

CONFICTING PRAGMATIC SYSTEMS IN BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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Abstract: The paper discusses development of *polite behaviour* and *proper forms of address* in bilingual children for whom second language skills are built on the foundation of the pragmatic system of the first language, spoken at home. Such children initially operate within an *asymmetric system of pragmatic strategies*, with each language related to different areas of social life. Bilingual children may often be perceived as ill mannered, since their behaviour is interpreted as related to their personality or *culture*, not language problems. Children of the same ethnic background are likely to commit similar errors and this may easily give rise to cultural stereotyping.

Keywords: bilingual children, politeness, address forms, stereotyping

1. INTRODUCTION

Like many female linguists with children, I have developed an interest in a child's acquisition of language. Although my children were born in Canada, the first language they learned was Polish, as this is the language spoken at home. I have not, so far, experienced any serious problems with my children refusing to speak the language of their parents. At present, my children age 7 and 9, speak both Polish and English. My interest in bilingualism is a direct result of my everyday observation of their linguistic development.

This presentation summarises my observations concerning various types of communicative failures of several children who – although born and/or living in English speaking Canada – grow up using a minority language (in this case Polish) at home. I observed a group of children of Polish background living in a small town in English-speaking Ontario. All of those children have parents who speak Polish at home and who, when the children reach school age, send them to both

regular English school and, once a week, to a Polish school where the children receive basic education in the Polish language. I concentrated on the group of the youngest children who were at the initial stage of learning English. My informal observations concern a group of ca 15 children over the period of 3 years. Quite often, the minority language is the only language the children speak until they enter school.

I am interested in the development of strategies of polite behaviour and proper address forms in those bilingual children for whom second language (here English) skills are built on a still shaky foundation of the pragmatic system developed for the first language (here Polish). I would like to argue that such children first operate within an asymmetric system of pragmatic strategies, with each language related to different, sometimes complementary areas of social life. As their second language skills develop, they reach native-like fluency but pragmatics often remains an area where first language exerts a strong influence. In such cases, bilingual children may be perceived as ill mannered, misbehaving and impolite as they employ politeness strategies (manifested as verbal behaviours) that seem odd to native-speakers of other languages. Wrongly chosen strategies of polite behaviour may then be perceived as related not to linguistic causes but rather to child's personality. Since children from the same ethnic background are likely to violate pragmatic strategies of the second language in a regular way, this may give rise to cultural stereotyping about a particular linguistic group (cf. Cecchetto & Stroinska, 1997 and Loeschmann & Stroinska, 1998).

2. DEVELOPMENT OF SECOND LANGUAGE SKILLS

In this paper, I discuss the stage of linguistic development of children, when they begin to acquire communicative skills in the second language. I concentrate on those cases, where the children are not developing bilingual competence from the very beginning of their lives but rather on the situation where one language is learned first, at home. As those children grow up in the context of another culture, they are often exposed to the second language to various degrees (radio and TV, other children etc.) from the beginning of their lives. This type of second language learning by children was referred to by Bialystok (1991:1) as "submersion in the foreign culture", with the relative status of the two languages critical for the outcome of the learning process.

I use my experience with Polish speaking children in Canada to illustrate what I believe to be more general processes of a bilingual child's language acquisition. I focus on those cases when the second language skills are formed on a still unstable and shaky foundation of the first language that the child is speaking with his or her family. I shall discuss the mechanism of mutual influences between two linguistic systems: the minority language spoken at home and the English language (or the language of the country), concentrating on conflicting pragmatic systems.

As Titone & Danesi (1985:86) point out, the fact that the child has already begun to develop, or has developed one language can be seen as both an aid and an obstacle.

It can be an aid because second language learners have already developed some form of metalinguistic awareness which will allow them to construct a theory of the second language in terms of the first without going through the stages of first language acquisition. It can be an obstacle in those areas where two languages contrast and where the first language can become a potential source of interference.

