analysis of the spoken and written interrogatives found in the 53,265-clause database indicates that SV? syntax predominates in all spoken registers, with VS? frequent only in planned, non-interactive spoken discourse, such as academic conferences (VS? = 38% of all such interrogatives) and news broadcasts (VS? = 44% of all such interrogatives). Therefore, these data strongly support an emphasis on SV? interrogative syntax in communicatively-oriented French language classes. A great number of the examples of VS? syntax found in the spoken data are either rhetorical questions, simple *quel* +V +S constructions, or partial questions (i.e., non-yes/no questions) with pronominal subjects. Therefore, exercises

on VS? syntax in the spoken language should focus primarily on such constructions and functions, with yes/no questions and most non-rhetorical questions presented as typically formed using SV? syntax.

Besides being the norm in the spoken language, SV? syntax is also quite common in contemporary written texts containing abundant dialogue (such as twentieth-century theater, detective novels, and folklore and fairy tales). In all other written genres, however, VS? is the clear norm. Consequently, dialogue portions of several contemporary genres would be appropriate as written models of SV? interrogative syntax. However, once students begin to read more narrative prose and non-interactive written genres, genres that contain a good deal of VS? syntax, the introduction of VS? interrogative syntax in the classroom is essential.

What can be said about the difference between SV? and *Est-ce que* SV? interrogative syntax? Should these be presented as interchangeable or as linked with specific types of structures and discourse functions? In the 53,265-clause database, the use of these structures differs in several significant ways. First, *Est-ce que* SV? is virtually non-existent in written French, but is common in particular contexts in the spoken language. For example, it is the form most likely to be used when the interrogative is out of direct object position, especially with common fixed expressions such as *Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire?* and *Qu'est-ce que c'est?* Outside of such expressions, its major functions appear to be to signal the interrogative marking of a question that is embedded in a long stretch of discourse, that is, as a device to highlight hypothetical questions, or perhaps to buy time.[1] Consequently, such a structure could be presented to students as a strategy to buy time as they are formulating their discourse or as a interrogative marker of emphasis in class presentations or exposés.

Passé composé, imparfait, passé simple

Perhaps the single most difficult area of French grammar for students to acquire is past narration, in particular, the various uses of the *passé composé* (PC), *imparfait* (IMP), and *passé simple* (PS). Presentation of these verbal forms in textbooks usually involves giving students a list of adverbial triggers for either the PC or the IMP and then a variety of general guidelines which are supposed to serve as a way of assessing the aspectual nature of the event or condition depicted in a particular sentence (e.g., Is the action completed or ongoing?). Unfortunately, such guidelines (especially when used at the sentence level) have been shown to be oftentimes

contradictory, inaccurate, or so vague as to be virtually useless as a way of discerning which verbal form would be more appropriate in a given context (Abrate 1983; Bourgeacq 1969; Conner 1992; Cox 1994; Dansereau 1987; Stavinohová 1978). If these pedagogical strategies have proven to be less than successful in the foreign language classroom or, even worse, inaccurate representations of the French language, what strategies would be better? The PS, for example, is usually characterized in broad terms by language textbooks as a "literary tense" and introduced at the more advanced language levels. However, where is the PS really used and how does it relate to the PC and IMP? Again, empirical research can offer some direction to the textbook author and language teacher in deciding how to present the use of these three past tenses.

In the 53,265-clause database, there are no clear-cut lexical triggers for use of either the IMP or the PC. It is true that one can see certain tendencies to use the IMP with the verbs *être* and *avoir* and with the adverbs *souvent* and *toujours* in the interactive spoken and written genres (conversations, interviews, theater pieces). Nevertheless, these tendencies can hardly be viewed as hard and fast rules. Instead, the only way to accurately characterize past tense use is by considering the larger discourse context. The PC is consistently used to foreground events, to promote verbs to the status of "event," and in so doing, to provide the chronological backbone to a story. On the other hand, the IMP is consistently used as a backgrounding technique, that is, to elaborate or flesh out various features of the foregrounded events. Thus, while formation of the PC and IMP can certainly be dealt with separately, only by students discovering how the PC and IMP work together can they understand the important function each tense has in the recounting of a past narrative. Blyth (1997) gives several valuable suggestions for training TAs to teach aspect, essential to the presentation of the IMP and PC in French. When treating the PC and the IMP at the intermediate or the advanced level, a useful technique in displaying the versatility of the IMP as a backgrounding device would be to provide students with embedded narratives found within novels. When characters in novels become lost in reverie, or when the author wants to recount a side narrative, the IMP is often used to "freeze" the entire reverie sequence or side narrative within the unfolding larger narrative. Thus, while certainly these sequences represent a chronological ordering of events, the use of the IMP allows the reader to understand these embedded narratives as background to the main storyline.

With respect to the use of the PS, the database analysis also indicates that this tense is fairly common, not just in literary prose, but also in other non-literary written genres such as detective novels, folklore, and fairy tales. The genres in which the PS appears to be particularly frequent are those in which the fictionalization of characters or the psychological distancing of the author from the events or characters of his or her story is evident. Perhaps this is why the PS is so infrequent in the spoken genres, where presumably speakers personally identify with what they say, and why the PS is typically infrequent in the dialogue portions of literary theater and prose. As for when to introduce the PS in a French language class, these data suggest that it is relevant in any class that focuses on the reading of narrative prose, including non-literary texts. Consequently, some knowledge of the PS is clearly necessary for students at the intermediate-level of study and, arguably, even before the end of the beginning-level sequence. While one could probably avoid the PS by either inventing written texts or by avoiding texts with PS forms, a more honest approach to the French language is to admit that many texts in common, everyday genres (such as magazines, popular novels, and fairy tales) contain not just PC and IMP forms but also PS forms, and to provide students with some guidance in recognizing PS forms as soon as they begin to read written prose.

