Misunderstanding between Israelis and Soviet immigrants: Linguistic and cultural factors

OLGA GERSHENSON

Abstract

This study define pragmatic characteristics of the Russian—Hebrew interlanguage of complaint and investigates its cultural origins. Complaints performed by three groups (Israelis, Russians, and Russian immigrants to Israel) were analyzed. The results show that the politeness strategy of the interlanguage is hybrid, since the immigrants' use both Russian and Hebrew mitigating strategies. However, since the immigrants' linguistic and cultural resources in a target language are limited, they use indicators of politeness to a much lower extent than the two groups of native-speakers.

Introduction

During the last decade, the Israeli social landscape has been transformed by the arrival of over 900,000 Soviet Jewish immigrants (about 15 percent of the Israeli population). At first, many Israelis welcomed the newcomers. However, their initially warm greeting soon cooled. The longed-for wave of Soviet immigration intensified Israeli political, economic and social problems. Frustration caused by lack of employment and housing was deepened by the clash of expectations, which led to the forming of mutually unfavorable stereotypes. Many Israelis started treating the newcomers, whom they saw as insincere and manipulative, with antipathy and mistrust. The ex-Soviets often reciprocated with contempt and estrangement towards Israelis, whom they perceived as rude and pushy. The emergence of these negative stereotypes can be partially explained in terms of power relations, media influence, and culture shock. I argue that linguistic and cultural factors, stemming from pragmatic differences between the Russian and Hebrew languages, also play a role in explaining the conflict between some Soviet immigrants and veteran Israelis. This essay demonstrates how linguistic differences lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings, resulting in negative attributions and stereotypes.

The purpose of this research is, first, to define the pragmatic characteristics of the Hebrew language as spoken by Soviet immigrants (interlanguage) and, second, to explore its origins by contrasting Russian and Israeli communication styles. This research is based on the assumption of culture-specific pragmatic strategies that are applied systematically within a speech community. These strategies are demonstrated by an analysis of complaint, a speech act performed when one interlocutor breaks a social norm (i.e., performs a socially unacceptable act), while another is annoyed and seeks either retribution or prevention of future violations (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). By nature, complaint is a face-threatening speech act for both interlocutors. Therefore, performance of complaint, especially in the cross-cultural context, is pregnant with potential for misunderstanding and conflict.

Theoretical background

Drawing from the field of interlanguage pragmatics, this essay uses the theoretical apparatus of speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969, 1975) and the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) to describe the Russian and Hebrew language pragmatics contributing to the Russian–Hebrew interlanguage.

Within speech act theory, directness is an important dimension of speech act analysis. Directness becomes critical in a cross-cultural context since the performance and interpretation of speech acts vary by culture. Thus in some cultures directness is taken as rudeness, whereas in others it is appreciated as open and sincere communication.

According to the theory of politeness, face (one's positive social value) has its positive and negative needs: positive needs find their expression in one's concern to be perceived as a normal individual contributing to his or her social environment, whereas negative needs find their expression in demand to preserve one's own territory, to be independent, and to avoid imposition. The necessary face-work that everyone performs helps to create a balance between these two needs. Positive (or solidarity) politeness that caters to positive face-needs, is based on the *communitas* mode of social life (Turner 1969) and reflects 'egalitarian, undifferential, individuating, person-to-person relationship' (Katriel 1986). Negative (or deference) politeness that caters to negative face-needs reflects the mode of *societas* and is characterized by 'a configuration of roles and status, a web of conventionalized, formal relations' (Katriel 1986). Depending on perceived dimensions of distance and power, both face-needs are played off against each other using different strategies of deference and solidarity politeness.

When analyzing Russian–Hebrew interlanguage it is important to bear in mind that its speakers are immigrants engaged in the process of

learning a new language. Language learners, who are often unaware of cross-cultural differences between pragmatic strategies, borrow strategies from their mother tongue and apply them to the target language. This process, called *transfer* in the studies of second language acquisition, may result in pragmatic failure – a certain type of misunderstanding caused by a language learner's lack of awareness of pragmatic aspects of the target language (Thomas 1983).