The interference of the second language in the area of syntax, morphology and phonology has attracted, over the years, considerable attention (for a review cf. Edwards, 1994). Cross-linguistic variation in the area of pragmatics has become one of the focal areas of research in the broadly defined field of sociolinguistics. However, little attention has thus far been paid to first language interference in the area of pragmatics in the case of bilingual children, with Bialystok (1991) being one of few exceptions. And yet, there is a potential for serious misunderstanding of the child's problems and for an unfounded but biased perception of the child's performance.

It is my objective in this paper to point to the linguistic sources of stereotyping about bilingual children, if their performance in the crucial areas of social behaviour (such as politeness and use of proper address forms) deviates from what is expected.

3. LANGUAGE TRANSFER

In the light of common beliefs about similarities and differences between languages, there appears to be a widespread assumption that language transfer, both positive and negative, is an important factor in the acquisition of the second language. However, not all learners behave as the contrastive analysis of two languages would predict. Not all learners make the same errors and not all of the possible and predictable errors are in fact made. The role of language transfer is a very controversial topic in applied linguistics. Odlin in his 1989 book entitled *Language Transfer – Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*, addressed the pragmatic aspects of language transfer. He observes that part of the difficulty in second language acquisition is related to assumptions that social interaction involves both universal and language specific elements. When communicating in foreign language, learners often believe that, as Odlin (1989:57) put it,

their requests, their greetings, their facial expressions, their volume, and so on, are not arbitrary in the way that words in their native language are. That is, learners may suspect – not altogether mistakenly – that the rules guiding their interaction are natural and therefore universal.

In the linguistic literature, the idea of cross-linguistic interference in language learning dates back to Lado's 1957 manual on contrastive analysis *Linguistics across cultures*. In the foreword to that book, Fries wrote:

learning a second language (...) constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special "set" created by the first language habits.

The fundamental assumption in Lado's work was that learners tend to transfer the forms and meanings, as well as their distribution, from their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. They do that both *productively*, when attempting to speak the language and to communicate in the foreign culture, and *receptively*, when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture of the native-speakers (cf. Lado 1957:2)

We still know relatively little of the mechanisms of learning language. Quite a significant portion

of our knowledge comes from the analysis of errors made in the process of learning. The process of learning the second language is often characterised by systemic errors, that is "aberrations or deviations which can be described either in terms of native-language interference or in terms of specific psychological learning strategies" (Titone & Danesi, 1985:93). The first type of errors is known as interlinguistic errors and the second type as intralinguistic.

4. TYPES OF ERRORS

Most studies on the linguistic development of bilingual children concentrate on language transfer in areas where errors are easy to detect and categorise, such as pronunciation, morphology, syntax and lexicon. It is quite obvious that there may be negative or positive transfer of linguistic habits in these areas. The extent of this transfer may depend on several factors, such as: child's age, the age when the child began to learn the second language, the extent to which the minority language is used at home (e.g. between the parents and the child, between the child and his or her brothers/sisters in the family, in the community, in the heritage language school, etc.).

If the child's pronunciation in English is perceived as deviating from the norm, it will be assumed that the child speaks with an accent because his/her parents were not born in the country. If the child makes syntactic or morphological errors, the listener may infer that the child does not speak English, or at least *Standard English*, at home. There is, however, yet another level of interference from the minority language, one that is not as obvious as the foreign accent or wrong grammatical forms that the child may be using. This is the level of discourse with all its aspects that are often labelled as pragmatic. They are related to the use of language and they have to be learned in order to be applied correctly. Odlin (1989:48) claims that "of all areas of contrastive analysis, cross-linguistic comparisons of discourse are probably most challenging".

In the early 1980s, the notion of communicative competence, introduced by Habermas and Hymes in early 1970s, was adapted to second language learning and teaching and the scope of cross linguistic contrastive research was extended to include the area called "interlanguage pragmatics" or "cross-linguistic pragmatics". Recently, the term "cross-cultural" is often used instead of "cross-linguistic".