Object Pronouns

Finally, the many series of French object pronouns (reflexive, direct, indirect, disjunctive, *y*, and *en*) also present a particular challenge to the language teacher. Clearly there is not enough time in the language classroom to expect students to completely master all of the different possible combinations of single and double object pronouns and their accompanying verbal or prepositional expressions. Emphasis should be placed on the most common forms in their most common contexts of use. But which are the most commonly used pronouns and in which linguistic and discourse contexts are they typically found?

Reflexive Pronouns

In the Di Vito (1997) database, reflexive pronouns account for over a quarter of all object pronouns in both the spoken and written texts. Within the reflexive pronoun series, *se/s'* is by far the most common pronoun, accounting for virtually all of the reflexive pronouns in several of the

non-interactive genres, such as travel guides, magazines, and news broad-casts. In the interactive genres (especially conversations and interviews), the reflexive pronoun *me/m'* is also extremely common, in stark contrast to the very low frequency of the third person plural form *nous*, throughout the database. Although most textbooks first introduce reflexive pronouns in the context of one's daily routine, no doubt because of the number of reflexive verbs used in this context (for example, *se réveiller, se lever, s'habiller, se brosser les dents, se laver, se peigner, se déshabiller, se coucher*), the most fre-quent reflexive verb in the conversational data is the polyvalent *se faire* (e.g., *se faire une idée, se faire des amis, se faire INF [doubler, avoir]*). Other common verb + reflexive pronoun examples include *s'agir* (to be about), *se passer* (to happen, to take place), *se trouver* (to be), *se dire* (to say to oneself), *se demander* (to wonder, to ask oneself), and *s'appeler* (to be called), all ex-pressions used in a wide variety of discourse contexts. There are very few double object constructions; of those few, the great majority are fairly fixed expressions, such as *il y en a* and *s'en aller*. Consequently, while reflexives in one's daily routine might still be a satisfactory way to demonstrate one type of reflexive construction, outside of the numerous semantic meanings of *se faire*, many of the most useful reflexive constructions for everyday discourse seem to be those best learned as lexical items.

Direct Object Pronouns

One-third of all direct object pronouns, also quite common throughout the database, are found with the verbs *faire, dire, être*, and *savoir*. It is important to note here that the generic third person singular pronoun *le/l'* is quite frequently paired with the verb *faire*, and that it is the only direct object pronoun form used with the verbs *dire, être*, and *savoir*. An-other commonly found direct object pronoun (especially in spoken dis-course) is *me/m'*, which is frequently paired with the verbs *intéresser* and *frapper* and used in presentative constructions, such as: *Moi, ce qui m'in-téresse beaucoup, c'est...* These native speaker patterns have clear pedagog-ical implications. While many verbs in French are transitive, only a fairly small number of them are commonly used by native speakers with direct object pronouns in this large spoken and written corpus. In addition, these verbs are often paired with particular direct object pronouns as well as with specific communicative functions. Clearly, such pairings should be highlighted:

le/l' with the verbs *faire, dire, être,* and *savoir;*

me/m' with the verbs *intéresser* and *frapper,* especially in presentative expressions.

Indirect Object Pronouns

As with direct object pronouns, the first person form is a common indirect object (IO) pronoun in interactive discourse, particularly with verbs connoting personal feeling such as *plaire, faire envie/plaisir, manquer,* and *sembler.* Together with the verbs *dire, donner,* and *demander,* these few verbs account for approximately 50% of all those verbs with which indirect object pronouns are found in the database. Consequently, classroom time spent on indirect object pronouns should focus on these few verbs. Double object constructions involving either direct or indirect object pronouns are rare in both the spoken and written database. The most common double object pronoun construction in the database involving these object pronouns is the expression IO pronoun + *le* + *dire* (*comme je vous le disais..., je vous le dis, il me l'a dit*). Consequently, classroom exercises stressing double object pronouns should be limited to such contexts.

Disjunctive Pronouns

Given the importance of disjunctive pronouns as a way of highlighting information in French (Calvé 1985; Joseph 1988), it is perhaps not surprising that such pronouns are very common as such devices in the interactive discourse types in the database (especially conversations, interviews, and plays):

1. Left dislocation: *Moi, j'aime pas tellement les bûches.*
   (Conversations: Claude)
   Me, I don't particularly like Christmas (cake) logs.

2. Right dislocation: *Que racontes-tu, toi?*
   (Twentieth-Century Theater: Giraudoux)
   What are you saying, you?

3. *Ce* + *être* + relative clause: *C'est moi qui vais vous en poser une.*
   (Conferences: Delart)
   I'm going to ask you one (question).

In fact, over half of all disjunctive pronouns in interactive discourse function as highlighting devices in such structures. This, then, is clearly one function of disjunctive pronouns that should be included in the French language classroom. While the use of disjunctive pronouns after prepositions (for example, *avec lui, pour moi, sans eux*) or following *que/qu'* in comparative or restrictive expressions (for example, *il est plus agile que moi*) are important structural rules for students to acquire, their functional role in interactive communication is perhaps the most important feature of disjunctive pronouns for students to understand and assimilate.