Learning a new language is only one aspect of cultural transition. Immigrants struggling to function in an unfamiliar and unpredictable environment also experience culture shock. For young people (who were the respondents for this research) cultural transition is accompanied by a life-stage transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Cultural pragmatics of Russian and Hebrew

There are only a few studies focusing on the pragmatic aspects of the Russian language, the results of which are contradictory. Wierzbicka (1985) shows that, as compared to English, Polish and other Slavic languages (including Russian) use more direct strategies for interrogative speech acts, reaching politeness by means of diminutives. In addition, she describes a value of cordiality (emphasizing close relations between people) prominent in Slavic cultures.

Surveying Russian-Soviet society, Levada *et al.* (1993) emphasize cultural characteristics, such as a divergence between private and public spheres, which emerged during the Soviet era. The public sphere was associated with the Communist Party and perceived as official, formal, and hypocritical. Fear and intimidation, which dominated this sphere, ruled out sincerity and self-disclosure. In contrast, in the private sphere intimacy, openness, and emotional involvement were highly valued, as indicated by the notions of cordiality (Werzbicka 1985), *druzhba* ['friendship'] (Markovitz 1993) or *dusha* ['soul'] (Carbaugh 1993). Due to this Soviet 'double consciousness' that emerged from the gap between the public and private spheres, Russians speak in two different codes, combining cordiality with caution.

I argue that this combination of openness and restraint gave rise to a unique feature of the Russian communication style best described by the Russian term *chootkost*, which translates roughly as sensitivity. *Chootkost* entails restraint on behalf of the speaker and sensitive understanding on behalf of the hearer. To reveal *chootkost* means to reach understanding without explicit verbal references to thoughts and feelings, and without asking personal questions. The concept of *chootkost* emphasizes indirectness and devalues direct verbal expression; it belongs to the transcendental realm of *dusha* ['soul'] discussed by Carbaugh (1993).

Indirectness combined with negative politeness is reported by Mills to be a typical Russian strategy (1991a, 1991b, 1992). Mills also describes the Russian tendency for hyper-politeness. However, Mills' data are derived from a small and unrepresentative sample, and the situations employed in her research refer mostly to the public sphere. Moreover, she uses culture-specific concepts borrowed from English linguistics, which are not always applicable to Slavic languages.

In previous research on interaction between Soviet immigrants and veteran Israelis, I conclude that Russian politeness is characterized by deference and indirectness, as compared with the Hebrew language (Gershenson 1994). However, this research did not account for the social implications of the immigrant status of the respondents.

Thus, while there is some evidence of preference for strategies of deference and indirectness, the precise characteristics of Russian politeness remain inconclusive. It is clear, though, that cultural and situational contexts that have not been fully accounted for in previous studies should have a great impact on the realization of these strategies.

The research on the pragmatic aspects of the Hebrew language is much more conclusive. Politeness strategies have received a great deal of attention and refinement in the studies of Blum-Kulka, Katriel, Olshtain, and Weinbach. It is worthwhile noting that Israelis themselves see politeness, *nimus*, as artificial, hypocritical, and unnecessary in close relationships (Blum-Kulka 1987, 1992). As for the distinction between the private and public spheres, it also exists in Israeli culture, but it entails entirely different ideological meanings. Israelis view intimacy and familiarity as replacing politeness in private. Solidarity based on the *communitas* mode of social relations lies at the heart of the Israeli notion of *dugriut*, which means sincerity, truthfulness, and frankness (Katriel 1986). Communication in the style of *dugriut*, based on common values and community membership, originates from the Zionist-socialist ideology of *halutzim* ['pioneers']. These pioneers, who came to Palestine with a desire to renew Jewish life in the *Land of Israel*, rejected formal politeness as associated with the humiliating stereotype of a diasporic Jew. Significantly, much of the ethos of the early pioneers in its turn can be traced back to Russian nihilism and *narodnikism* (the Russian back-to-the-people movement) of the mid-nineteenth century, which revolted against bourgeois values (Kuzar 2001).

The cultural preference for directness in Hebrew is demonstrated in studies of different speech acts: requests (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989), apologies (Olshtain 1989), and complaints (Olshtain and Weinbach 1987; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). These studies show that Israelis use a wide range of strategies, which in comparison with other languages tend to be more direct (Blum-Kulka,

House and Kasper 1989). Indeed, the value of directness is so prominent in Israeli culture that over-polite speech act performance is interpreted as 'strategic-manipulative' and 'foreign' (Blum-Kulka 1992). Research also shows that Israeli directness often tends to be mitigated by solidarity politeness (Blum-Kulka 1987).

