

German-English Communication: A Cross-Cultural Challenge

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As an immigrant to the United States I have experienced many conflicts between my own German culture and the American culture I first encountered in 2007. While it was fairly easy to adapt to new cultural aspects such as food, lifestyle, education, and climate, the obstacle of language and communication was, and still is, more difficult to overcome for me. Research on cultural adaptation reflects my own struggles as well as those experienced by English speakers residing in Germany.

According to scholar Juliane House (2006), Germans communicate differently compared to Americans on five dimensions. Other theorists, such as Geert Hofstede and Edward Hall, confirm these different communicative preferences. The first dimension, which addresses the issue of directness, reveals that German speakers favor more directness than English speakers. Germans, for instance, are less likely and less willing to engage in small talk and prefer to move on to serious or “straight” talk sooner rather than later. In fact, the phrase “small talk” has been adopted into the German colloquial language because the German vocabulary cannot offer its own equivalent expression for it. Therefore, the German ground rule for this communicative tendency is to say what one means and to mean what one says (House, 2006). In Germany, when recognizing somebody, you greet them with a simple “Hello.” In America, this usually gets extended to “Hello, how are you?” or “Hi, what’s up?” When I first came to the United States, I found this very confusing because Germans see this kind of extension as a “throw-away routine.” How could people say this and keep walking? How would that give me enough time to explain how I am actually doing? Similarly, many English speakers travelling to Germany are confused in other situations. In some studies, travelers felt like they were being ordered around when asking shop assistants simple questions at stores. Others observed that Germans “say what they believe...and we just say ‘well you know’ and dance around trying not to hurt each other” (House, 2006).

The next dimension “self-orientation vs. other-orientation” blends in with the directness issue.

Germans can be observed to have a self-referencing nature when it comes to communication, for example when expressing responsibility. In addition to that, Germans tend to be very explicit and focusing on the content of a message rather than on the addressee. For instance, Germans focus on the “matter on hand.” While Americans often tend to make non-committal suggestions for social get-togethers, Germans prefer a firm immediate commitment when it comes to planning something. In conversations, Germans prefer phrases such as “Kann ich[...]?” (Can I[...]?) versus the English preference “Would you like me to[...]?” or “Ich moechte[...]” (I want[...]) versus “How about[...].” Thus, while English speakers influence their conversational partners through implicit statements, Germans prefer to reduce uncertainty through explicitness (House, 2006). A lot of students in my study groups have noticed these communicative features in me and made me their group leader for this reason as my directness usually leads to progressive action.

Lastly, the fifth dimension “reliance on verbal routines” describes how Germans are less prone to verbal routines than English speakers. Since English speakers tend to prefer politeness to truth, they often repeat certain polite phrases. Germans do not feel the need to do that because they prefer truth to politeness (House, 2006). When you go to a restaurant in America, for example, waiters often have polite memorized phrases that are repeated to every customer in order to show respect. In Germany, communication is not about being polite; consequently, during my first couple months in the United States this behavior seemed very unnecessary to me. Germans know that you come to a restaurant because you have an appetite and they focus on that intention (the truth), not the politeness of the waiters.

However, the question may be asked: what explains the “rough” German communicative style? House offers several tentative explanations, for example a loss of a sense of national identity and community feeling after the catastrophe of the Nazi regime, an educational system which has traditionally