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# **“Appropriateness” in foreign language acquisition and use: Some theoretical, methodological and ethical considerations<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*In this contribution, I focus on the concept of “appropriateness” in the usage, the learning and the teaching of foreign languages. Using a participant-based emic perspective, I investigate multilinguals’ perceptions of appropriateness in their foreign languages. Referring to the existing literature, and using previously unpublished material collected through a web questionnaire (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001–2003), I will show that multilinguals develop their judgements of appropriateness, a crucial aspect of sociopragmatic and sociocultural competence, as part of their socialisation in a new language/culture. However, their ability to judge appropriateness accurately does not imply that they will always act “appropriately”. Indeed, the presence of conflicting norms in their other languages may contribute to conscious or unconscious divergence from the “appropriate” norm in a particular language. Some implications for foreign language teaching will be considered.*

## **1. Introduction**

Should foreign language teachers teach learners how to violate the rules of “appropriate” behaviour? The consequences can be unexpected. In Dewaele (2005a), I recounted an episode that happened during a school trip of Flemish schoolchildren to Paris. My father, our French teacher, had taught us some potent colloquial words and expressions in French order to “survive” in a linguistic environment reputed for its use of vernacular speech:

The trouble began when we sat down on the well-tended lawn in front of the Invalides, pretending not to understand the sign “Pelouse interdite” (‘Keep off the grass’). An irate guard in his sixties yelled and chased us off the lawn, pointing at the sign. A friend perceived this as a unique opportunity to try out a new speech act in French and uttered the words “Avec ta sale gueule” (literally ‘with your dirty mug’, meaning ‘shut your gob’). He had clearly underestimated the illocutionary effects of the expression. The guard turned red and his medals started clinking. He threatened to call the police and called out to our teacher: “Moi, monsieur, ancien combattant de la dernière guerre, il m’a dit, vous vous rendez compte monsieur, “avec ta sale gueule”! C’est l’honneur de la France qu’il a bafoué monsieur!” (‘He told me, sir, a veteran of the last war, can you imagine sir, ‘with your dirty mug’. It’s the honor of France that he has treated with contempt sir!’). My teacher managed to calm the man down: “C’est un Flamand monsieur, son français est élémentaire, ce qu’il vous a dit ne signifie pas plus pour lui que “moules et frites”. (‘He is a Fleming sir, what he said to you doesn’t mean much more than ‘mussels and French fries’”) (2005a: 470).

One could argue that my friend’s transgression in uttering the fateful words was in fact not the result of inability, but of deliberate choice. This hypothesis could obviously not be used by my father to defend his student. Pleading linguistic

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and pragmatic inability were more likely to calm the guard down rather than starting an argument about the reasons for banning the lawn to exhausted tourists. I also assumed at the time that my friend pretended not to understand the sign, but since I did not ask him, he may in fact genuinely not have understood the sign.

This anecdote highlights a number of theoretical, methodological and ethical questions. Firstly, the very concept of “appropriateness” is slippery, as different individuals may interpret behaviour very differently. Secondly, the intentionality of the violation of “appropriate” behaviour presents a methodological quandary to researchers. Indeed, spontaneous speech production contains no clues relating to the intentionality behind violations of “inappropriate” behaviour. Thirdly, any foreign language teacher is faced with the ethical question whether or not to teach L2 learners words and expressions that are considered inappropriate in polite conversation, and whether or not a L2 learner should be equipped with the linguistic and pragmatic means to be consciously impolite. The final ethical question lies with the L2 user who decides to deviate from the local norm.

The paper is organised as follows: firstly the concept of appropriateness will be discussed. Secondly, I will look at how this concept has been integrated in communicative foreign language teaching. Thirdly, I will adopt an emic perspective, i.e., a description of participants’ behavior in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to them and where their voices and opinions are heard (Pike 1967), in order to investigate the complex judgements of appropriateness in multilinguals’ different languages. The patterns emerging from previous research and multilinguals’ narratives (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001–2003) will be discussed. Teaching implications will be presented in the final section.

## **2. The concept of “appropriateness”**

The concept of appropriateness is at the basis of the model of communicative competence originally proposed by Hymes (1972). Hymes was unhappy with Chomsky’s (1965) definition of linguistic competence, which he found too narrow and inadequate. He agreed with Chomsky that language users need to be able to create and understand grammatical utterances, but he added that language users also need knowledge about cultural norms in order to judge the social situation correctly so as to produce appropriate speech. Hymes insisted that knowing what to say is never enough, it is also necessary to know “what to say to whom in what circumstances and how to say it” (1972: 277). Hymes also pointed out that appropriateness depended both on linguistic and sociocultural competence: “From a communicative standpoint, judgments of appropriateness should not be assigned to different spheres, [. . .] the linguistic and the cultural: certainly the two spheres will interact” (1972: 286).