The Object Pronoun *y*

With respect to the object pronoun *y*, its most frequent context of use is in the expression *il y a*. In fact, in the spoken language, 93% of all occurrences of *y* are found in this one expression. Of course, *y* is used to refer to places or as the inanimate object of verb + *à* expressions. It is interesting to note, however, that native speakers in the database do not employ such expressions often. Only 4% of all examples of *y* refer to places and only 3% are objects of verb + *à* constructions in the spoken database (the only frequent expressions are *répondre à, participer à,* and *croire à*). These data suggest that the aural/oral focus in French language classrooms should primarily be on the expression *il y avoir*, with perhaps some minor emphasis on *y* as a place referent or as the object of the verbs *répondre à, participer à,* and *croire à*. In the written language however, the pronoun *y* is often found to refer to places (26% of all examples of *y*) and to the objects of a fairly wide variety of verbs of mental attitude such as *y croire, y tenir, y comprendre, y songer,* and *y penser* (14% of all examples of *y*). When designing written contextualization exercises for *y*, therefore, native speaker usage supports the presentation of a wider variety of structural contexts.

The Object Pronoun *en*

Although *en* has several discourse functions, its most common use throughout the spoken and written database is with certain types of verbs:

1. special *avoir* expressions: *avoir besoin, l'air, marre, envie, ras-le-bol*;
2. the verbs *parler* and *faire*; and
3. a fairly wide variety of pronominal expressions (*s'en faire, s'en aller, s'en ficher, s'en faire, s'en douter, s'en souvenir, s'en rendre compte, s'en moquer*).

84

In addition, *en* is frequently used by native speakers in:

4. modified intransitives signifying "to be" (such as *en suis content*); and

5. quantified expressions (such as *en ai trois*).

These, then, are the contexts that should be highlighted in French language classes. As for the use of *en* in double object constructions, it is indeed common in pronominal expressions (which account for almost half of the contexts) and in the expression *il y en a* (which accounts for almost half of the remaining contexts). Again, these data should direct the types of double object exercises presented to students. Rather than drilling the numerous possible combinations of double object pronoun constructions, students should first become comfortable with these few commonly used expressions.

A Cross-Cultural Approach to Presenting Speech Acts

In addition to knowing the general frequency and specific discourse functions of different grammatical structures, language students need to understand the conventional speech act norms of the target language they are studying. Most language teachers now believe that foreign language acquisition involves mastering not just a set of grammatical rules but also the social rules of appropriate language use. Consequently, interactive activities, particularly those highlighting common speech acts (e.g., complimenting, greeting, making excuses), are now a feature of most contemporary language textbooks. Given the emphasis placed on such exercises, one is tempted to view almost any interactive, engaging exercise involving speech acts as inherently useful in a language classroom. But is an activity worthwhile solely because it is focused on a speech act and is interactive and engaging?

Language textbooks tend to present speech acts as primarily lexical exercises. Typically students are given a list of expressions associated with a particular speech act and then asked to acquire the speech act by practicing these expressions in role plays. This approach, of course, assumes that speech acts play out in similar ways across cultures. However, numerous research studies have demonstrated that what constitutes an apology, a request, or an invitation in one culture is not always recognized as such in another. In other words, what is perceived as an appropriate apology in one culture may be perceived as inappropriate in another.

Research has suggested that language learners do not naturally acquire the speech act norms of a foreign language, but rather transfer their own cultural norms, including values and meanings (Blum-Kulka 1982). Unfortunately, this transfer of speech act norms has also been shown to cause cross-cultural communication breakdown (Fraser, Rintell, and Walters 1980; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1994; Thomas 1983). These cross-cultural studies strongly suggest the need to revise the way in which language teachers present speech acts to their students. By allowing students to assume that the acquisition of speech acts in a foreign language is merely a lexical issue, we may be setting them up for communicative and, even worse, social failure. How can one create and maintain affective bonds with another if the two participants are operating under different notions of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior? In this section, the discussion focuses on recent cross-cultural speech act research: extending and responding to invitations, offers, and requests from French and American perspectives. Some of the many ways in which French and Americans may be miscommunicating when involved in these speech acts will be described, and new types of pedagogical exercises to help teachers better deal with cross-cultural issues will be proposed.

Directness vs. Indirectness as a Cultural Norm in Certain Speech Acts

Given the numerous studies on the American tendency toward *indirectness* in extending and responding to invitations, requests, and apologies (Blum-Kulka 1982, 1983; Ohlstain and Blum Kulka 1984; Ohlstain and Cohen 1989; Wolfson 1981; Wolfson, D'Amico-Reisner, and Huber 1983) and the French tendency toward *directness* (Geis and Harlow 1996) in requests, there is reason to hypothesize that certain communication problems between the French and Americans and certain negative cultural stereotypes that some French and Americans have of each other are due to differing uses of directness and indirectness in the two cultures. In order to test these hypotheses, my colleagues[2] and I decided to collect a number of French sequences of invitations, self-invitations (requests), and offers, and then to compare French and American responses to them. For each exchange that implied or directly stated an invitation, request or offer, or a response to an invitation, request or offer, we developed a question designed to uncover culture-bound attitudes and behavioral tendencies. For example, in the sequence where one character responds to an invitation

with *Ah samedi soir je ne sais pas si je serai libre* (Oh Saturday night, I don't know if I'll be free), the informants were asked to rate the extent to which the response should be interpreted as an implicit refusal to the invitation (with 1 indicating that the response is an implicit refusal and 10 indicating that the response is to be interpreted at face value) and then to explain their answer. Sequences with more than one key exchange were spread over several pages in order to oblige informants to evaluate the exchanges as they unfolded in the conversation (i.e., without knowing what dialogue came next). In this way, they were able to evaluate the interaction in much the same way as we do in real conversations—as it unfolds. There were four groups of informants: French natives (N = 15; 6 male, 9 female; age = 25–65 years), American teachers of French (N = 8; 5 male, 3 female; age = 25–35 years; all had lived in France at least one year), and two groups of American students: one a high-intermediate French class (N = 19; 4 male, 15 female; age = 17–21 years) and one a low-intermediate French class (N = 56; 3 male, 26 female; age = 17–21 years except for one 27-year old). Each informant was told that they would be reading different dialogues and that they would be asked to evaluate their feelings about various exchanges within the dialogues. Although a vocabulary key was provided to the students, the dialogue was in French with no translation. (The translation provided here is for the benefit of the reader.)