While analyzing cross-cultural pragmatic strategies, one should bear in mind that the norms of directness are not universal even within a certain culture but rather are influenced by the situational context.

Method

The respondents in this study were undergraduate and graduate students in Russia (Urals State University) and Israel (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), ranging in age from 20 to 28, with equal numbers of males and females. The research included two consecutive tests: first, the Situation Assessment Test (SAT) and, second, the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The SAT was conducted in order to identify situations that both Russians and Israelis interpreted similarly. Two groups, Russians (n = 40) and Israelis (n = 40), participated in the test. The respondents were asked to evaluate *status*, *distance*, and *insult* in each of 33 situations from typical college student life. The Chi-square analysis was applied to the data, and only situations with no significant difference between Russian and Israeli evaluations entered the final DCT questionnaire. Three groups participated in the DCT: Russians (n = 40), Israelis (n = 40), and Soviet immigrants in Israel (n = 40). The Russian group was interviewed and audiotaped in Russian, the two other groups in Hebrew. For the purposes of this essay I have translated the responses quoted throughout the text into English. The DCT included 12 situations (see Appendix for sample situations) that resulted in 1,440 responses (12 situations × 120 respondents). The responses to the DCT were processed through the coding scheme by three trained coders, whose evaluations were tested for reliability. Finally, the data were processed through MANOVA and ANOVA.[1] The DCT was followed by brief post-test interviews in which I invited the respondents to comment on the probability of the situations and the cultural meanings of their responses.

Coding scheme (list of variables)

The variables comprising the coding scheme are designed to reflect the directness and politeness strategies of all three groups, as well as the pragmatic competence of the immigrants. All variables are dichotomous, coded as either a 'yes' or a 'no' value. The major variables are as follows.

1. The *speech act* variable indicates a speaker's pragmatic choice to perform a speech act as opposed to opting out. Opting out is conceptualized as extreme indirectness.

2. The *complaint* variable indicates whether a performed speech act is a complaint rather than another speech act. Performance of a complaint is an explicit expression of the speaker's disapproval of the hearer's actions; therefore, performance of a complaint indicates directness. If a speech act is not a complaint, it is omitted from further analysis here.

3. The *intensity of complaint* variable refers to the pragmatic choice of the degree of aggravation, similar to the 'degree of mitigation' variable used by Olshtain and Weinbach (1993). The intensity of complaint is a culture- and context-dependent variable which reflects the cultural, rather than literal, meaning of a complaint in a given language. The coders relied on their cultural knowledge to assess intensity. Complaints expressing annoyance or disapproval are coded as moderate, and complaints expressing accusation or threat are coded as intense.

4. The *routine expression* variable shows whether a complaint is routine (found more than once), or varies by speaker. Clyne, Ball, and Neil (1991) suggest that speech acts are performed in a routine form in some cultures, and creatively in others. Either one of these strategies can play a mitigating role depending on cultural context.

5. The *playfulness* variable points to expressive elements, such as word play, metaphor, hyperbole, and joke, that are usually marginal for the referential message. This variable emphasizes the poetic function of speech (Jakobson 1981).

6. The *question* variable indicates a complaint performed in the form of a question. In some cultural contexts, playfulness and the question format have a mitigating function.

7. The *indicators of positive politeness* and the *indicators of negative politeness* variables reflect pragmatic choices between solidarity and deference. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness is based on the principle of claiming common ground, and it uses such strategies as *Include both S* [speaker] *and H* [hearer] *in the activity, Intensify interest to H, Hedging options, Use of jargon and slang.* Negative politeness uses such strategies as *Don't presume/assume, Impersonalize S and H, Don't coerce H.* Indicators of positive politeness include emotional markers that imply a personal relationship and mutually understood codes, e. g., curses, terms of affection, first names,

nicknames, and slang. In contrast, indicators of negative politeness emphasize distance between speaker and hearer, e. g., conventional polite expressions and formal register of speech.