Hymes’ concept of “appropriateness” has remained central in sociolinguistic research. Canale (1983) provided a definition of sociolinguistic competence strongly influenced by Hymes:

[it] addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction [. . .] Appropriateness of utterances refers to [. . .] appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of meaning concerns the extent to which particular

communicative functions (e.g. commanding, complaining and inviting), attitudes (including politeness and formality) and ideas are judged to be proper in a given situation (Canale 1983: 7).

The concept of appropriateness is also at heart of Lyster's (1994) definition of sociolinguistic competence: "the capacity to recognize and produce socially appropriate speech in context" (1994: 263). Ranney (1992) provides a slightly more explicit description of "appropriateness" in her own definition of sociolinguistic competence, i.e., "the ability to perform various speech acts, the ability to manage conversational turns and topics, sensitivity to variation in register and politeness, and an understanding of how these aspects of language vary according to social roles and settings" (1992: 25).

Appropriateness is, obviously, a central concept in pragmatic research. Crystal (1997), in his definition of pragmatics, refers to choices made by participants and "the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction" (1997: 301). These constraints are undoubtedly the rules that guide "appropriate" linguistic behaviour. Barron (2003: 10) points out that "knowledge of the appropriate contextual use of the particular languages' linguistic resources" is a crucial part of pragmatic competence (2003: 10).

### **3. Appropriateness in foreign language learning**

Hymes' focus on appropriateness caused a radical change in language teaching practice. Grammar-based pedagogy was largely abandoned in favour of a Communicative Language Teaching approach in the mid-1970s (Leung 2005). Researchers and teachers agreed that language teaching needed to take account of social context and social rules of use, and not just focus on grammar rules. The concept seemed to offer an intellectual basis for pedagogic broadening (Leung 2005).

However, Leung points out that as the ELT profession imported Hymes' ideas, it recontextualized some of the original meanings: empirically oriented questions underwent an epistemic transformation to an idealized pedagogic doctrine (2005: 124).

Inevitably some crucial aspects were lost in the transformation. Studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) seldom produce unambiguous, generalisable results because these are affected by local factors or methodological choices. However, pedagogic guidelines and principles need a degree of stability, transparency and certainty (Leung 2005: 125). Those charged with implementing the teaching of second languages thus have the difficult task of translating these complex research findings into clear, uniform pedagogic guidelines and principles.

The application of Hymes' concepts in the Communicative Language Teaching approach has been imperfect from a SLA point of view. Course material typically proposes a decontextualised idealization of language use, i.e., idealized typifications of what native speakers may say and do in specified contexts (Holliday 2005; Leung 2005). Moreover, this idealized curriculum for L2 learning was typically built on the perspective of an imagined or idealized native speaker (NS) of English (Leung 2005: 127).

The difficulties that L2 learners/users face in acquiring this subtle and elusive understanding of "appropriateness" are considerable and well documented. Wilkinson's (2002) study of American exchange student's interactions with the members of their host family in France showed that the roles and norms of the classroom were often inappropriate in out-of-class conversations (Wilkinson 2002: 168).

Toya and Kodis (1996) offered an insightful study on the difficulty to be consciously (and appropriately) rude in a foreign language. Participants were

NNSs of Japanese with advanced English proficiency. They were presented with five situations in an English-speaking context in which anger was expected and were asked (1) how they would feel in each situation, (2) how they would or would not express their anger verbally and/or nonverbally, and finally (3) why they would or would not express themselves in those ways. The results demonstrated that frequency of use of rude expressions was linked to the length of stay in English speaking countries and the confidence of the L2 users. Learners who had had more restricted input to the L2 (the foreign language classroom) steered clear of angry words. The researchers point out that the acquisition of rude language is an extremely sensitive issue because learners are fully aware of the possible danger and misunderstanding involved in using such expressions (1996: 293).

Mugford (2007) argues that everyday communicative realities as rudeness, disrespect, and impoliteness should not be neglected in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom because impoliteness is likely to be experienced by L2 users in the target language context or when interacting with other L2 users. It is necessary for L2 users to be able to react appropriately when confronted with rudeness.

Dewaele (2005b) observed that the use of slang and (some) swearwords is considered perfectly appropriate in informal conversations between NSs of French. However, it is not at all straightforward to incorporate this rich vernacular style in the foreign language class. On the one hand, it could be argued that knowledge of these words and expressions constitutes an essential part of sociocultural

competence in the target language and should therefore be taught, albeit with the necessary words of caution. However, the potential reactions from press and parent associations should not be underestimated. From the teacher's point of view, it is much safer to teach grammar rules rather than lists of expressions with lethal illocutionary effects.

Studies on stay abroad programs have shown to have potentially huge effects on L2 learners' understanding of appropriateness in the TL (Kinginger to appear; Kinginger and Belz 2005; Kinginger and Blattner 2008; Thomas 2002; Wilkinson 2002). However, these learners/users sense of achievement in managing authentic communication in the foreign language must be tempered by the fact many teachers complain that students returning from study abroad may have broadened their repertoire, including vernacular styles, but may still be unable to assign contextual appropriateness to given variants (Kinginger to appear) and may generalise informal variants into their formal styles (Dewaele 2004a). Warga and Schölmberger (2007) found in their study of the development of apologetic behaviour of Austrian learners of French during a stay in Montreal that exposure to the TL did trigger important developments. Most, but not all changes represented a development toward to the L2 pragmatic norm (2007: 243).