Even though many of the sequences indicated differences in norms between French and Americans, this article will focus on just one sequence that offers a particularly clear view of the ways in which French and Americans can negatively evaluate the other's behavior by misinterpreting it. In the sequence which we entitled "Ça t'embête?" from *Un conte de printemps,* a film by Eric Rohmer, we see Jeanne, who enters her apartment and finds her female cousin, to whom she had lent her apartment for a week. Her cousin announces that she will have to stay another week and asks if that will bother Jeanne. Jeanne responds that it will not bother her at all. Her cousin indicates that she can go to a hotel, to which Jeanne reiterates that she is not at all bothered and that she hardly lives there anymore and is just returning to get some books. Her cousin, in an apparent effort to show gratitude, invites Jeanne out to dinner on Saturday night. Jeanne responds that she does not know if she is free or not. Her cousin repeats the invitation enthusiastically, and Jeanne says that she will call her and asks her cousin if she will be home (presumably to get the call). Her cousin gives Jeanne the precise times when she will be at home.

Ça t'embête? (Does that bother you?)

COUSIN: *Devine quoi?*
Guess what?

JEANNE: *Ben, je ne sais pas.*
I don't know, what?

COUSIN: *Il va falloir que je reste une semaine de plus. Ça t'embête?*
I'm going to have to stay another week. Does that bother you?
[end of exchange 1]

JEANNE: *Oh, non, pas du tout.*
No, no, not at all.

COUSIN: *Non, parce que je peux aller à l'hôtel, hein!*
No, because I can go to a hotel!

JEANNE: *Mais tu es folle! Ça ne m'embête absolument pas. De toute façon, je te l'ai dit, je n'habite pratiquement plus ici. Je suis juste venue prendre quelques bouquins.*
You're crazy! It doesn't bother me one bit. In any case, I told you, I practically don't live here anymore. I just came to get some books.

COUSIN: *Ecoute, je suis tellement confuse. C'est tellement gentil de ta part. Gildas vient me chercher samedi et nous partons dimanche. Ça te ferait plaisir de venir avec nous au restaurant samedi soir?*
Listen, I don't know what to say. It's so nice of you. Gildas is coming to get me Saturday and we're leaving Sunday. Would you like to go out to dinner with us Saturday night?

JEANNE: *Ah samedi soir, je ne sais pas si je serai libre.*
Oh Saturday night, I don't know if I will be free.
[end of exchange 2]

COUSIN: *Oh, je t'en prie, dis oui! On y tient absolument.*
Oh, please, say yes! We really want you to come.

JEANNE: *Ben, écoute, je te téléphonerai. Tu seras là?*
Well, listen, I'll call you. You'll be there?
[end of exchange 3]

COUSIN: *Tous les jours entre six heures et demie et sept heures et demie, tu es sûre de me trouver là.*

Every day between six-thirty and seven-thirty, you're sure to find me there.

Exchange 1: Responding to a Request (Auto-Invitation)

In the first exchange, the informants are asked to imagine that they are Jeanne, and that they would rather *not* have their cousin stay in the apartment another week. They must indicate to what extent they could directly tell her so on a scale of 1 to 10, with "1" indicating that it would be "very impolite" to answer the cousin directly and state that her staying longer in the apartment would be an inconvenience, and "10" indicating that it would be "perfectly polite" to refuse the cousin directly. Positive face needs (within the framework of Brown and Levinson 1978) would lead the speaker to answer indirectly or sublimate feelings of being inconvenienced in order to maintain harmony with the cousin; negative face needs would lead the speaker to be honest and overtly indicate annoyance with the request. Our hypothesis was that the French natives would answer higher on the response continuum (5–10) while the American groups would answer lower on the continuum (1–5). As indicated in Table 1, all three American informant groups were less inclined to voice their inconvenience directly to the cousin.

Table 1
Mean responses to question: Could you directly tell your cousin that you don't want her to stay longer in your apartment and still be polite?
1 = No. It would be impolite to directly refuse my cousin.
10 = Yes. It would be perfectly polite to directly refuse my cousin.

Informant group	Mean response*
American low-intermediate students of French	4.4
American high-intermediate students of French	4.3
American teachers of French	4.1
Native French speakers	6.9

* T-test significant at the .02 level for groups 1, 2, and 3 versus group 4.

The reasons offered for the responses given by the American groups were typically that "family is family" and cannot be refused, at least not directly, such as in the following statements by the American informants:

"I'd act agitated and confusing (sic), probably make some pathetic excuse, but ultimately I'd feel I couldn't kick her out—she's family!"

"I would probably fold and let her stay but if I had the guts I would probably feel fine saying that it would be better if she made other arrangements."

The reticence of the American informants to directly voice their feelings is noteworthy for two reasons. First, one would assume the need for positive face behavior to protect the relationship of cousins to be fairly low, since one's bonds with family members are typically considered to be among the strongest of our various relationships. Secondly, the fact that the request involves taking over one's private living space makes the impingement level on Jeanne fairly high. Even so, the American informants felt uncomfortable directly voicing their annoyance at the self-invitation. In contrast, the French informants tended toward the direct approach:

J'ai envie de retrouver mon appartement, je le dis poliment mais franchement.
If I wanted my apartment back, I'd say so politely but frankly.

