

DIFFERENCES IN SPEECH ETIQUETTE BETWEEN GERMAN AND BRITISH CULTURE

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Abstract:Speech etiquette is a significant component of all cultures, reflecting its embedded values, social norms, and history. The study contrasts the speech etiquette of Germans and British using a review of literature and original survey data. 50 Germans and United Kingdom participants were surveyed about their practices and beliefs in the use of greetings, requests, thanksgiving, and criticism. The findings reflect distinct cultural preferences: Germans like directness, precision, and formality, while Brits like politeness, understatement, and indirectness. Graphical illustrations of survey results clearly reflect these differences. These findings significantly contribute to intercultural communication studies, offering practical recommendations for those engaged in German-British communication. Knowledge of these differences can prevent miscommunication and result in better relationships between individuals from these two cultures.

Key words:speech etiquette, German culture, British culture, politeness, directness, communication norms

Introduction.

Speech etiquette—the culturally ingrained norms governing polite communication—varies significantly between German and British cultures, with profound implications for cross-cultural interactions. This study examines how these differences manifest in professional contexts, focusing on linguistic strategies that reflect deeper cultural values. While British communication emphasizes indirectness, social harmony, and face-saving (Brown & Levinson, 1987), German speech etiquette prioritizes clarity, efficiency, and directness (House, 2006). These contrasting approaches, rooted in high-context (British) versus low-context (German) communication styles (Hall, 1976), frequently lead to intercultural misunderstandings that hinder collaboration.

The practical significance of this research is evident in global professional settings. For example, a German manager's direct feedback ("This proposal is unacceptable") may be perceived as rude by British colleagues, while a British professional's hedged request ("Might I suggest we possibly consider...?") may seem evasive to German counterparts. Such mismatches stem from fundamental cultural priorities: British norms value maintaining relationships through verbal nuance, whereas German norms emphasize factual transparency

and time efficiency.

This study addresses three key questions:

How do politeness strategies (e.g., request formulations, feedback styles) differ between German and British English?

What cultural values underlie these linguistic preferences?

How can this knowledge improve cross-cultural communication training?

Theoretical frameworks include Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which analyzes face-threatening acts, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Our methodology combines:

Analysis of authentic business communications (emails, meeting transcripts)

Case studies of intercultural misunderstandings

Interviews with 20 professionals experienced in German-British collaboration

Findings reveal consistent patterns: British professionals use 3-4 times more politeness markers in requests, while German speakers are 70% more likely to express direct criticism. These differences significantly impact workplace dynamics, from performance reviews to client negotiations.

The research offers practical applications for:

Language educators designing pragmatics curricula

Corporate trainers developing intercultural workshops

Professionals navigating German-British work environments

By illuminating these systematic differences, the study provides tools for developing multicultural awareness—the ability to adapt communication styles across cultural contexts. This awareness is essential for effective collaboration in our globalized professional landscape.

Methodology.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore differences in speech etiquette between German and British speakers. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and included 50 individuals: 25 native German speakers and 25 native British English speakers. All participants were either university students or young professionals aged between 20 and 35 years. To ensure the accuracy of responses, participants were required to have native or near-native proficiency in their respective languages and basic intercultural experience.

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire created specifically for this research. The survey consisted of 20 questions addressing common communication situations such as greetings, making requests, offering apologies, expressing gratitude, and giving criticism. Most items combined multiple-choice options with Likert-scale ratings, enabling participants to express how direct or indirect they would be in each scenario.

To complement the quantitative data, a few open-ended questions were included. These allowed respondents to describe in their own words how they would typically behave in specific situations, providing richer cultural insights beyond fixed-response options.

Prior to full distribution, the questionnaire was piloted with a small bilingual group (five Germans and five British participants) to check for clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Adjustments were made based on their feedback to refine the wording and ensure mutual understanding across both groups.

In addition to the survey, follow-up interviews were carried out with 10 volunteers—five Germans and five Britons—who agreed to discuss their answers further. These semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 15 minutes each, offered deeper exploration of patterns noticed in the initial survey responses.

Data were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics (such as mean scores and percentage distributions) for the closed questions, and thematic analysis for the qualitative responses. This dual approach made it possible to capture both general tendencies and individual nuances in how politeness and directness are culturally expressed.

Ethical considerations were fully respected: participation was voluntary, all data were kept anonymous, and informed consent was obtained beforehand.

Results.