#### **4. Issues in research on appropriateness**

Leung's (2007) idea of an abstract ideal with dynamic and variable manifestations is particularly appealing. Indeed judgements on norms and on appropriateness are not static but highly fluid. They are subjective appraisals made by participants in the course of an interaction and they can be revised during the interaction. Someone who behaves rudely to a member of the group may, in a first instance, be judged by group members to have acted inappropriately. After hearing the reasons for the rude behaviour, group members may revise their judgment and decide that the behaviour had in fact been completely appropriate.

It is unlikely that everybody will agree or disagree on degrees of

(in)appropriateness of certain speech acts. Jokes are a typical case where appropriateness

can be very hard to judge both by native and NNSs alike (Vaid 2006). What one NS may consider a perfectly appropriate (and funny) joke in a given situation may be perceived by another NS to be offensive or rude and not funny at all. Even friends communicating in their L1 may occasionally misjudge “appropriateness” by embarking on a topic that may have become inappropriate because of changing circumstances in the friend’s life.

An accurate judgment of appropriateness implies that interlocutors have a good understanding of the relations between the members of a group and their history. However, judgements of appropriateness are made by researchers, not the participant in typical research designs. In other words, researchers, with or without a panel of NS judges, will determine how appropriate the production of an L2 learner/user is. This epistemological stance is called the etic perspective, i.e., a description of a behaviour according to the researcher’s point of view (Pike 1967). It has been argued that in order to gain a fuller understanding of the concept of appropriateness, specifically related to the communication of emotion, the field needs more epistemological and methodological diversity (cf. Dewaele 2005b; Garces-Conejo 2006; Matsumura 2007). Such an emic perspective could lead to the gathering of rich data provided by the participants themselves, which in turn could inform both the understanding of this area of SLA and foreign language teaching practices.

It has already been pointed out that it is very difficult to decide on the intentionality of inappropriate behaviour, and that the labelling of something as being ‘inappropriate’ is often open to debate. This problem is clearly illustrated in the study by Davidson and Fulcher (2007) who consider the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and reflect on tests of pragmatic competence in service encounters (open-air markets). Using the CEFR Level A1 service encounter descriptor, they propose an “objectively keyed test” (2007: 237) and present the following sample task intended to assess rapport:

- [The examinee hears]  
voice1: Can I buy some apples?  
voice2: Yes. They are two for 75p.  
[The examinee sees:]  
What comes next?  
a. How much are they?  
b. How much are two?  
c. Thank you. I’ll buy two.\*  
d. Gimme two. (2007: 240).

The asterisk (\*) at the end of the utterance indicates the intended correct choice, or ‘key’. Davidson and Fulcher observe that item (d) is “a somewhat more rude response” which is considered incorrect in the present encounter: “while technically accurate in terms of focused listening, the more-rude choice (d) violates an expectation of politeness for the encounter, and it is therefore considered to be a wrong response” (2007: 240).

Whether or not item (d) is inappropriate is probably an empirical question. Item (c) seems to violate Grice’s maxim of quantity (i.e., it is too long). Based on my 13 year experience as L2 user of English, I guess that “OK, give me two” would be an appropriate response, and even “gimme two” would not necessarily be considered impolite by the seller. Bailey (2001) reported that service encounters can be minimal in length. One typical service encounter (in Korean) between a Korean shopkeeper and a Korean customer in Los Angeles went as follows:

Cashier: Hello

Customer: Hello

Customer: Cigarettes!

Cashier: You would like cigarettes? (reaches for cigarettes)

Cashier: Here you are. (cashier takes customer's money and hands her cigarettes, customer turns to leave) (Bailey 2001: 125).

The assumption of many research designs in SLA is that L2 learners/users' knowledge of the TL is incomplete, and that deviations from the norm are evidence of that incompleteness. Bardovi-Harlig (2001: 14) notes that speech act realizations may deviate in terms of social, linguistic or pragmatic acceptability of the utterance. At a linguistic-pragmatic level, L2 learners may choose different speech acts, different semantic formulas, different content and finally different form (grammatical and lexical modification devices) (2001: 14–20). In categorizing the performance of L2 learner/users in terms of appropriateness (i.e., how "proper" was the social behaviour of the participant?) researchers may inadvertently introduce a monolingual bias (Cook 2002; Pavlenko 2005). Since L2 users are legitimate, multicompetent users of an L2, they are entitled to deviate from the NS norm just as NSs are (Cook 2002). As an L2 user of English, I fully agree with Cook. However, I do realise that the L2 user's sense of being a legitimate language user may not be shared by his/her NS interlocutor. Two perspectives need to be taken into account: firstly that of the NS interlocutor, and, secondly that of the L2 user.