In fact, whereas only six of the 83 American informants chose either "9" or "10," seven of the 15 French informants did so, suggesting that a completely direct response is more within the norms of appropriate behavior in French culture than in American culture when responding to such a self-invitation.

Exchange 2: Interpreting a Response to an Invitation

In another exchange, the cousin asks Jeanne to dinner. From all appearances, the invitation is a positive-face strategy, a sort of "pay back" for Jeanne's graciousness in allowing her to stay longer in the apartment. Jeanne answers that she does not know whether or not she will be free that night. The informants were asked to put themselves in the cousin's shoes and decide how to interpret Jeanne's answer. Is she indirectly refusing the invitation or should her response be interpreted at face value? All American groups of informants "read between the lines" of Jeanne's response, seeing it as a possible indirect refusal to the invitation (see Table 2).

Table 2
Mean responses to question at end of exchange 2 (*Ah samedi soir, je ne sais pas si je serai libre*): Is Jeanne's response an indirect refusal to the invitation?
1 = Yes. Her response is an implicit but clear refusal.
10 = No. Her response merely indicates that she is not free on that Saturday.

Informant group	Mean response *
American low-intermediate students of French	5.6
American high-intermediate students of French	4.3
American teachers of French	5.5
Native French speakers	7.9

*T-test significant at the .001 level for groups 1, 2, and 3 versus group 4 .

Some informants, in fact, saw a clear-cut refusal in Jeanne's statement:

"She has said that she is unavailable on that night and is refusing the invitation."

"If she is not free, she cannot go, I wouldn't press the case."

"It seems pretty clear that it's a refusal and there probably isn't a big chance that she will accept."

Others noted their reading of the response as a way of being polite or trying to avert causing any hurt feelings:

"It's pretty clear she's just being polite but does not want to join me on Saturday."

"It sounds like a way to dismiss me without hurting my feelings."

The French informants, however, clearly took Jeanne's response at face value, both in their ratings and in their written interpretations of the exchange:

Je ne sais pas si elle sera libre ou pas!
I don't know if she'll be free or not!

La réponse de Jeanne indique seulement qu'elle ne sait pas ce qu'elle fait le samedi en question.
Jeanne's response only indicates that she doesn't know what she's doing that particular Saturday.

Jeanne ne connaissant pas son emploi du temps précisément, j'insisterai à nouveau.
Since Jeanne doesn't know her precise schedule, I'll ask again (later).

Exchange 3: Interpreting a Response to an Invitation

In the final exchange, the cousin enthusiastically reiterates her invitation, to which Jeanne responds that she will call. Jeanne asks when the cousin will be home (presumably to receive the call), and the cousin gives Jeanne times when she is sure to be in. At this point, the informants were asked to put themselves in the cousin's shoes and say not only if they would expect a call from Jeanne but also if they would think it rude if she did not call. Again, the French informants interpreted the exchange more at face value than the American informants, with the student responses indicating their clear tendency to read a refusal into the statement (see Table 3).

Table 3
Mean responses to question: Is Jeanne's statement that she will call merely a polite, indirect refusal?
1 = Yes. It is a polite refusal. I do not expect her to call.
10 = No. I expect her to call and will think her impolite if she does not.

Informant group	Mean response *
American low-intermediate students of French	5.9
American high-intermediate students of French	5.7
American teachers of French	7.7
Native French speakers	8.7

*T-test significant at the .001 level for groups 1 and 2 versus groups 3 and 4.

Once more, the written interpretations of the American informants suggest that certain responses are typically read as a polite way to refuse an invitation:

"I've used the same line before."

"I don't think she actually wants to go and is just saying she'll call to be polite."

"I would feel that Jeanne had not wanted to accept my invitation and that my begging had made her feel that she must at least give a pretense of accepting. I would be glad for her to come, but would definitely not expect her to call."

And once more, the French informants wrote of their inability to read Jeanne's response as a refusal. In fact, most informants focused on the politeness issue of calling rather than on whether the response was an indirect refusal or not, suggesting that they did not even see a possible refusal issue:

C'est une politesse de confirmer ou refuser une invitation.
It's polite to confirm or refuse an invitation.

Par politesse je l'invite, donc il me semble normal d'avoir une réponse, donc un coup de fil.
I was polite to invite her so it seems to me to be normal to have a response, therefore, a call.

Elle ne semble pas décidée alors j'attendrais son appel que ce soit pour confirmer ou annuler.
She doesn't seem to have decided so I'd wait for her call whether it's to confirm or cancel.

En effet Jeanne n'ayant pas donné de réponse directe, il serait déplacé de sa part de ne pas rappeler.
Because Jeanne didn't give a direct response, it would be wrong on her part not to call back.

93

For this particular question, the responses of the American teachers of French were much more similar to the French responses than to the responses by the other American groups. This could be due to the low N of this group or it could be due to the fact that this group had had a greater exposure to French culture than the other American groups.

General Analysis of the Exchanges

In general, the responses of the informants suggest fairly clear differences between French and American directness norms which, in turn, suggest differences in what is being communicated (e.g., has an invitation been extended or not? has it been refused or not?) as well as in the perceived polite or impolite nature of the interaction. Positive face needs did not seem to be a significant factor for the French in refusing a request, in interpreting an invitation, or in responding to that invitation. Consequently, directness in voicing one's feelings and face value interpretations of words were the norm in the French interpretations of the invitational sequence. In contrast, despite the general perception of Americans as being frank and straightforward, all three groups of American informants favored the more positive-face strategy of indirectness in voicing the refusal of the request (even by a family member, whose social bonds would presumably be sufficiently strong to withstand the direct rejection of a request).