8. The *pragmatic competence* variable, which applies only to non-native speakers – the immigrants – accounts for such pragmatic parameters as accent and linguistic transfer. Pragmatic competence was assessed by a native Hebrew speaker.

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis is that the three groups should differ in the realization of their complaints. The three groups are expected to display the following characteristics:

1. The Israeli group should exhibit a tendency for directness and positive politeness, as expressed in performance of the speech acts coded as intense complaints with indicators of positive politeness. The accepted Hebrew mitigating strategies should include routine expressions and questions.

2. The Russian group should exhibit a tendency for indirectness and negative politeness expressed in opting out and performance of moderate complaints with indicators of negative politeness. The accepted Russian mitigating strategies should include playful expressions and the avoidance of questions.

3. The immigrant group should exhibit a tendency for indirectness and negative politeness similar to the Russian group. Their accepted mitigating strategies should combine common Russian strategies (e. g., playfulness) with Israeli strategies (e. g., routine expressions and questions). However, the immigrants should employ these strategies to a lesser extent as compared to the native-speakers. Most complaints performed by the immigrants should be interpreted as pragmatically deviant by native Hebrew speakers.

Results

The results of the analysis of variance for the difference between the three groups are presented in Table 1. The results indicate significant group differences in the performance of speech acts and complaints. As expected, the Israeli respondents choose to speak out and complain most frequently, whereas the immigrants show the strongest tendency to opt out. For example, consider situation 3, in which a respondent was asked to react to disturbing loud music played by a neighbor. An Israeli stu-

Table 1. *Means, standard deviations (in parentheses) and F values for eight dependent variables by groups*

Dependent Variable	Israelis	Russian-Israelis	Russians	F
Speech Act	11.5	10.15	10.65	8.93***
	(0.78)	(1.82)	(1.53)	
Complaint	8.47	7.10	8.23	7.37**
	(1.47)	(1.89)	(1.73)	
Intensity	4.45	3.68	2.95	6.51**
	(1.83)	(2.09)	(1.63)	
Positive Politeness	2.13	1.5	3.13	7.69**
	(1.77)	(1.34)	(2.36)	
Negative Politeness	2.18	1.98	2.63	1.59
	(1.32)	(1.49)	(2.1)	
Routine Expression	2.68	1.43	0.85	20.41***
	(1.47)	(1.43)	(0.95)	
Playfulness	0.90	1.63	2.30	6.46**
	(0.98)	(1.63)	(2.34)	
Questions	2.58	2.40	1.53	5.23*
	(1.74)	(1.65)	(1.24)	

*$p < .05$
**$p < .005$
***$p < .0005$

dent chose to complain: 'Guys, you have to be considerate and think about others, these are dorms here.' In the same situation a Russian respondent said: 'I also want to have fun.' This speech act contains only a playful hint to take the neighbors into consideration.

Consistent with these results, the Israeli group performed intense complaints most frequently. However, whereas the Russian group performed more complaints than the immigrant group, the immigrants performed intense complaints more frequently than the Russians. Interestingly enough, those immigrants who chose to speak out and complain were influenced by the Hebrew pragmatic norms, which affected the intensity of their complaints. Overall, the results for the speech act 'complaint', and intensity of complaint variables indicate a preference of the Russian and immigrant groups for indirect expression, and a preference of the Israeli group for direct expression.

Analysis of the indicators of positive and negative politeness yields less obvious results. Firstly, differences in the extent of usage of negative politeness indicators are insignificant. This result can be explained by the overall preference of both Russian and Hebrew language pragmatics for an informal communication style, especially among peers. Significant differences were found only in the use of positive politeness indicators. Surprisingly, Russians perform complaints with indicators of positive

politeness most frequently. This result shows a 'cultural pressure' to mitigate a complaint experienced by Russian respondents. In Hebrew, it is more acceptable to be up-front; therefore, Israeli respondents are less pressured to use politeness indicators.