NSs may not perceive and interpret L2 users' deviations from the NS norm in the same way as deviations by L1 users. An utterance, a swearword or a joke uttered by an L1 user may be judged appropriate by the NS interlocutor, but the same words in the mouth of an L2 user could be judged to be inappropriate. I experienced this when using a swearword in Spanish (my L4) with Spanish friends during a night out in Malaga. Wine and swearwords had been flowing all evening, yet when I uttered the word "joder" ('fuck') to make a point, my friends fell silent and looked at me. They explained that my swearword sounded "funny" in their ears and that I should not use it (Dewaele 2004b: 85). In other words, the word that they had used all evening was deemed inappropriate when it came from me. My first thought was that this was unfair. I later realised that L2 users do not enjoy the same pragmatic freedom as NSs. I encountered

similar reactions in the UK when I ventured some sarcastic remarks about the mass hysteria surrounding the death of Princess Diana. My British interlocutors would suddenly deny me the right to make jokes about something I could not possibly understand as a foreigner. Although the L2 user may have the linguistic means to produce a conscious deviation from the TL norm for some special effect, the NS may judge it differently than a comparable deviation by an L1 user, and the NS may assume that the L2 user does not grasp the full meaning of his/her words. In sum, the NS interlocutor may be less forgiving towards L2 users than to L1 users in deviations from the L1 norm. The situation is quite different when adopting the perspective of the multicompetent, legitimate user of the L2. One possible option for the L2 user is to refrain from engaging in interactions that could lead to inappropriate linguistic behaviour. This is nicely illustrated by Nancy Huston, the Canadian-born author who moved to Paris as a young adult. She observes that L2 users are at a disadvantage in expressing anger:

il y a toujours quelque chose de ridicule à s'emporter dans une langue étrangère :

l'accent s'empire, le débit s'emballe et s'achoppe . . . on emploie les jurons à tort

et à travers [there is always something ridiculous about getting carried away in



a  
foreign language: the accent gets worse, the rhythm runs off and stumbles. . .  
you  
use the wrong swearwords in the wrong way.] (the quote and its translation  
come  
from the study on Huston by Kinginger 2004: 172).

A second option for the L2 user is to accommodate towards the TL norm in order to produce the desired perlocutionary effects. This typically occurs after a period of intense L2 socialisation. Evans (1988) quotes a British student who had spent a semester in Italy where he discovered that shouting to order a coffee is not only considered appropriate behaviour, it is also imperative to get served:

The Italians are so different, and if they want something they will go out and get it. I've been taught that you ask for it politely. You realize that unless you do what they do, shout, nothing will come out of it. (1988: 45)

A third option for the L2 user is to consciously refuse to accommodate towards the TL norm. This conscious deviation from the TL norm is therefore not an example of pragmatic failure but it can have unwanted social consequences. Matsumura (2007) focused on advice-giving strategies to individuals of three different levels of social status (higher, equal, or lower status) among Japanese learners after their stay in Anglophone Canada. The combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative data gathered through retrospective group interviews allowed him to understand that the divergence from the English norm observed after the students' return to Japan was not caused by a loss of pragmatic competence, but rather by a reflection on their sense of self. Two students pointed out that they preferred to opt out (i.e., not give advice to someone with a higher status) and act according to the Japanese sociocultural norm in English (2007: 186). One student felt that it was inappropriate for students to offer advice to an older and higher status person, the other student had decided that silence was preferable to expressing opinions in front of higher-status interlocutors (p. 182). These deviations from the TL norm were unlikely to create tension. However, in some cases L2 users' refusal to accommodate to the TL norm can be a source of conflict and tension as it is easily interpreted as a lack of respect for local sociocultural norms (Bailey 2000, 2001). Bailey videorecorded service encounters between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers in Los Angeles. The two groups have different concepts of the relationship between customer and storekeeper. As a consequence, both groups also have different ideas about appropriate speech activities in service encounters. African American customers expect a personal, sociable interaction while the immigrant Koreans remain impersonal and focus almost exclusively on the business transaction at hand (Bailey 2001). When confronted with the evidence that their African American customers were unhappy, the Korean retailers explained that they perceived this stress on interpersonal involvement as "a sign of selfishness, interpersonal imposition, or poor breeding" (2001: 143) and therefore held on to their Korean norm of appropriate behaviour in a service encounter. These difficulties in intercultural communication may well be linked to the attacks on Korean businesses during the riots in Los Angeles in 1992.

In sum, L2 users may intentionally violate sociolinguistic, sociocultural and sociopragmatic rules, just as L1 users do. In other words, it is very difficult for SLA researchers working on L2 production data to guess what the communicative intention of the L2 user was and hence to decide whether a deviation from the TL norm is attributable to gaps in knowledge, to a conscious choice to stick to the L1 norm, and whether deviations from the norm in the TL were intentional

or not. While L2 users are perfectly entitled to behave as they please, it is clear that in some instances the deviation for the TL norm can have unwanted and unexpected consequences.