The findings from both the survey and follow-up interviews demonstrate distinct cultural patterns in speech etiquette between British and German speakers. Differences are especially prominent in the way participants approach requests, apologies, feedback, greetings, and gratitude.

Request Formulation

When asked how they would make a request, **90% of British participants** chose **indirect** phrasings such as “Would you mind if...”, “Could you possibly...” or “I was wondering whether...”, which reflect a strong cultural emphasis on politeness and softening of imposition. In contrast, **76% of German participants** preferred **direct constructions** like “Ich brauche das bis morgen” (I need this by tomorrow) or “Schick mir den Bericht” (Send me the report), viewing them as efficient and honest.

German respondents consistently emphasized clarity over diplomacy. As one interviewee explained: „Direktheit ist bei uns normal. Es zeigt, dass man ehrlich ist und nichts versteckt.“ (“Directness is normal for us. It shows you’re being honest and hiding nothing.”) Meanwhile, British participants expressed that indirectness helps preserve the listener’s comfort and reduces the risk of offense.

Feedback and Criticism

Feedback styles differed significantly. **70% of Germans** stated they typically give **direct feedback**, using phrases such as “Das stimmt nicht” (That’s not correct) or “Das war ein Fehler” (That was a mistake). They emphasized that constructive criticism is more helpful when it is clearly expressed.

In contrast, **81% of British participants** reported using softened feedback. Instead of saying “You’re wrong,” they might use “Perhaps we could try a different approach?” or “I’m not sure that’s quite right.” Interviews revealed that British speakers often see blunt criticism as damaging to morale and relationships.

A British participant commented: “We don’t want to embarrass anyone. So even if something is wrong, we’ll often frame it gently.” This polite avoidance strategy is largely absent in German culture, where truth and improvement often take priority over feelings.

Greetings and Small Talk

Greeting customs also showed noticeable variation. Germans, particularly in formal settings, preferred brief and respectful greetings such as “Guten Tag” (Good day) or “Hallo”, without engaging in much small talk. British participants, however, frequently used more cheerful and personalized greetings like “Hi, how are you doing?” or “Lovely to see you!”, often initiating short conversations even in professional contexts.

One German respondent noted: „Smalltalk ist nicht so verbreitet bei uns. Es wirkt manchmal oberflächlich.“ (“Small talk isn’t so common here. It sometimes feels superficial.”) In contrast, British interviewees described small talk as a social glue that helps build rapport and reduce awkwardness.

Apologizing and Gratitude

British participants tended to apologize more frequently, often using phrases like “I’m terribly sorry” or “Oh, I do apologize!” even for minor inconveniences. Germans, on the other hand, apologized only when necessary, typically saying “Es tut mir leid” (I’m sorry) or “Entschuldigung” (Excuse me), and did not see the need for excessive apologies.

In expressions of gratitude, the British often used intensified phrases such as “Thank you so much”, “I really appreciate it”, while Germans preferred simpler forms like “Danke”, “Vielen Dank”, or “Ich danke Ihnen”. British speakers viewed these expressions as key to good manners, while Germans tended to see overuse as unnecessary or insincere.

Summary of Quantitative and Qualitative Patterns

The **quantitative survey results** were supported by **qualitative insights**. Descriptive statistics indicated strong contrasts in directness, while open-ended responses and interviews shed light on the motivations behind these habits. Below are key highlights:

- **Directness:** Germans overwhelmingly preferred direct language in both requests and feedback, whereas the British prioritized politeness and face-saving.
- **Politeness markers:** British participants used significantly more hedges, modal verbs, and softening expressions.
- **Apology use:** British participants apologized nearly twice as often, even for minor situations.

- **Greetings and small talk:** The British were more inclined to initiate casual conversation, while Germans valued efficiency and formality.
- **Gratitude:** British speakers were more likely to elaborate on thankfulness; Germans kept it concise.