In this context, it is worthwhile considering various strategies used by Russians and Israelis in order to 'claim common ground' and reinforce 'in-group identity' (Brown and Levinson 1987). Russian speakers achieved positive politeness through a use of playful language which results in verbosity. On average, Russian respondents in this study used 165.5 words per response, as compared to 134.5 words per response for Israelis. Culture-specific Hebrew strategies, such as direct addresses and complaints in the form of a question, led to more concise expression. Use of the positive politeness strategy, whether in Russian or in Hebrew, clearly requires a considerable mastery of the language, as well as cultural competence. Therefore, immigrants used indicators of positive politeness least frequently, and were also the most laconic of the three groups (132.5 words per response).

These results pose a question about the relationship between directness and politeness as it is played out in the complaints performed by the three groups. The characteristic pattern of a Russian complaint combines indirect expression and positive politeness within the same speech act. Consider situation 3: 'This music rocks, but it would sound even better if it were softer.' This speech act brings together slang (*rocks*), indicating common ground, with an indirect request to turn the music down. In contrast, the strategy combining direct expression and positive politeness is typical for Israeli culture (Blum-Kulka 1987). For example: 'Come on, really, I already asked you to lower it [the music], it's really not nice what you are doing to me.' This speech act, opening with the explicitly informal *come on, really*, further appeals to in-group identity by emphasizing the personal relationship between speaker and hearer; yet it is phrased in a direct and firm manner. In contrast, the immigrants, who lack the linguistic and cultural resources of native speakers, used indicators of both negative and positive politeness least frequently, relying instead on indirectness as their main politeness strategy.

As stated above, Russian and Israeli respondents used diametrically opposed strategies to achieve positive politeness: playfulness and routine expressions, respectively. Israelis used routine expressions significantly more often than the two other groups. For example, in situation 7, in which a teaching assistant has not returned a paper on time, the speech act, 'What happened to my paper?' was repeated 17 times (n = 40). These results are consistent with other studies of Hebrew pragmatics that show a wide range of conventionalized routines in various speech acts (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989).

Immigrants use similar routine expressions but apply them less frequently. Thus, the speech act 'What happened to my paper?' is repeated only 6 times in the same situation 7. In contrast, Russian respondents almost never used routine expressions, drawing on playfulness instead. They used this strategy significantly more often than the other two groups. Moreover, in addition to metaphor, exaggeration and humor, which are found in the speech acts of the other two groups as well, the Russians demonstrate culture-specific tropes, such as allusions to Soviet reality: 'Listen, are you talking to the Kremlin, or what?' (addressing a clerk who is talking on the phone too long in situation 12), and linguistic puns: 'If you don't have *voda* ['water'], then bring vodka!' (addressing a waiter who provides slow and inefficient service in situation 1). The only allusion made by an Israeli respondent dealt with the army: 'Tomorrow you show up for the massive cleaning operation' (reprimanding a friend for a mess in a lent apartment in situation 4).

When the immigrants apply this Russian pragmatic strategy to their Hebrew speech, they draw on the Hebrew language for word play and on Israeli reality for allusions. Thus, in situation 3, an immigrant student says: '*Stom et ha-tape!*' His complaint translates literally as: 'Shut tape-recorder up.' It is a pun on the colloquial Hebrew expression *Stom et ha-peh*, which means 'Shut your mouth up'.

As was already mentioned, the Russian communication style is verbose. Russian linguistic competence includes the ability to use sophisticated rhetorical constructions, quotes from well-known works of literature, film, TV-programs, and cultural anecdotes, as well as demonstrating a mastery of both high and low registers of speech. In order to make a polite complaint, one has to reveal creativity and resourcefulness. For example, in situation 7, a Russian student nitpicks his teaching assistant: 'Darling, why didn't you return my paper? Do you need it as a souvenir? I'll bring you my photo instead!' However, qualities such as verbosity, idiosyncratic allusion, humor, and sarcasm, all of which make this complaint polite and competent in Russian, render it contemptuous and roundabout in Hebrew. Israeli politeness is based on the concept of *dugriut*. In order to be polite in Hebrew, one should not try to achieve sophisticated rhetorical effort. Instead, one should speak his or her mind in a straightforward way, using solidarity politeness to mitigate directness (Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gerson 1985).

The tradition of sophisticated rhetoric, irony, allusion, and word play is so prevalent in Russian pragmatics (Zemskaia 1983) that immigrants keep using playfulness despite their limited linguistic resources in Hebrew. Apparently, it does not occur to them that this strategy can make them sound evasive and condescending in the cultural context of Israeli *dugriut*.

