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Please Excuse My Accent:

An Examination of Impression Management

Strategies Used by Nonnative Speakers

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Abstract

In this research, we investigate the impression management (IM) strategies used by nonnative speakers. We ask the following questions: 1) What IM strategies do nonnative speakers employ, 2) Are some IM strategies more effective than others, and 3) What determines the use of different IN strategies among nonnative speakers? Across two studies, we examine if some IM strategies are more effective than others in improving outcomes for nonnative speakers. Results from both studies revealed negative effects associated with the use of defensive strategies, and results from Study 2 demonstrated benefits associated with assertive strategies (i.e., self-promotion and flattery).

Keywords

impression management, nonnative speaker, accent, diversity, language proficiency, malleability

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Increases in immigration, mobility, and cross-national work require many people to learn and use a nonnative language, which is usually accented. A nonnative accent occurs when the phonetic and phonological features of a person's speech are influenced by the speaker's native language (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d). Accent is distinct from language competence, and even people who are fluent in a second language often retain a distinctive accent that is immediately recognized by listeners (Munro & Derwing, 1995).

A speaker's accent can activate listeners' stereotypes about specific national groups (e.g., Chinese, Russians, Italians). However, general stereotypes regarding nonnative or non-standard "foreign" accents are often activated, as listeners are frequently unable to identify specific accents (Lindemann, 2003; Roessel et al., 2018). Decades of research in both English and non-English speaking countries have shown that nonnative speakers are perceived more negatively than native speakers. Nonnative speakers are judged by native speakers as less pleasant to listen to, less intelligent, less loyal, less credible, and less competent (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a; Lev-Avi & Keysar, 2010). This preference for native speech emerges at a very young age (Kinzler et al., 2009).

Studies further indicate that nonnative speakers are often aware of listener prejudices (Derwing, 2003; Wated & Sanchez, 2006). Wated and Sanchez (2006) surveyed Hispanic students employed full-time and found that perceptions of accent-based discrimination at work predicted work stress above and beyond general stressors of role ambiguity and role conflict. Beyene et al. (2009) found that nonnative speakers in globally distributed work teams were anxious in interactions with native speakers due to their accent. They engaged in avoidance and withdrawal, with a negative impact on information sharing, team performance, and interpersonal relationships (Fuertes et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2019). Perceived accent discrimination was

negatively related to language confidence for both native and nonnative speakers of French living in Canada (Freynet & Clément, 2019). Nonnative speakers' awareness of accent discrimination can raise concerns that they are being categorized by native speakers and judged on the basis of stereotypes (Freynet et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Pilote & Canuel, 2013). This concern has been labeled stereotype or identity threat because the individual fears not being seen as their unique self, but instead in terms of stereotypes about their social identities (Steele et al., 2002)

Thus, interactions with native speakers are likely to be threatening for nonnative speakers. Most research on accent discrimination has tended to focus on native speaker prejudice and not on how nonnative speakers cope with and manage this threat (Freynet & Clément, 2019). The studies presented here focus on this understudied area and explore the impression management strategies used by nonnative speakers when interacting with native speakers.

Impression Management Strategies

Impression management (IM) refers to the attempts of actors/individuals to create, maintain, and protect positive images of themselves in their interactions with others (Bilbow, 1997). IM is particularly likely when one's positive image is under threat and people feel there is a discrepancy between the way they hope to be seen and how they believe they are currently seen by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Research in organizational psychology has examined IM in work related settings, such as job interviews, networking, and interactions with supervisors. A number of impression management behaviors or strategies have been identified (Bolino, 1999); these are often classified as assertive or defensive.

Assertive impression management strategies are used to bolster one's image, such as ingratiation – flattery or agreement with others to appear likeable, self-promotion – highlighting and promoting one's desirable qualities and accomplishments to present a positive image to the other, or assimilation – attempting to be seen as a member of a different, higher status group by making those group identities more salient (Lee et al., 1999; Roberts, 2005). Conversely, *defensive* impression management strategies, such as apologies, excuses, or justifications, focus on minimizing one's deficiencies and mitigating negative reactions by others (Lee et al., 1999).