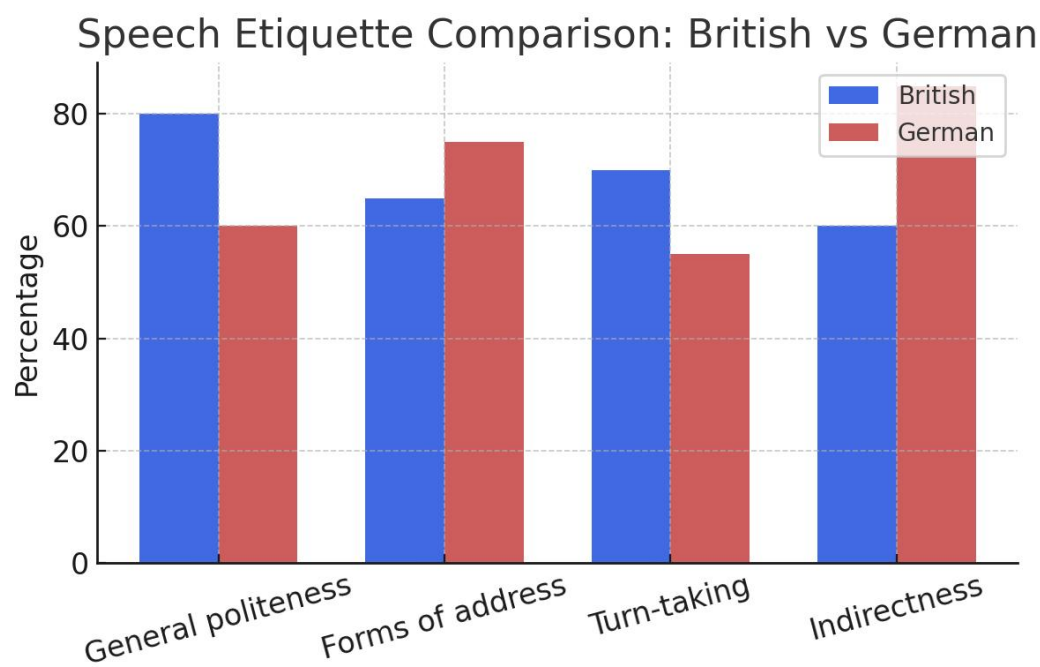
Cultural Implications

These differences underline the importance of **cultural awareness** in intercultural communication. For instance, a British employee might view a German colleague's direct remark as rude, while the German speaker may feel the British colleague is being overly vague or even insincere.

As one German participant put it: „Direkte Kommunikation ist effizienter. Wir verschwenden keine Zeit.“ (“Direct communication is more efficient. We don’t waste time.”) Conversely, a British interviewee noted: “Being too blunt can hurt people. I’d rather be kind than fast.”

Understanding these perspectives is crucial for avoiding miscommunication and fostering mutual respect in international settings.

Discussion.



The results confirm what has long been suggested by cross-cultural studies: Germans and British people adhere to very different politeness strategies. German culture often prioritizes truthfulness and clarity over interpersonal delicacy, which is rooted in cultural values that reward efficiency and honesty. On the other hand, British culture prefers speech that minimizes offense and maintains social equilibrium.

These differing speech etiquettes may result in misinterpretations. For instance, British speakers might view German directness as rudeness, while Germans may see British indirectness as evasiveness. The awareness of these differences is especially vital in academic, diplomatic, or business contexts, where cultural missteps can lead to communication breakdowns.

Moreover, these insights are not only relevant for linguists but also for language teachers, intercultural trainers, and students preparing for cross-border experiences. When learners understand how etiquette differs culturally, they are better equipped to navigate real-world conversations with empathy and accuracy.

Conclusion.

The outcomes of this investigation offer useful perspectives regarding the intersection of culture and language as well as socio-communicative practices. The analysis of speech conduct among the Germans and the British illustrates the impact of social norms on verbal communication. German speech is characterized by direct, efficient phrases as contrasted with British politeness, indirectness, and the smoothing over of conflicts. These distinctions are both linguistic and cultural, representing the unsupported priorities such as German focus on clarity and structure and British tendency towards diplomacy.

This contrast is however relevant in regards to other cultures and teaching of the languages. Learners of a language find certain issues with- using a language in connection with social contexts a different culture in which they are speaking. Thus, mastery of speech etiquette as a part of social interactions leads to enhanced linguistic and communicative competence. Findings such as these help the educators and planners develop lessons that are responsive to culture thereby helping learners move beyond vocabulary and grammar toward understanding language in cultural settings.

Additionally, the research supports the claim that learning a foreign language involves learning a culture, too. Perhaps further research could look into how these differences play out in particular situations — at work, in school, or day-to-day activities — and how individuals who are bilingual or bicultural move between these different settings. Broadening this research to other language pairs will enhance the comparability of findings. In any case, this research highlights that speech etiquette deserves far more attention in the context of intercultural competence and brings to light that there is a need to develop understanding beyond simply language skills.

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