It was observed that the transfer of the norms of one community to another community may well lead to 'pragmatic failure' and to judgements that the speakers from other ethnic backgrounds are in some way being impolite, uncooperative, etc. Pragmatic failures may both result from the transfer of cultural norms of polite behaviour and from the transfer of linguistic representation of the norms of politeness. Thomas (1983) introduced the notion of a *pragmalinguistic failure*, where the transfer of linguistic means for performing certain social acts may lead to misinterpretation of the speaker's intentions and of his or her intended politeness. In the latter case, especially if the child's first language is not well known, the linguistic reasons behind the child's behaviour may not be seen. Most people realise why so many speakers of English confuse the polite and the familiar forms of address in languages that make a distinction between them, as the *tu* and *Vous* in French, *du* and *Sie* in German, etc. Even though confusing those forms may still be interpreted as arrogance or lack of respect for those of higher age or status, there seems to be more tolerance for the wrong use of address forms by the speakers of English than there is for the speakers of less known languages.

5. PRAGMALINGUISTIC ERRORS

I am particularly interested in language transfer in the area of address forms. I believe that a bilingual child develops an asymmetric repertoire of functional registers. The child is growing up in a home where the parents' native language is cultivated (or at least spoken...) and in a country where yet another language is used. Therefore the child learns to speak both languages but does not have the same range of styles in both languages. This is clearly a case of *diglossia*, which is usually defined as a situation where the varieties of one language or two languages are kept quite apart functionally, with one used in one set of circumstances and the other used in an entirely different set (cf. Wardhaugh, 1986:88). The child may achieve a symmetric range of registers in both languages but this may require an extra effort and will happen when the child is older. It may be noted here that there are also children who, for the first few years of their life, or until they start school, may speak a very impoverished mixture of the two languages. This may happen, for instance, when both parents are working and the child spends most of the time with caregivers. It is simply yet another stereotype that children from minority groups who do not speak English, necessarily speak the other language.

In the majority of cases, however, by the time the child goes to school, he/she usually speaks the minority language well and may also speak some English. Some children from ethnic minorities go to school without any knowledge of English, some speak enough English to be able to engage in very basic communication. It is not unusual that a child, who spoke no English in September, will be able to speak it by Christmas. Is at that stage that teachers, coaches, family doctors etc. form their first opinions about the child. They will form their impressions partly on the basis of what the child knows and can say but partly on the basis of how the child speaks.

Richards (1980) notes that the violations of the norms of conversation in the target language are potentially much more serious than syntactic or pronunciation errors since such violations may affect what is called "the presentation of self". The level of discourse competence includes phenomena such as appropriate politeness strategies used for apologies, requests, greetings, address forms etc.

If native language patterns influence learners in inappropriate ways, the language that the learner uses may seem impolite or incoherent. (...) A learner may interpret conversations and monologues in the target language in terms of native language norms, and may mistakenly believe that native speakers are being rude in situations where they are actually behaving appropriately according to the norms of their speech community. Odlin (1989:48-49)

This is a vicious circle of misinterpretation with both sides forming opinions about each other on the basis of their own expectations.

6. FOREIGN ACCENT AS SELF-DEFENCE

Here, I would like to point to the importance of the child's pronunciation. When we talk to foreigners, their accent often reveals their origin. In neutral situations, many native-speakers tend to show a higher degree of tolerance to all kinds of errors (linguistic and behavioural) made by people who, as their accent reveals, are foreigners.

In case of bilingual children, their pronunciation may not reveal that the listener should be aware of a potential interlanguage transfer. In some social work study on the integration of immigrants in Canada, I found the following statement describing the experience of one frustrated immigrant: people believe that if one speaks with an accent, one thinks with an accent.

If so, then foreign accent functions as a kind of "self-defence", indicating that there is a potential for miscommunication. In case of a child, whose pronunciation may be native-like, communicative failures will likely be attributed to non-linguistic factors, such as below average intelligence, behavioural problems, etc. Cross-cultural discourse awareness among professionals working with children in multiethnic communities may be the key to finding a solution.

7. FORMS OF ADDRESS

There are situations where languages may differ in the choice of linguistic means to express politeness. I shall concentrate here on the element of language that is particularly important in the entire system of interacting with other people, that is on linguistic means available to the speakers to make reference to themselves, as well as to other participants in communicative events. Their use in a conversation cannot be avoided. As the system of pronouns available to the speakers plays a major role in that area of language use, I shall start with an analysis of possible differences between the first and the second language.