Another pragmatic strategy that creates potential for cross-cultural misunderstanding is the use of a question format for a complaint. The popularity of this strategy differs significantly across groups: Israelis ask questions most frequently, whereas Russians ask them least frequently. For Israelis, a question is a standard strategy of face-saving. Questioning is a good alternative to order and imposition (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989). The Russians, however, avoid this strategy of complaining. This choice has a cultural explanation. In Russian, questions are perceived as an intrusion, threatening to one's private information. Questions in Russian-Soviet culture are associated with official forms. The value of *chootkost* suggests that one should not ask questions. Instead, one should either take a guess or tactfully wait for another person to volunteer information. In the Slavic languages, unlike both English and Hebrew, a request in the form of a rhetorical question (e. g., 'Can you pass the butter?') can be interpreted as a genuine question that could be answered (Wierzbicka 1985). Therefore, Russian-speaking immigrants can interpret a polite Hebrew complaint as a genuine, and thus to them intrusive, question.

Differences in pragmatic strategies, including transfers from Russian into Hebrew, verbosity, playfulness, and indirectness, caused the coders to evaluate 60 percent of the complaints performed by the immigrant respondents as being pragmatically deviant.[2] Other factors that contributed to such an evaluation included accent (in the audiotaped interviews) and, curiously, erroneous usage of foreign-sounding Russian words in Hebrew speech, e. g., *conspect* ['notes'], or *bedlam* ['mess']. One should keep in mind that all the immigrant respondents had a high level of Hebrew proficiency. All of them were university students who have passed Hebrew proficiency tests and have lived in Israel for 3–5 years. However, Israeli coders still found many indicators of foreignness. Since *sabra* ['native Israeli'] status is prestigious, linguistic and pragmatic competence appears to be an important factor for social relations.

Discussion: Cultural and social considerations

The results clearly indicate that the immigrants perform linguistic transfer by borrowing a strategy of indirectness from their native Russian. This apparently innocent linguistic phenomenon leads to a pragmatic failure due to a clash of cultural values embodied in the strategies of directness and indirectness. This clash is salient in the way the Russian and Israeli cultures approach difficult conflict-ridden situations, such as the situations used in this study. I argue that the Russians used strategies of opting out and indirectness inspired by the value of *chootkost* in order to avoid conflict. In contrast, the Israelis chose the strategies of direct-

ness and speaking out consistent with the value of *dugriut* in order to 'put things on the table' and, thus, to allow a conflict situation to evolve. I suggest the following explanation for this cultural difference.

In Israeli culture, conflict is perceived as a normal part of human relationships. It is not particularly threatening because resolving the conflict situation enables people to move on. In Russian culture, however, conflict is avoided, because it is viewed as detrimental to relationships. People perceive that they have no control over conflict and the way it can develop; therefore, they prefer to stay away from it. I suggest that differences in Israeli and Russian perceptions of conflict reflect distinct cultural values: Israeli culture internalized the western notions of positivism and rationalism, that along with Zionist-socialist ideology resulted in the hybrid construct of *dugriut*. Russian-Soviet culture, nurtured on the Russian mystical belief in fatalism, the impossibility of rational change, and a transcendental realm of *dusha* ['soul'], alongside the Soviet-procreated distrust, *chootkost* became a key-value. *Chootkost* (speaker's restraint and hearer's sensitivity) permeates various facets of Russian culture. Chekhov's plays, for instance, are rich with innuendos and allusions. His characters express their thoughts and feelings only indirectly, causing the audience to be responsible for their interpretation.

Open expression of feelings, especially in a public setting, has always induced apprehension for Russians. A popular Russian self-help book, which I use as cultural evidence, even offers a psychological explanation for refraining from up-front emotional behavior: 'There is a great danger in uncontrolled expression of feelings and emotions in public ... All of a sudden we are unconsciously involved in someone else's condition, distributed and intensified as a chain reaction' (Krohina and Krupenin 1995).