Bilbow (1997) proposed the Cross-Cultural Impression Management model of discourse to explain how culture influences both the use and the interpretation of impression management tactics. However, empirical research on cultural influences has been scattered (Bolino et al, 2016), and much of it focused on comparing workplace IM in the U.S. to other countries. More recent studies have addressed other cultural issues. Bye et al. (2011) found that the impact of national culture on IM was explained by cultural differences in values and response styles. Derous (2017) explored differences between ethnic minorities and majorities in preferred IM strategies and the impact of their strategies on interview ratings. Fant and Lundell (2019) examined intercultural differences in IM among native speakers of the four language groups, and the extent of nonnative speaker alignment to native patterns of IM. IM practices of nonnative speakers have yet to be fully explored.

Beyond the work context, research in the U.S. has explored the self-presentation and communication strategies used by stigmatized individuals. For example, overweight women who thought they were visible to their interaction partner behaved in a friendlier manner and were rated more positively by listeners than those women who thought they were not visible (Miller et al., 1995). Moreover, when African Americans expected their White interaction partner to be

prejudiced, they engaged in greater personal disclosure and warmer, more cordial behaviors (Shelton et al., 2005). The authors proposed that this may have been an attempt to counter what they presumed to be their partner's stereotypic beliefs.

Studies have shown that across a variety of stigmatizing conditions (e.g., race, disability) individuals recognizing the possibility of discrimination will use increased effort, greater persistence or/and different skills to achieve their interpersonal goals (Miller & Myers, 1998). However, we know little about the compensatory and coping strategies of nonnative speakers when faced with possible accent discrimination (Freynet & Clément, 2019). Vorauer (2006) proposed that those experiencing threat are more likely to engage in behaviors that are oriented towards avoiding being viewed in negative terms than in pursuing being viewed in positive terms. This suggests greater use of defensive IM strategies. Due to the greater salience of accent discrimination, nonnative speakers may also use different IM strategies when interacting with native speakers than they do when interacting with other nonnative speakers. Empirical investigations are needed.

Consequences / Effectiveness of Impression Management Strategies

In most studies, the effectiveness of IM strategies has been determined by the reactions of the listener; that is, the extent to which IM leaves listeners with a favorable impression of the speaker. Depending on the context of the research, this has meant measuring outcomes such as the perceived likeability of the speaker, the speaker's perceived warmth or competence, or the likelihood of offering a job to the speaker. However, research on those threatened by stigma concerns and prejudice has emphasized instead the consequences of IM for the user's psychological well-being (e.g. anxiety, depression, and self-esteem). Literature on second

language learning has also considered speakers' feelings regarding the use of second language, such as anxiety, enjoyment, or pleasure (Freynet & Clément, 2019; Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b). These affect language confidence and willingness to engage in future conversations (Freynet & Clément, 2019). Gluszek and Dovidio (2010a) also pointed to the importance of attributions for any communication difficulties encountered. Attributing difficulties to one's own language deficiencies can decrease language confidence. Attributing difficulties to the partner's prejudice can protect the speaker's self-esteem, but reduce opportunities for learning (Major & Schmader, 1998), if potential feedback is not believed credible and thus discounted.

Besides effects on wellbeing, exposure to stigma also has consequences for performance. This is perhaps the most studied outcome in the threat literature. More than 300 studies have documented the negative consequences of stereotype threat on the performance of tasks in behavioral domains that are relevant to the stereotype. The accumulated findings establish that any type of performance (cognitive, physical, interpersonal) can be affected. Paladino and colleagues (2009) examined stereotype threat for nonnative language performance. When reminded of the stereotype that Italians have difficulty learning other languages, native Italian speakers in a bilingual (Italian German) region of Italy performed more poorly on a written German language test. The authors studied only written language use, but a similar influence may be found for spoken language performance.