English no longer distinguishes between the familiar and polite address form in the system of pronouns. The 2nd Person pronoun has the same morphological shape in singular and plural. Furthermore, there is no special form reserved for the polite address, as, for instance, the German polite form *Sie*, the French *Vous*, or the Polish *Pan/Pani/Panstwo* (the distinction between the first two forms is related to Gender, the third form is Plural). English represents in this respect quite a minimalist approach: many other languages have much more developed systems of address, either grammaticalised or based on the use of lexical means. It might seem that children with linguistic background in any other European language (French, Italian, Spanish, German, Polish, Russian etc.) should have no difficulties with the English address forms since there is practically no choice but *you*. Despite that fact, negative transfer is possible and indeed common.

Apart from the grammatical means of address (forms of verb (+ pronouns)), some languages use lexical items to specify the addressee (like the addition of *Your Honour*, *Your Worship*, *Dr. Nichols*, etc. in English) or to emphasise a high degree of politeness. This is not a simple question: in sarcastic comments, elaborated forms of address may in fact strengthen the insulting character of the utterance, as it is often done, for example, in parliamentary debates.

If the first language differs from the second language in the structure of polite address forms, it may be expected that some forms of polite address will be difficult for the child to master or will involve transferring structures of address or greeting from the first language into the second.

8. TRANSFER FROM POLISH

Polish polite address form requires that the form *Pan/Pani/Panstwo* be added to the 3rd person

(singular or plural) form of the verb. The first two of these nominal forms correspond roughly to the English *Mr* and *Mrs*, however, the speaker is not supposed to use them with the last name of the person addressed. The addition of the last name is quite frequent in some regional varieties of Polish and thus is interpreted as either dialect or common (thus not particularly polite).

If the speaker is familiar with the addressee, the addition of the person's first name is a standard form. In most neutral situation, however, the forms *Pan* or *Pani* are used on their own, i.e. without the last or first name, as the subject of the 3rd person singular verb. In many contexts it is also considered impolite to talk about other people using their last names only, unless they are close friends or public figures.

The Polish polite address is thus almost the opposite of the English one. In English, forms *Mr* and *Mrs/Ms* are not used on their own but rather with the last name and never with the first name. Direct transfer of the Polish strategy into English results in forms that would be unacceptable for English speakers. This is not a question of failing to learn something that the child should have learned. The child is usually doing his or her best to express the thoughts according to the only set of rules of polite behaviour that he/she has. The question of universality versus relativity of those rules most likely never even enters the child's mind. The following examples illustrate how a simple literal translation from Polish into English yields pragmatically unacceptable utterances.

Polish → English:

1	"Dzien dobry Pani"	? Hello Mrs/Good day Mrs/Good day Ms ¹
	polite greeting addressed to a female	
2	"Dzien dobry Pani Ireno"	? Hello Mrs Irene...
	polite and formal greeting addressed to a familiar female	
	e.g. a neighbour or a colleague at work	
3	? "Rachunek od pana Bella" ²	* (Here is) a bill from Mr Bell
	the way my children talk about telephone bills	
4	? "To napisal pan Beethoven"	* Mr Beethoven wrote this piece ³
	as above, an example of the overgeneralization...	
5	"Tak prosze pani."	* Yes lady please
	a polite and formal expression of agreement when addressing a female; the English form	

¹ There is a difference in the use of greeting forms when the child addresses the teacher in Canada and in Great Britain. The form 'Good morning Miss', used to address a female teacher, may be considered odd in Canada while it is required in some English schools. My daughter found this difference very confusing when she went to school in England after two years of attending school (Kindergarten) in Canada.

² My children overgeneralise Polish politeness strategies and add the word *Pan/Pani* where it is inappropriate even in Polish. This behaviour is quite idiosyncratic.

³ These forms are not correct in Polish, as the addition of *Mr* or *Mrs* to the names of famous people or to persons' names used as company names is not recommended. They show an exaggerated level of politeness or are simply an overgeneralization of a rule that requires the addition of a polite title/address form to the last name of the person talked about.

was used by a middle aged Polish woman who spoke very limited English when talking to her landlady.