The Russian introduction routine is also based on the principle of avoiding any expression of feelings and/or personal issues. When meeting for the first time, people typically discuss general topics and avoid asking personal questions. According to the Russian expression, they try not to 'invade one's soul'. During such initial conversations people have a chance to learn personal information about each other in an indirect way, and without interrogation. This is not to say that the value of openness and emotional expressiveness is lacking from Russian-Soviet culture. Openness is highly appreciated in close relationships, made possible by the parties' full trust in each other, as in a context of friendship (Markovitz 1993). However, it is extremely difficult for Soviet or post-Soviet individuals to reach the state of full trust, especially if they are Jewish (Markovitz 1993). Highly concerned with the perils of openness, Soviet Jews were always cautious in their personal contacts. Among the

sociological and historical reasons that shaped this communicative style is the mutual fear engendered by the Soviet system.

The avoidance of questions in Russian speech also has historical and cultural origins. Questions are interpreted as intrusions or interrogations, rather than as a way to mitigate a request or complaint. In an informal post-test interview, one of the respondents commented on an additional cultural meaning of questions in Russian: 'Questions were always problematic in Russia. Not just personal questions, but any questions. For example, you can't ask a teacher if you don't understand something. Question is what distinguishes an individual from a crowd. The rule is, if you cannot ask a question – don't ask!' Therefore, questions, which are often used in Hebrew as a mitigating strategy, can be misinterpreted by Soviet immigrants reading their own cultural meanings into another language.

Another culture-specific strategy that can result in pragmatic failure is Russian verbose playfulness that emphasizes the value of eloquence: *krasnoe slovo* ['a nice turn of phrase'] in Russian literary tradition. An English journalist who spent an extended stay in Russia describes this phenomenon as a digression from the subject:

> Digression is not just a commonly employed attribute of the St. Petersburg bohemians; it is one of their main rhetorical devices, a necessary element of their technique. A St. Petersburg local will never go straight to the heart of the matter, if he has an opportunity to go around; he'll never refer to facts if he can debate possibilities. It will never occur to him that to verbalize an idea one can use hundreds of relevant words instead of thousands of irrelevant but colorful ones. (Nicholson 1994)

This rhetoric clearly contrasts with the Hebrew norm preferring standardized routine expressions. The immigrants influenced by the Hebrew norm use routine expressions, which also make speaking the second language easier. However, they do not leave their playful and verbose rhetoric behind, which, though perfectly suitable in Russian, makes them sound evasive and long-winded in Hebrew.

Conclusions

The main hypothesis is confirmed: the three groups differ in the realization of complaints. The three groups are characterized as follows:

1. The hypothesis for the Israeli group is confirmed: as expected, the speech acts performed by the group exhibit a tendency for directness

and positive politeness. Inspired by the value of *dugriut*, the common Hebrew mitigating strategies include routine expression and questions that convey personal involvement.

2. The hypothesis for the Russian group is only partially confirmed: indeed, the speech acts performed by the group exhibit a tendency for indirectness, expressed in opting out; however, instead of expected negative politeness, complaints show a tendency for positive politeness. The common Russian mitigating strategies, in lieu of the value of *chootkost*, include playful expressions such as metaphors, hyperbole, jokes, allusions, and the avoidance of questions.

3. The hypothesis for the immigrant group is also partially confirmed: even though the interlanguage reflects a tendency for indirectness, it is not associated with negative politeness. The politeness strategy of the interlanguage is hybrid, since the immigrants use both Russian and Hebrew mitigating strategies. However, since the immigrants' linguistic and cultural resources in a target language are limited, they use indicators of politeness to a much lower extent than the two groups of native-speakers. As language-learners, the immigrants are unsure about pragmatic norms; they focus on conveying basic meaning, not on nuances. Even though their complaints for the most part are grammatically acceptable, Israeli coders often interpret them as pragmatically deviant.

In conclusion, ex-Soviets nurtured on the value of *chootkost* and the tradition of 'reading between the lines' misinterpret Hebrew directness; whereas Israelis who grew up on *dugriut* fail to appreciate playful and verbose Russian indirectness. Thus, these pragmatic strategies lead to negative attributions and stereotypes that can be overcome only through mutual effort towards cultural understanding.