## **5. An emic perspective on appropriateness in adult foreign language use**

I have argued in Dewaele (2007b) that instead of using an exclusively etic perspective and considering specific communicative actions of L2 users as reflections

of their pragmatic competence in the L2, an emic perspective could be added. Such an emic approach allows the researcher to assess pragmatic competence in the L2 using L2 users' views of their ability to communicate appropriately in a L2. The L2 users' perceptions based on their life-long interactions in different languages may provide a richer, broader view of their pragmatic competence. Long-term L2 users may reach an equilibrium point in the development of fluency and accuracy, and judgments of proficiency and success will probably be determined more by the relative ease with which communicative intentions are translated in the L2, especially in social interactions which require interpersonal skill, sociocultural awareness and knowledge of local pragmatic norms. In order to collect such rich data from L2 users, Aneta Pavlenko and myself developed a web-based questionnaire (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001–2003).

### *5.1. The Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire*

The Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ; Dewaele and Pavlenko, 2001-2003) generated a rich database covering many aspects of multilingual communication, and it included spontaneous comments by participants on appropriateness.

The web-based form of the BEQ contained 13 questions relating to participants' gender, age, education level, ethnic group, occupation, languages known, dominant language(s), chronological order of language acquisition, context of acquisition, age of onset of acquisition, frequency of use, typical interlocutors, and self-rated proficiency scores for speaking, comprehending, reading, and writing in the languages in question. The second part of the BEQ consisted of 13 Likert-type questions on language choice for the expression of various emotions with various interlocutors, on code-switching behaviour in inner and articulated speech, on the use and perception of swearwords, on attitudes towards the different languages and, finally on communicative anxiety and foreign language anxiety in the different languages. The last part of the BEQ presented 5 open-ended questions which asked about: (1) the weight of the phrase "I love you" in the participants' respective languages; (2) their linguistic preferences for emotion terms and terms of endearment; (3) emotional significance of their languages; (4) language of the home and language in which they argue in; (5) ease or difficulty of discussing emotional topics in languages other than the first. A final open question invited the participant to comment on the questionnaire itself. The data elicited through the open questions yielded a corpus of about 150,000 words. The complete BEQ has been incorporated as an appendix in Pavlenko (2005: 247–256). Nearly 1,800 multilinguals filled out the BEQ between 2001 and 2003. About 200 incomplete questionnaires were discarded. The final database contains the feedback of 1,579 multilinguals (1,114 females (70.5%) and 465 males (29.4%)). The participants spoke a total of 77 different L1s. Anglophone NSs represent the largest group ( $n = 433$ , 27.4%), followed by NSs of Spanish ( $n = 162$ ; 10.2%), French ( $n = 159$ ; 10.1%), Chinese ( $n = 136$ ; 8.6%), German ( $n = 131$ ; 8.2%), Dutch ( $n = 96$ ; 6.1%), Italian ( $n = 66$ ; 4.2%). The remaining 389 participants share another 68 languages. Languages were labelled

L1, L2, L3, L4 and L5 according to their order of acquisition. The participants consisted of 323 bilinguals (20.4%), 376 trilinguals (23.8%), 377 quadrilinguals (23.8%), and 503 pentalinguals (31.8%). Participants were generally highly educated with 160 having a High school diploma (10.1%), 539 a Bachelor's degree (34.1%), 454 a Master's degree (28.7%), and 421 a doctoral degree (26.6%). Age ranged from 16 to 73 (Mean = 34.3; SD: 11.5).

The advantages of using an on-line web questionnaire are that it allowed us to gather data efficiently from a very large sample of learners and long-time users of multiple languages from across the world and from a wide age range.

So far the BEQ database has been used for studies on language choice for swearing (Dewaele 2004b), on the emotional force for swearwords and taboo words (Dewaele 2004c), for expressing anger (Dewaele 2006a), for disciplining

and praising children (Pavlenko 2004), for expressing love (Dewaele, 2008), for bilingual identities (Pavlenko 2006; Wilson 2008) and for the communication

of emotion in general (Pavlenko 2005). We also looked at interindividual variation in communicative anxiety, in self-perceived communicative competence and in attitudes towards the different languages (Dewaele 2006b, 2007a; Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham 2008).

The following section will present previously unpublished material from the BEQ database, which shows evidence of participants' awareness of differences in what is considered "appropriate" in their different languages and about their own attitudes towards these norms. As appropriateness was not the specific focus on the BEQ, the resulting feedback is too limited to carry out a systematic analysis. The following statements should therefore be seen as an illustration of the diversity of views concerning differing norms of appropriate linguistic behaviour in different languages.