If a child from an ethnic background hears English, it is often the language that other children are using or English on TV. In both cases, the indiscriminate imitation of the speech patterns heard may result in verbal behaviour, which might have fitted the context where it was originally used and encountered by the child, but is unacceptable in most real life situations.

Let me illustrate this statement with an anecdotal example from my personal experience, without making any generalising claims. My then four-year-old daughter, who was brought to school for the Junior Kindergarten registration, wanted to draw the Principals attention to the fact that he dropped his pen on the floor. She said: "Hey man, you dropped something". This was her English version of the Polish expression, appropriate for the situation: "Prosze Pana, cos Panu upadlo" (literally 'Please Mr, something of yours dropped'). It was fortunate that the Principal was of Polish background himself and was able to assess my daughter's general politeness talking to her in Polish. He was also well aware of the linguistic problems that immigrant children may face at school as the school has over 30% of children with a language other than English spoken at home. My daughter was less fortunate one year later, when, after two months spent in Poland, she persisted in greeting her teacher with "Good morning Mrs". Although the teacher never complained directly about my daughter's choice of words, she did complain about her 'childish way of speaking', 'playing silly', etc., and had her seen by a speech pathologist.

An example of my daughter (then 3 years old and only beginning to interact with English speaking people) using wrongly what she has heard used by other children, probably talking to her, was her friendly greeting to the babysitter: "Hi Linda, you silly one...", with clearly no offence intended. The block "Hi ___, you silly one" was imitated without being analysed into smaller parts, except for the substitution of the name.

9. TRANSFER FROM ENGLISH

There is no doubt that the influence of English on the system of address forms used in Polish may be equally disturbing. Probably the most typical error made by those who adopt the English system of pronouns and then learn another language is the use of the familiar form instead of the polite form. This is usually perceived as rude, especially if coming from a child speaking to an adult. The same error is frequent among, for instance, university students in Canada, who learn German, Italian, French, Russian, or any other language with a richer system of polite address forms, and regularly use the familiar form addressing the instructor. Another problem is the unnecessary insertion of the 2nd person pronoun *ty*, although in Polish pronouns are usually dropped as redundant. The insertion of the familiar, therefore not polite enough form of address strengthens the impression of rudeness.

English → Polish

2nd person singular instead of polite address:

6	"Dzien dobry Stachu"	'Hello Stan'
	a greeting from a 5 year old child to an 80 year old uncle...	

7 "Pani Jadziu, jak ty sie czujesz?" 'Mrs Jadzia, how are you?'
 the correct form should use 3rd person singular of the verb with the word Pani (Mrs') as subject: "Pani Jadziu, jak sie Pani czuje?"

The use of the form "jak sie czujesz?" is another type of error: this phrase is a direct translation of the English "How are you" but, used in Polish, may be interpreted as inquiry about health problems. Polish functional equivalent of a greeting formula would rather be "Co slychac?" (roughly corresponding to 'What's happening?').

The children are expected to learn two systems of pronouns used for address forms as well as two systems of combining titles, first names and last names. As a result, the children may confuse the two in a way that allows them to use a *minimal effort system*, i.e. a selection of simplified means from both languages. One could say that, in the pragmatic domain, the child has developed a single *interlanguage* at the rule level, and realises those rules in two ways at the lexicon level. This obviously means that the child is likely to make mistakes in both languages and, despite the effort of learning two languages, may be regularly punished for not achieving the required standard in either of them.

10. OTHER SPEECH ACTS

There is potential for misinterpretation of the speakers intentions in many other everyday situations, such as leave taking, opening a telephone conversation, introducing oneself and others, exchanging compliments, apologising to and thanking other people. There are, obviously, many other areas where cross-cultural influences may result in pragmatically wrong behaviour, not all of those situations are likely to involve small children (cf. Wierzbicka, 1991, Cecchetto & Stroinska, 1997). Here, I shall briefly mention some of the errors encountered in observing children of Polish background in communication with English-speakers in Canada.