In noting that Americans offer not only genuine invitations but also "ostensible invitations," Isaacs and Clark (1990) suggest that invitations may serve a purely social function. In this study, the American informants' interpretation of the invitational exchanges can be seen as a series of positive-face moves, functioning solely to maintain social bonds between the participants.[3] One can read the entire exchange between Jeanne and her cousin as an elaborate verbal confirmation of their social bonds through the use of certain conventionalized statements. Let us hypothesize that Jeanne has read the cousin's invitation as a gesture of appreciation. In order to acknowledge it as such but not put the cousin out, she responds that she does not know if she is free. The cousin sees Jeanne's response as an acknowledgment of her gesture but wants Jeanne to know that she truly would be happy for Jeanne to read the invitation as a genuine one and so she reiterates it. Jeanne acknowledges the invitation once more by noting that she will call, which may again be interpreted as no more than an acknowledgment.

94

Whether or not one sees the American interpretations of this French exchange as evidence that invitational exchanges may serve a purely social function in American culture, the clear differences in the American and French responses to this and the request sequence indicate that politeness norms may differ dramatically in certain speech act routines in the two cultures. Direct refusals of a request, even by an intimate, may be viewed as rude or impolite by Americans even though it may be seen as completely acceptable behavior within French culture. And in tending to take invitations and responses to invitations more at face value, French people may consider Americans as rude or impolite when they say they will call and they do not, or when they extend an invitational statement and do not follow it through. At the very least, these data demonstrate how dangerous it is to assume that an "invitation is an invitation" or "requests are requests" when the interaction is a cross-cultural one.

Pedagogical Implications of Cross-cultural Speech Act Research

Even if one acknowledges that the transfer of cross-cultural norms may, in fact, result in miscommunication and negative cultural stereotyping, the direct classroom implications of this and other such cross-cultural studies are not as evident. It is one thing to demonstrate possible misunderstandings of one specific realization of a speech act due to a conflict in cultural norms. It is quite another thing, however, to generalize from that one speech act example to an entire speech act type (as applying to all invitational exchanges, for example). Indeed, it is clearly impossible to use the results of cross-cultural studies to formulate any precise speech act "rules" (linguistic or social) for foreign language students. The only thing one can do is help students to learn how culturally embedded their own behavioral norms are and show them some of the ways in which these norms may either impede students from appropriately evaluating target language norms or result in students being inappropriately evaluated by target language speakers.

But does the language teacher really have the time to deal with such questions? If one intends to present speech acts over the course of the year (as is currently the case in contemporary foreign language textbooks), certainly not. However, by continuing to treat speech acts as an acquisitional goal that requires little more than the memorization and practice

of a few lexical expressions, language teachers are encouraging students to view speech act norms as culturally universal and are actually leading them down the garden path to miscommunication and negative cultural stereotyping.

While language teachers may not be able to give students concrete rules of interpretation when acquiring a foreign language, they can certainly help them to develop strategies of interpretation. In order to develop strategies of interpretation, students must first learn to question their own behavioral norms. One way to do this is to encourage students to consider how certain expressions can result in cultural misunderstandings. With respect to invitations, for example, a short discussion of the possible misunderstanding by French people of the American expression "We'll have to get together for lunch sometime" would be appropriate. Taped interviews of native French speakers on this issue could be a useful point of departure for discussion. Once students have grasped the idea that a statement which to them is ambiguous may be interpreted by target language speakers as a real invitation, they are ready to explore the flip side of the coin. How does one know when an invitation by a target language speaker has been unambiguously extended? Again, taped interviews on the topic could be provocative classroom or homework materials. While such exercises will not provide formulaic rules, they will oblige students to question how they interpret what other people say and how and why their own behavior may be misinterpreted. Since most cross-cultural miscommunication is due not to lexical or grammatical problems, but rather to "pragmatic failure" (Thomas 1983), sensitivity to sociolinguistic and sociocultural norms is arguably the key to acquiring a foreign language and the most important tool that a language teacher can help a student to develop.

Exercises designed to promote reflection on cultural norms can easily be incorporated even in beginning-level French classes. At the University of Chicago this past year, invitational film sequences and excerpts of taped interviews with native speakers were included as part of the unit on extending and responding to invitations (which we introduced toward the end of the second quarter and again at the beginning of the third quarter of study). One interview was with Tomas, an exchange student from the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, who explains one type of American behavior that he has had a hard time understanding since arriving in the U.S. He states that Americans seem to make plans that do not go anywhere, that they will say " Friday, we'll absolutely have to go to this restaurant or go

dancing or do this or that" but that Friday will come and go and nothing happens. Students were given the passage as a (fairly heavily glossed) reading assignment (reproduced in the Appendix), with the following questions to answer in English:

(1) Summarize in general terms why Tomas is disappointed (i.e., what he thinks, what he does, what happens after).

(2) In your opinion, how should one interpret expressions such as the following: "Let's get together for lunch this week." "We'll *have* to go out this weekend."

(3) What might Tomas' misunderstanding indicate with respect to the way in which French people make invitations?

(4) Given Tomas' misunderstanding, what hypothesis can you make that might explain why some French people hold a stereotype of Americans as being dishonest?

(5) How might this difference in invitational norms lead some Americans to misunderstand French people in certain (invitational) contexts?