In this study, we examine the effectiveness of IM in terms of its impact on the user's emotional (e.g., positive and negative feelings) and performance outcomes (e.g., comprehensibility). We examine if IM strategies mitigate the negative effects of perceived threat, and if some strategies are more effective than others in improving outcomes for nonnative speakers.

Predictors of Impression Management Strategies

We also explore the determinants of strategy use. The speakers' perception of their own accent is likely to affect how they interact with both nonnative and native speakers (Cargile et al., 1994). Zarrinabadi and Khodarahmi (2017) found that positive perceptions of one's second language accent were related to willingness to communicate in the second language. Such willingness may increase the use of assertive behaviors and decrease the likelihood of defensive strategies (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010b). In social psychology, beliefs in the malleability of one's skill levels have been shown to influence motivation and learning.

Dweck (1999, 2007) distinguished between an entity view of one's skill, and a malleable view. Those with an entity view believe that their level of skill is fixed, much like height or color of the eyes. Thus, one has a certain amount of the skill, and it cannot be changed or improved. Those with a malleable view believe that they can improve their skill level, be it bowling, spelling, or telling jokes. One's skill level is seen as malleable, and practice makes one better, even if not perfect.

These beliefs affect the interpretation of feedback. Those with entity views are motivated to the extent that they receive positive feedback on their performance. This is interpreted as a signal that they have a very high level of the skill, providing positive reinforcement. The difference between the two views is especially clear when negative feedback on performance is received. For people with entity views, this signals that they do not have high skill levels. Since they believe their skills cannot be improved, they become discouraged. Motivation and persistence quickly drop, and individuals may engage in self-handicapping. But those with a malleable view do not show a decline in motivation. The negative feedback is taken as a sign that

they need to discover how to surmount the difficulties. Persistence and strategy development are increased, and ultimately performance is higher (Dweck, 2007).

Beliefs about the degree of control that adults have over their second language accent has received some attention in the literature. Researchers generally tend to agree that individuals who learn a language later in life are unlikely to acquire a native-like pronunciation (Gluszek & Dovidio 2010a; Kinzler, 2021). However, a majority of language learners want to acquire a native-like accent as their ideal goal and believe it can be reached (Kang, 2010). Derwing and Rossiter (2002) reported that 60% of their sample of adults in second language education believed they could control their accent. Gluszek and Dovidio (2010a) reported initial evidence that speakers who believe that over time they can eliminate their accents enjoy talking with others more, yet feel more frustrated and embarrassed when their accent interferes. We need to know more about how attitudes and beliefs influence IM.

The Present Research

In summary, IM has been and continues to be a topic of interest in social and organizational psychology. Cultural influences on IM have been studied, most often with a narrow focus on the influence of national culture on the content and extent of IM. However, IM with regards to nonnative speakers has been largely ignored. The studies reported here address the following research questions regarding the content, consequences, and /antecedents of IM used by nonnative speakers.:

RQ 1: What IM strategies do nonnative speakers employ when speaking with native speakers?

RQ 2: What are the consequences of different IM strategies? Are some IM strategies more effective than others?

RQ 3: What determines the use of different IM strategies among nonnative speakers?

We report on two studies using different methodologies that address these questions. Study 1 is a correlational field study examining nonnative speakers' descriptions of a past interaction with a native speaker. Study 2 was conducted in the laboratory (experiment) in which participants were asked to prepare for an interaction with either a native or nonnative speaker.

Study 1

In Study 1, we use a standardized measure of self-reported IM, with items drawn from those frequently used in past research. These measures yield the individual's perception of the frequency of their IM behaviors, often without regard to a specific time, place, or type of communication partner. However, our research concerns IM in interactions with native speakers. We used behavioral description interviewing (Van Iddekinge et al, 2004) to focus our participants on these situations. Originally developed for employment interviews, behavioral description, or structured interviewing asks interviewees to recall and describe times in which they used skills in a specific type of situation (e.g., leading a team, resolving conflict). The interviewer's task is to elicit details about the individual's behavior and the consequences resulting from their actions.