When taking leave, in Polish, one could politely negotiate next meeting or say that it was nice to *meet* someone. This is a standard expression even if the current get together was not the first meeting. The verb *see* is not used for a past event, as it would downgrade the pleasure of meeting the person (i.e. being with rather than just seeing someone). It can be used in greetings opening a conversation as in "Milo Cie widziec/zobaczyc" ('it is nice to see you'). A typical error of Polish adult speakers is therefore to finish conversation with *it was nice to meet you...* This sounds as if the speaker could not remember that he/she already met the conversation partner before. Children of Polish background, on the other hand, often use the English formula "it was nice to see you" translated into Polish, which is not very polite for Polish conversation standards. "See you later", "Nice talking to you...", "Talk to you later", "Bye for now" ... may also be translated into Polish and will then be considered too abrupt or short and not polite enough for the Polish standards. "We should get together for lunch sometime", on the other hand, may be taken literally.

The Polish etiquette requires starting a telephone conversation by stating one's name and apologising for intrusion or invading someone's privacy. This apology can take many forms, the caller may apologise for calling too early, too late, at a meal time, on Sunday, etc. This tendency to apologise may be an effect of the earlier influence of French on the Polish upper class culture in general. The accepted rules for making a telephone call in most of the English speaking world

do not require that the caller identifies himself or herself and the apology will be considered odd and out of place. The caller may even feel that, by making a telephone call, he/she is being polite. This, combined with the fact that the callers do not identify themselves, produces in effect the impression of arrogance, while the apologetic behaviour of Polish speakers may give the impression that the person lacks confidence.

Another interesting area of confusion is the pair of expressions used for apology in English: *sorry* and *excuse me*. The corresponding set of expressions in Polish also has two elements: *przepraszam* ('I am sorry'/ 'Excuse me') and *przykro mi* ('I am sorry' - used in response to bad news). The correspondence between the English expressions and their Polish counterparts is not obvious, and the rules for their use are language specific. Most importantly, Polish uses apology as a relatively standard opening of conversation. In case of a genuine mistake or lack of knowledge, on the other hand, in Poland, one usually does not apologize but rather tries not to admit a mistake. Many interesting cross-linguistic observations on requests and apologies can be found in Blum-Kulka (1989).

Even such a simple situation as responding to someone saying "Thank you" may prove difficult. The standard response in Polish is "Nie ma za co", ('there is nothing to thank for', like the French "de rien") follows the general principle of downgrading one's own achievements and playing down compliments. As English speakers expect a simple "You are welcome" as a response to "Thank you", and a simple "Thank you" as a response to a compliment, the Polish strategy of denial will be seen as odd rather than polite. To Polish speakers, on the other hand, the English expression "You are welcome" may give the impression that the speaker is putting the hearer down.

There are many other expressions that look like close equivalents but would be interpreted in both languages in a very different way. For instance, Poles often use in English the expression "Who knows?", equivalent to the Polish "Kto wie?". They do so with the simple meaning "noone knows". In English, on the other hand, there is an additional negative element of meaning: "Who knows?" (noone knows) and "Who cares?". The negative element is absent from the Polish expression. However, when it is translated directly into English, it may be interpreted as rude. At the same time, the English "I don't care", used if the speaker was offered a choice, will be interpreted as rude by many speakers of Polish, as it is impolite to show that one does not care about something that is the subject of the conversation. Some of these linguistic behaviours may involve children and adults (a typical setting would be Polish parents communicating with the English-speaking friends of their children). There is a great potential for misinterpretation of the children's behaviour and stereotyping about their arrogance. A comprehensive study of potential problems in intercultural communication with Poles may be found in Ronowicz 1993 and 1995.

While adult speakers may be expected to at least understand that the two languages differ and that what is used in one language may not necessarily have a similar form in the other language, most children have not yet formed such assumptions. They learn the second language using the rules for polite behaviour accumulated when acquiring the first language. In most cases they try very hard to be polite. Despite their efforts, they may still say wrong things at a wrong time. Their errors, however, are most often linguistic, i.e. resulting from transfer of linguistic strategies of politeness from one language into another, and not necessarily related to their personality or level of intelligence.