Students also completed short questionnaires on various film sequences involving invitations and offers. A scene from *Un coeur en hiver* (by Claude Sautet) composed of a one-line offer was a particularly successful classroom exercise. Here Maxime and Fabien, old friends and professional partners, have just come out of a café. Maxime offers Fabien a ride part of the way home in his car by saying:

Je ne suis pas en avance, mais si tu veux que je te rapproche...
I'm running late, but if you want me to take you part of the way home . . .

Table 4
Mean responses to question: Imagine that you are Fabien and that you would like a ride. How appropriate would it be to accept Maxime's offer at this point (without him saying anything more)?
Choose from 1–10 (1 = completely inappropriate; 10 = completely appropriate)

Informant group	Mean response
American students of French	5.2
Native French speakers	9.3

Students were then asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 how appropriate it would be to accept Maxime's invitation and explain their response (see Table 4).

We then presented back to the students the tendencies apparent in their own answers along with some of the American and French tendencies shown in our surveys. Here are some sample responses of American students in the winter 1998 beginning-level French class:

> "Maxime is politely saying he can't give Fabien a ride."
> "Maxime did offer, but it sounds as though he is only being polite."
> "Maxime is running late. He would rather not give Fabien a ride, but must offer because they're friends."
> "Except with a great need, inconveniencing a friend is not acceptable."
> "You're putting Maxime in an awkward position."
> "He says he's running late. He should first decline, then if he insists, accept."
> "You refuse the first offer. You let your friend talk you into it."
> "He should probably say 'Are you sure?' first.'"

Along with these data students listened to an excerpt of a taped interview with a native speaker discussing the same segment. Here the interviewer tells Florence that some students thought that the fact that Maxime mentioned that he's running late suggests that he's just being polite and then asks her what she thinks of that interpretation. We gave the students the excerpt as a *semi-dictée* listening comprehension exercise to do outside of class:

Florence discusses the segment by referring to the relationship between friends in French culture:

FLORENCE: *Je crois comme différence aussi c'est que les Français se sentent moins obligés entre amis de faire des choses. C'est-à-dire qu'en fait si la personne le dit, c'est que ça l'arrange peut-être pas mais c'est quand même pas un gros problème. Si vraiment c'était un problème—ils se sentent assez à l'aise, justement parce qu'ils sont amis, de pas lui proposer—ce sera pas un problème qu'il lui propose pas de le ramener—il lui dira "je te ramène pas parce que là je suis vraiment en retard, donc il faut que j'y aille. L'autre dira: "oui, oui, bien sûr."*

> *FLORENCE:* I think as a difference also is that French people feel less obliged among friends to do things. That's to say that, in fact, if the person says it, then maybe it's not convenient but still it's not a big problem. If it were really a big problem—they feel free, precisely because they're friends, to not offer—it won't be a problem for him not to offer to take him home—he'll say "I'm not taking you home because I'm really late, so I have to go."
>
> The other will say: "Sure, sure, of course."

We then asked students to answer the following questions:

(1) Given the discussion of the segment by Florence and the sample American responses, how would you characterize the major difference(s) between the French and American respondents?

(2) Looking at these American responses and Florence's remarks as an indication of possible cultural tendencies, what type of hypotheses could you make about the rights and obligations of friends in the two cultures?

(3) How could such tendencies result in miscommunication or negative cultural evaluation?

Once this written assignment was handed in, we again presented back to students their own responses so that they could see the various tendencies present among themselves (see Table 5).

Table 5

Characterizations of French and American culture by first year university students of French (underlining indicates key thoughts)

In general, many of you used the word "etiquette" and "politeness" when referring to American norms of making offers to friends and opposed this to a more straightforward, "genuine offer" which is more common in French culture.

Specific comments about French culture:

•French take words at <u>face value</u>.

•There is a sense in which for the French <u>you say only what you mean</u>— offers are extended only if there is the intention of carrying them out.

Table 5 (continued)

•In France, it seems that if a friend makes an offer to do something, <u>the person has the right to take him up</u>.

•Obviously the French believe <u>one can be more free to show their feelings</u> in a friendship whereas Americans do not.

Specific comments about American culture:

•Americans think that <u>certain things are said out of politeness but not really meant.</u>

•With Americans there is a <u>meta—or sub-dialogue</u> which must be read.

•In the US it seems a friend is obligated to make somewhat of an offer to a friend, but the friend is also expected to ensure that the offer is sincere.

•Americans believe <u>they must be polite</u> and offer . . .

Possible problems that Americans might have with French people:

•Americans who offered a French person a ride in the manner that Maxime did might be taken at face value. The American would be <u>annoyed at the French person's lack of manners</u>.

•There may be a misreading of intentions—and a misunderstanding of etiquette. The American whose offer is accepted may be <u>put off</u>, since he/she had thought it was clear that the offer was extended out of mere surface politeness, the rhetoric of etiquette, rather than as a "real" offer.

•<u>French people might seem either intrusive or rude</u> if they intervene when not asked or if they don't invite when they don't really mean it.

•The American may find the <u>French person pushy</u>.

•The American might offer just to be nice, and the French might jump into the car right away (this is rude in American culture).

Possible problems that French people might have with Americans:

•<u>A French person might be offended</u> that an American would "argue" about an offer that was freely given.

•<u>Americans might seem cold or uninterested</u> because they may interpret invitations as polite questions and not real offers.

•The French might consider the <u>Americans to be rude</u> because of how they treat their friends.

Because we were dealing with beginning-level students, we did not try to discuss these issues in the classroom since they could not do so in French but rather had students do these exercises primarily as listening comprehension, reading, and reflection exercises. All exercises were graded; however, we agreed that there would be no right or wrong answer on the reflection exercises. Since the goal of these exercises was to encourage students to question both their own cultural norms and the way in which they evaluate the behavior of people from other cultures, they received full credit as long as their answer showed that they had thought about the issue. The response to these exercises by the students was enthusiastic. Oftentimes before and after class we found students discussing their impression of various aspects of typical American behavior (especially between American and non-American students in the class) or their impression of the behavior of people from other cultures.