#### 5.2. *The views of adult L2 users*

To the question whether it is easier or more difficult to talk about emotional topics in a foreign language, one of our participants, Eva-Maria, points out that Italian is supposed to be more "tortuous", compared to the relative directness of her native German in emotion talk:

(1) Eva-Maria (L1 German, L2 English, French L3, Italian L4)

Sometimes it's easier because I'm less direct in Italian so it can be negotiated more slowly in a dialogical way. Sometimes it's more difficult because I have the impression that I never come exactly to the point. But in the end it's the same phenomenon because my German cultural base always pushes me towards transparency, which is not always very helpful with emotional topics.

Linda, an American professor, ponders on the fact that the appropriate tone for "confrontations" is quite different in her different languages:

(2) Linda (English L1, German L2, Swedish L3, Spanish L4, French L5)

In emotional situations I want to be very precise about word choice and the two foreign languages I know best are in any case more reserved (Swedish) or more "brutal" feeling (German). (. . .) I can allow myself a greater degree of honesty sometimes in confrontational situations in German; English is more "polite."

Linda's metalinguistic awareness about the appropriate confrontational style in English, Swedish and German is an indication of her high level of sociocultural competence in these languages. Being multicompetent, she can switch from the norm in one language to that in another language, converging with her interlocutor's behaviour. She is able to project different images of her self in her different languages, in other words she is able to behave appropriately in these different languages: more polite in English, more direct in German, more

reserved in Swedish.

While Linda willfully allowed herself to stress certain aspects of her personality in certain languages, Lameen felt the tension between her own appreciation of appropriateness and her perception of the norm in the TL:

(3) Lameen (English and Algerian Arabic L1, Standard Arabic L2, French L3, Japanese L4)

Japanese makes me exaggerate my politeness to a ridiculous extent and think very differently. Algerian Arabic also makes me more serious perhaps – and makes me feel less intelligent for lack of “intellectual” vocabulary . . .

The L1 norm is not always preferred, especially if the multilingual is equally fluent in another language in which a particular norm fits better with the individual’s personal preferences. A Japanese participant, Sanae, prefers the relative informality of getting acquainted in her L2 Mandarin Chinese to the more formal L1 Japanese equivalent:

(4) Sanae (Japanese L1, Mandarin Chinese L2, English L3)

I find getting acquainted in Chinese easier as the language does not require as much formal expressions as Japanese (thus it is much easier to break the ice). I would probably be quite casual, outgoing and frank when speaking in Chinese while I might be friendly but more discreet and polite when conversing in Japanese or English.

Sanae also reports that a Japanese friend of hers in Australia, married to an Australian, noticed that her bilingual children had different interpretations of “appropriate behaviour” according to the language they were speaking:

(5) She noticed that her twin children (5 years-olds) appear to be more polite and childlike (=more angelic) when using Japanese than English which unfortunately has been spoken more frequently since they started school. She said she did not feel respected when children use English and was a little upset. Immediately, two Japanese mothers from Germany (married to Germans) responded that their children’s attitudes were different in German and Japanese. They preferred Japanese to German which they found too “direct” and impolite. (“Children should not speak in such a way to their parents.”)

This is a clear example of multicompetent bilingual children, who are clearly able to behave appropriately in their two languages, but who may be slowly shifting towards the norm of their dominant language.

Another participant, Alfredo, a lecturer at a university of Japan, shows an acute awareness of topics of conversation that are appropriate in some of his languages in particular contexts but not in other:

(6) Alfredo (Portuguese L1, English L2, Spanish L3, Japanese L4)  
when the subject of HIV comes up for example I recognize that some of my Japanese friends – in an intimate situation – may not be comfortable hearing about my brother’s death so I fight the impulse to mention it even though I know they expect me to do and say unexpected things. Also I wouldn’t mention it either in English or Japanese.  
(In Canada or Brazil I wouldn’t hesitate.)

I reported in Dewaele (2008) the case of a Japanese participant, Rie, who insists that the appropriate way to communicate love in Japan is non-verbal:

(7) Rie (Japanese L1, English L2)

In Japan we tend to avoid expression emotion direct (sic). Furthermore silence is beautiful in Japanese society. We try to read an atmosphere. In contrast, in case of English direct expressions have been regarded as logical thinking. In order to reduce misapprehensions I try to use clear expression. As a result I never say ‘I love you’. In both languages

I seldom say 'I love you'.

One NS of English, Francine, shows a clear appreciation of different norms of appropriate behaviour according to gender in French. While she rejects them in theory, she does seem to adopt them unconsciously when using her French:

(8) Francine (English L1, German L2, French L3, Italian L4)

I am perhaps more at ease with French gender norms as expressed through linguistic nuances such as tone and hesitation than I am on an intellectual level. In other words, consciously I would reject French gender norms and find them misogynist but it would appear that I play them out in the way that I speak in ways that I would refuse to do in English.