11. LANGUAGE-BASED STEREOTYPING

It can be assumed that, unless the speaker has good reasons to behave otherwise, he or she will try to be polite. This can in fact be seen as an extension of Gricean maxims. Normally, the behaviour of two or more individual people can be seen as a function of their personalities and other individual features, as well as those of the situation. In case of cross-cultural communication, this simple picture becomes more complex. We need to take into account e.g. culture specific preferences for the use of certain politeness strategies or possible difficulties in performing politeness with the limited means of a foreign language.

In the study of politeness in cross-cultural communication, two further factors may need to be considered in a systematic way (as suggested in Knapp-Potthoff, 1991). Firstly, in cross-cultural communication the errors and misunderstandings, through the process of *stereotyping*, tend to have far reaching consequences for higher levels of social organisation as (ibid:203). Secondly, in many cases of cross-cultural communication, it is the structure and form of discourse itself that seems to cause problems in the communication of politeness.

The term *stereotype* has several meanings and can be defined from several theoretical perspectives. In the everyday sense of the word, 'stereotype' is something that simplifies our perception or understanding of the objects in the world, something rigid and inflexible, something that may even falsify our picture of the reality (cf. Loeschmann & Stroinska, 1998 – forthcoming).

The system of pronouns used for self-reference and to address the others is transparent enough to escape our attention. It is, nevertheless, able to influence our perception of each other and our mutual attitudes. Therefore, it plays an active role in the formation of social images of other people. Since pronouns are considered one of the most basic elements of language, their erroneous usage may be attributed not to the lack of language proficiency but to the lack of proper politeness, thus contributing to the negative stereotyping about other nationalities. This is further aggravated by the fact, that speakers of one language, due to native language interference, may tend to make regular errors in the foreign language.

When differences between verbal behaviour in two languages/cultures can be reduced to differences in the use of lexical items or idiomatic expressions, we are more likely to notice that the communicative failure may be due to a language barrier. If a group of people regularly exhibit a "deviant" behaviour, a prototype of their national standard may be formed. It will be a prototype formed from outside, with little or no understanding for the reasons behind the "deviation". Such 'semi-prototypes' are not based on facts but on misperceptions, that is on misunderstood or misinterpreted behaviour patterns. These ill-formed categories are usually referred to as *stereotypes*. It is often stressed that stereotypes are taken over and accepted without much thinking, that they are part of the tradition and that they are not *actively* formed by the members of a group, but rather *passively* acquired. This is not the case for the language-based stereotypes.

Language-based stereotypes are formed in the process of interaction with members of a different culture, and may be reinforced by each subsequent instance of cross-cultural communication. Some speakers lack cross-cultural discourse awareness and do not know, or do not want to know, that some communication breakdowns are due to cultural differences in how the same meanings can be expressed. They will then be inclined to form stereotypes of their conversation partners, labelling them as impolite, rude, arrogant, imposing or withdrawn. The label will depend on how

those speakers themselves define polite behaviour. Contact with a foreign culture is, unfortunately, not enough to create sensitivity and awareness of cultural diversity. On the contrary, exposure to other cultures may sometimes only strengthen negative attitudes and induce the process of stereotyping. Exposure to anything foreign and different may cause stress and anxiety, which in turn causes the individual to feel like defending his or her own identity by rejecting (being critical about) everything that is not familiar.

In the context of the ever increasing globalisation of human interaction in politics, economy and culture, this is a scary perspective, unless we make a conscious effort to develop cross-cultural discourse awareness. Cross-cultural awareness for bilingual or bicultural children in multiethnic societies remains a neglected area.

12. CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, I would like to reiterate that bilingual children, coming from homes where the minority language is spoken, often enter English speaking environment with some set parameters for pragmatic strategies of politeness. In those contexts where the child has had no experience with the English language discourse patterns, it will use the minority language patterns, assuming wrongly, but with no evil intentions, that this is what is expected. Regular discourse errors produced by members of same language groups may result in cultural stereotypes. Those stereotypes are based on the fact that different languages set different parameters for the same principle of behaviour. There is no right and wrong here, things are simply different, and the children lack linguistic knowledge and experience that could help them to differentiate the possible patterns.

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