The last issue we had to resolve was how to test this more culturally-oriented unit. We finally decided to include it in the essay section of the final exam. Here students were told the following:

Imagine that you have been living in Paris for a year and have become friends with a French person. Write a letter to someone back home:

a. describing this person (physical and character portrait, background, etc.);

b. narrating how the two of you met; and

c. discussing how the friendship evolved (including a misunderstanding between the two of you due to cultural differences).

The imaginary anecdotes recounted by the students were very diverse. In some essays students missed out on outings with their French friend because they had not realized that an invitation had been extended; in other essays they discovered that some statement they had made had been misinterpreted by their French friend as a firm invitation. Students typically included in their anecdotes some change in the social evaluation of one or the other person, for example, their French friend thought that they were superficial or they thought that the French friend was too direct or aggressive, but then they each realized they had misinterpreted the other's intentions. Although we had been careful to avoid giving generalizations to students as we presented the different types of data to them (including several short excerpts from Raymonde Carroll's *Evidences Invisibles*, 1987),

101

clearly students had formed their own hypotheses about possible differences in cultural norms and how such differences might lead to misunderstandings and negative cultural stereotyping.

Conclusion

In this essay, it was shown how sociolinguistic and sociocultural research can help the foreign language teacher and textbook author to decide how to link linguistic form, function, context, and social meaning. Understanding the frequency and functions of grammatical structures in different spoken and written discourse is invaluable information in deciding which structures to emphasize and how best to contextualize them. In addition, it was demonstrated that cultural norms often impact on how language is used and interpreted in common, everyday interactions. Discussion of the possible miscommunication that can result from the transfer of cultural norms was suggested as one way of helping students to develop an understanding of both their own language use and target language use as rooted in cultural norms.

Notes

1. Suggestion made by Cécile Denier, passing along the comments of Jacques Filliolet, Maître de Linguistique at the Université de Paris X-Nanterre.

2. Claude Grangier has been one of the primary researchers in this study since its inception. Jane Blevins identified the invitational sequences in the various films and completed initial transcriptions of the film segments. Agnès Hy collaborated in this research project during the 1995-96 academic year. I am indebted to the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning for having funded this project. I am grateful to Thierry Hoquet and Florence Cédiey for allowing interviews with them to be used in this research project.

3. I am grateful to Rosemary Buck for this insight on an earlier analysis of this sequence.

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Appendix

A Frenchman's (mis)perception of American behavior

Tomas talks about the American tendency to make plans that do not go anywhere:

TOMAS: *...peut-être que les gens font beaucoup plus de projets dans le vide. C'est-à-dire ils peuvent vous dire "vendredi il faut absolument qu'on aille là" ou "il faut absolument qu'on aille dans ce restaurant, qu'on sorte en boîte—qu'on fasse ci ou ça" et donc moi, d'une certaine façon il y a une petite case dans ma tête où c'est inscrit "réserver ma soirée pour ça vendredi soir" et puis le soir arrive et ben, rien.*

Donc, d'une certaine façon on peut revoir les gens régulièrement et puis faire quelque chose avec eux mais c'est souvent plus spontané—disons que, quand les gens vous disent "il faut absolument qu'on fasse ça ensemble," ça veut pas dire qu'on va le faire. Même s'il y a "absolument" dans la phrase [laugh]. Et ça c'est, ben, ça me fait toujours de la peine quoi enfin. C'est toujours un peu dûr à accepter... en fait, je me rends compte que j'ai encore été trop crédule et que je me suis encore fait avoir [laugh].

Donc ça c'est un peu décevant. Surtout que les Américains ne supportent pas qu'on leur dise "tu as fait ça parce que tu es américain". Ils vont toujours trouver d'autres raisons. C'est-à-dire, ils vont me dire "on en avait parlé juste une fois" ou "je croyais que tu étais au courant que les plans avaient changé entretemps".

CLAUDE: *Parce que toi tu penses—c'est comme des excuses...*

TOMAS: *Oui, moi je trouve que c'est de la mauvaise foi à la limite. C'est vraiment de la mauvaise foi et puis même je crois que c'est une généralité, que vraiment, il faut pas compter sur les plans qui sont lancés comme ça à la minute.*

TOMAS: . . . maybe (American) people make a lot more projects that don't go anywhere. That's to say, they can tell you "Friday we absolutely have to go there" or "we absolutely have to go to this

restaurant—have to go dancing— have to do this or that" and, me, to a certain degree there's a place in my head where it's written "Reserve my Friday evening for that" and then the evening arrives and well, nothing.

So, to some degree you can see people regularly and then do something with them, but it's oftentimes more spontaneous— let's say that, when people tell you "we absolutely have to do that together," it doesn't mean that you're going to do it. Even if there's "absolutely" in the sentence. And that always hurts me. It's always a little hard to accept . . . in fact, I realize that once again I've been too gullible and that I've been had.

So that's a little disappointing. Especially since Americans can't stand people to tell them that "you did that because you're American." They'll always find other reasons. That's to say, they'll tell me "we'd only talked about it once" or "I thought you knew that plans had changed since we talked."

CLAUDE: Because you think—it's like they're excuses . . .

TOMAS: Yes, I think that you could say it's dishonest. It's really dishonest and then I even think that it's a generalization (one can make about Americans), that truly, you 'can't count on plans that are thrown out like that, on the spur of the moment.