There is a certain unfairness in that the rules of appropriateness that apply to fellow NSs may not apply to foreigners, even if they know a foreign language really well. One participant, who wished to remain anonymous, recalls how he was shocked when a foreigner greeted him in his L1:

(9) DP (L1 Tagalog, L2 English)

I once met a fellow who addressed me in fluent Tagalog. My initial reaction was shock. I responded in English (when I could very well have spoken in Tagalog). Why? Because this fellow was a foreigner whose background I didn't know and whose motives I didn't know either. In speaking Tagalog he was too personal had penetrated too close to "home" because at that very moment I was "a Filipino" on the street. It made more sense to hold him off at a distance in English until I could figure what to do.

Researchers have also pointed out that appropriate non-verbal display of emotion is a crucial aspect of sociopragmatic competence (Mrowa-Hopkins and Strambi to appear; Planchenault 2005; Soudek and Soudek 1985). Besemeres (2004) offers an excellent illustration of a combination of verbal and nonverbal displays of emotion in Italian culture in her analysis of the work of Parks (1996). Tim Parks is a British author married to an Italian and living in Italy. In his autobiographical text, he mentions the Italian concept of "fare festa a qualcuno":

It would truly be hard to exaggerate the cooing and crying and sighing and kissing and nose-tweaking and exclamations and tears and tickles and cuddles that now have to take place. The children must imagine they are the only people in the whole universe. Nonna lifts up Michele and dances round and round with him and

*'O che bel bambino! O che ometto splendido! O che spettacolo! . . .*

It's what the Italians enthusiastically call *fare festa a qualcuno*, which, literally translated, means 'to make a party for someone', and combines the ideas of welcoming

them and smothering them with physical affection. Comparison of this expression with the slightly disapproving 'to make a fuss of' speaks worlds about

the difference between Italian and English approaches to such occasions (1996:

142–143).

This specific Italian emotion concept of "fare festa" offers a good illustration of the difficulties facing foreign language teachers. Italians will have learned the concept through socialisation, namely by having witnessed these exuberant shows of affection and having been the focal point of them. Second language learners of Italian might be able to learn to recognize the concept through exposure to Italian culture. However, they may feel that it would be inappropriate

for them to adopt this particular culture-specific concept in their L2 repertoire. Tim Parks obviously learnt to recognize the concept of “fare festa” as a direct observer. As he presents himself as a passive participant in this particular event, the reader does not know whether or not he himself would consider it appropriate to engage in “fare festa” for some Italian child.

Summing up, these observations suggest that as soon as adult L2 users acquire sufficient proficiency in a language, they become acutely aware of possible differences in pragmatic norms in their different languages, and they reflect on potentially conflicting norms concerning appropriateness. Some participants (Eva-Maria, Linda, Sanae, Alfredo) reported being able to shift to different norms of appropriateness as they shifted language. They had clearly developed a metapragmatic awareness of differences in the norms in their different languages, and were able to adapt according to the situation. Sanae even preferred getting acquainted in her second language because one could be much more informal than in her L1. The need to produce appropriate speech in the foreign language felt constraining for some participants: Lameen felt that she is exaggeratedly polite in her Japanese L4 and Alfredo had to fight the impulse to talk about certain inappropriate topics in his Japanese L4. Another participant, Francine, reported an ambiguous attitude towards her perception of appropriate female behaviour in French: being opposed to them in theory, yet slipping into them when using French L3.

One Japanese participant, Rie, explained that he is aware that it is appropriate to declare love openly in English. Yet, he has decided that he will stick to his Japanese way of expressing love in English, namely through silence.

Bilingual/bicultural children resemble chameleons according to Sanae, who reported the surprise of Japanese mothers at their children’s ability to switch languages as well as behaviours. One participant reflected on his own negative reaction in response to a NNS who addressed him in his native language. Somehow he felt that it was inappropriate for that NNS to address him in that language.

The final narrative by Tim Parks shows the full ambiguity surrounding the concept of appropriateness and of the adoption of behaviour that does not fit their image of self. Just as Matsumura (2007) Japanese participants’ decided to “opt out” rather than give advice in English to older people with a higher status, as would be acceptable in the Canadian culture, Tim Parks seems to remain slightly reticent about the idea of engaging in the Italian script of “fare festa” for a child.

## **6. Implications for foreign language teaching**

Considering the implications of the present study for foreign language teaching, two questions come to mind:

1. Why do we need to include appropriateness in the foreign language teaching curriculum?
2. If we agree that appropriateness needs to be include, how do we teach it?

The answer to the first question is relatively simple: ever since the focus on communicative competence in foreign language teaching, there has been widespread

agreement that sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence form an integral part of the curriculum. Just as the swimming instructor is expected to teach his students how to survive in deep water, the language teacher is expected to prepare his students for successful social interactions in a foreign language. Without a proper understanding of “appropriate” behaviour in the TL, the L2 learner/user may not only risk coming across as insensitive, rude, or inept but misunderstandings or even communication breakdowns could result (Crandall and Basturkmen 2004; Eslami-Rasekh 2005).