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

Appendix

Sample items from the Discourse Completion Test

Situation 3

You live at the dormitory. Your friend lives next door, and every evening you hear loud music from his room until 1 o'clock in the morning. One day, when the music is extremely loud and you have a headache and cannot fall asleep, you decide to talk to your friend. He opens the door and you say to him:

Situation 7

You are friends with a teaching assistant at one of the courses. He was supposed to mark and return your essay to you. Everybody in your class already got their essays back. When you asked the assistant about your essay, he promised to return it to you later. The exam is soon, and he still hasn't returned your essay. You approach the assistant and say to him:

Notes

1. The DCT includes only situations that both Russians and Israelis interpreted similarly; therefore interaction effect is neutralized and is not discussed in this essay.
2. Since this variable is valid only for the immigrant group, T-test was performed instead of ANOVA.

References

Austin, John L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana (1987). Indirectness and politeness in requests: Same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics* 11, 131–146.

— (1989). Playing it safe: The role of conventionality in indirect requests. In Blum-Kulka, S., J. House and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 37–70.

— (1992). The metapragmatics of politeness in Israeli society. In Watts, R. J., S. Ide, and K. Ehlich (eds.), *Politeness in Language*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 255–280.

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper (1989). *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana and Juliana House (1989). Cross-cultural and situational variation in requesting behavior. In Blum-Kulka, S., J. House, and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 123–154.

Brown, Penelope and Stephen D. Levinson (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carbaugh, Donal (1993). 'Soul' and 'self': Soviet and American cultures in conversation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, 182–200.

Clyne, Michael, Martin Ball, and Deborah Neil (1991). Intercultural communication in work in Australia: Complaints and apologies in turns. *Multilingua* 10, 251–273.

Gershenson, Olga (1994). Mezhkulturnye neponimaniia: Israiltiane i repatrianty iz Rossii. [Cross-cultural misunderstanding: Israelis and Russian immigrants.] *Slavianovedenie* 4, 53–58. (In Russian)

Jakobson, Roman (1981). Linguistics and poetics. In *Selected Writings*. Vol. 3. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Katriel, Tamar (1986). *Talking Straight: Dugri Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krohina, Irina and Alexei Krupenin (1994). *Vsio ob Etikete*. [Everything on Etiquette]. Rostov-na-Donu: Fenix. (In Russian)

Kuzar, Ron (2001). *Hebrew and Zionism: A Discourse Analytic Cultural Study*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Levada, Yurii et al. (1993). *Sovetskii Prostoi Chelovek*. [Rank-and-file Soviet]. Moscow: Intercenter. (In Russian)

Markovitz, Fran (1993). *A Community Inspite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Émigrés in New York*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Mills, Margaret H. (1991a). Strategia obrashenia s prosboi na russkom iazyke: nepriamoi sposob, vezhlivost i kulturnye osobenosti. [Request strategies in Russian: Indirect way, politeness and specific cultural features]. *Russkii Yazyk Za Rubezhom* 3, 137–149. (In Russian)

— (1991b). The performative force of the interrogative in colloquial Russian: From direct to indirect speech acts. *Slavic and East European Journal* 35, 553–569.

— (1992). Conventionalized politeness in Russian requests (A pragmatic view of indirectness). *Russian Linguistics* 16, 65–78.

Nicholson, John (1994). *Drugoi Peterburg*. [Another Peterburg]. St. Petersburg: Petrogradskii and K. (In Russian)

Olshtain, Elite (1989). Apologies across languages. In Blum-Kulka, S., J. House, and G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 155–173.

Olshtain, Elite and Weinbach, Liora (1987). Complaints: A study of speech act behavior among native and non-native speakers of Hebrew. In Verschueren, J. and M. Bertuccelli-Papi (eds.), *The Pragmatic Perspective*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 195–208

— (1993). Interlanguage features of the speech act of complaining. In Kasper, G. and S. Blum-Kulka (eds.), *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 108–123.

Searle, John R. (1969). *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

— (1975). Indirect speech acts. In Cole, P. and J. L. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics, 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 59–82.

Thomas, Jenny A. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4, 91–112.

Turner, Victor W. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Pub.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1985). Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, 145–161.

Zemskaia, Elena A. (ed.) (1983). *Russkaia Razgovornaia Rech'* [Russian Conversational Speech]. Moscow: Nauka. (In Russian)