The answer to the second question, namely how to teach “appropriateness”

in L2 classrooms is much more complex and has generated a lot of studies and recommendations (Bardovi-Harlig 2001; Dewaele and Wourm 2002; Kasper and Rose 2001, 2002; Mugford 2007; Rose and Kasper 2001). Teaching appropriateness

implies talking about inappropriateness, which can be difficult because teachers and materials developers prefer to avoid representations of language that might be considered inappropriate (Kinging to appear). L2 learners need to be made aware of the full range of sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic

variants and learn to use them according to the situation. A comparison between patterns of variation in the L1 and those occurring in more or less comparable situations in the TL is most useful. Teachers can develop awareness of culture-specific norms of appropriate behaviour in the TL if no comparable norm exists in their L1. Consciousness-raising activities in foreign language classrooms have been shown to be useful and effective (cf. Eslami-Rasekh 2005; Lyster 1994; Valdman 2003).

It is probably also beneficial to focus on sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence from the start of the acquisition process, as it takes a considerable amount of time to master these unwritten rules (Barron and Warga 2007: 122). The first attempts of the learner to communicate in the foreign language have been compared to “sink or swim” situations. It seems even more important to have a basic understanding of the sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic rules governing an interaction than the exact knowledge of words and grammar rules to string an utterance together. An interlocutor who is fluent in the L2 is unlikely to be annoyed by a beginning L2 user’s non-native use of vocabulary and grammar. However, if the L2 learner/user inadvertently violates some sociolinguistic

or sociopragmatic rule in the L2, interlocutors might have more difficulty in hiding their irritation.

Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) recommend that foreign language teachers make use of authentic samples of spoken discourse to raise pragmatic awareness. They employed a “guided discovery” approach in which the learners analysed samples of authentic spoken language. The authors found that learners’ perceptions of the appropriateness of requests matched those of NSs more closely than they did prior to instruction. Authentic multimodal material in the TL can also be used to raise awareness of finer details of specific speech acts.

Planchenault (2005) used film fragments of confrontations in the TL to raise learners’ awareness of appropriate use of sociolinguistic markers and pragmatic strategies. In doing so, it should be possible to establish the list of variants and to link them to an abstracted ideal. The result would be a situated theory of communicative competence (Leung 2007).

Study abroad clearly has the potential to boost L2 learners’ grasp of appropriateness in the L2. Having to survive linguistically and socially in a foreign environment forces the L2 learner to pay attention to aspects of communication in the TL that might have been dismissed in the safe home environment as teachers’ obsessions with petty details. Kinginger and Blattner (2008) report that study abroad students developed, to varying degrees, their awareness and understanding of colloquial words, especially the social meaning of colloquial language.

L2 learners do not necessarily need to go abroad to broaden their understanding of appropriateness in the L2. I pointed out in Dewaele (2005b) that similar levels of exposure to the TL can be achieved through access to the media, films, and satellite television in the home environment. Also, the multilingual and multicultural populations in big cities offer motivated language learners the opportunity to practice the TL with NSs.

## 7. Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to highlight the crucial importance of “appropriateness” in social interactions of L2 users. While judging appropriateness can be difficult in a native language, it is specifically hard for foreign language learners and users. The reason for this is that judgments of appropriateness are highly dependent on the specific context of the interaction. Given the highly situated nature of the judgment of appropriateness, foreign language teachers can only point to general rules in specific speech communities. Armed with that theoretical knowledge, L2 users have to venture out and experience for themselves what works and what does not. This capacity to judge appropriateness is a crucial part of sociopragmatic, sociocultural and sociolinguistic competence. I argued that in order to gain any understanding the fluid and ever-evolving concept of “appropriateness” among L2 learners and L2 users a purely etic perspective should be complemented by an emic perspective. I tried to prove this point by presenting some observations made by participants who filled out the BEQ (Dewaele and Pavlenko 2001–2003) and by referring to the linguistic autobiography of the bilingual author Tim Parks. Participants reflected on the appropriateness of their own linguistic behaviour and on that of interlocutors addressing them in their different language(s). All participants showed an awareness of varying norms in their different languages. Some reported switching to different norms effortlessly, some had to remind themselves of the specificities of the norms, some applied the norms unconsciously and despite their own reservations, and, finally some resisted consciously and choose to deviate from the norm in the foreign language. While it is any L2 user’s right to deviate from what is considered appropriate behaviour in the TL community, that L2 user should bear in mind that a systematic refusal to accommodate to the local norm may create tension and even anger among the NSs (cf. Bailey 2000, 2001).

The implications for foreign language teaching have been highlighted. Learners need to be prepared for their transition to authentic L2 users, capable of navigating through the sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic minefields in the TL.

Referring to my unfortunate Flemish schoolmate, in his stand-off with the irate guard at the Invalides in Paris, I sometimes joke with my students that if he had been aware of the rules governing terms of address, using the polite “vous” form instead of the inappropriate “tu”, the situation might not have escalated to the point where it did. It may seem unfair that there always seem to be more ways to be unconsciously inappropriate in a foreign language rather than consciously appropriate. However, this should not discourage foreign language learners to take the plunge and become confident L2 users.

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