In this study, we asked participants to recall and describe in detail a specific interaction with a native speaker where they felt that their accent played a role in the way they were perceived. We then asked them to answer the IM survey questions with this particular incident in mind. We included a sample of excerpts in Appendix 1.

Method

Participants and Design. Participants in this study were nonnative language speakers in Italy and France. We initially launched a recruitment campaign with flyers seeking participants. Following basic principles of snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981), we asked recruited participants to recommend participation in the research to others. In order to be included in the sample, participants had to work in Italian, English, or French as a nonnative speaker, regularly interact with native speakers in their jobs, and have sufficient fluency to speak, read, and comprehend that language.

Participants completed a 40-minute semi-structured interview and two short questionnaires. At the beginning of the interview, researchers said, "we are working on a research project which involves understanding the experiences of nonnative speakers when they interact with native speakers. We want to know what strategies nonnative speakers use, and what factors contribute to positive interactions between native and nonnative speakers".

The interviewer then said, "I would like for you to think of a time when you were interacting/speaking with a native speaker, and where you felt that your accent played a role in how you were perceived. Please tell me about that incident". They were given a few minutes to think about a relevant incident and were asked to describe it. As needed, the interviewer used prompts to elicit details, such as, what they said or how the native speaker had responded. Participants were then asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their actions and feelings during the incident. Lastly, a second questionnaire was administered, which contained questions about attitudes toward their own accent, malleability, previous experiences with native speakers, and demographic information. Participants received €10 as a token of appreciation for their time.

The final sample included 75 nonnative speakers from 25 countries working in France and Italy. Forty-three respondents were women (57.3%) with an average age of 42 years (SD = 10.65). Sixty percent of the respondents were employed in professional jobs (e.g., higher education, researcher, teaching assistant, aircraft industry), whereas 40 percent were employed in blue-collar jobs (construction, domestic work, or agriculture).

Measures

IM Strategies. We used a 15-item scale to measure assertive and defensive IM strategies. Items from scales developed by Lee et al. (1999), Bolinò and Turnley (1999), and Andrews and Kacmar (2001) were adapted for our context. The scale assessed two defensive IM strategies, apology (i.e., I apologized for my poor accent; α = .73) and excuse (i.e., I said that my nonnative language wasn't very good; α = .80) and two assertive IM strategies, self-promotion (i.e., I talked about my main strengths and abilities; α = .80) and flattery (i.e., I complimented the other speaker; α = .67). These items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) and higher scores indicate a higher frequency of the strategies. Instructions on the scale read: "Indicate the extent to which the following statements are representative of behaviors/thoughts you had/felt during the incident by circling the appropriate number."

Blame. Based on Plant et al. (2008), blame was measured using three items (α == .81) using a 7-point scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). A sample item was "It was my communication partner's fault if the interaction did not go well".

Positive and Negative Affect. Affect ratings were obtained using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), which consists of 20 affect descriptors yielding a Positive Affect Score (α = .79) and a Negative Affect Score (α = .88). Participants

were asked to rate the frequency with which they degree to which they currently felt the descriptor on a scale of 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*)

Anxiety. Anxiety measure consisted of four items from Plant et al. (2008), *anxious, uneasy, concerned,* and *uncertain.* A higher score indicates greater anxiety during the interaction (α = .74).

Liking. Liking of partner was assessed with three items (α = .84) using a 7-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). A sample item was "How much did you enjoy interacting with the native speaker?"

Attitudes toward Nonnative Accent. Zahn and Hopper's (1985) Speech Evaluation Instrument was used to assess participant attitudes towards their nonnative accent. Respondents were asked to rate how they perceive their nonnative speech on a semantic differential scale containing 3 subscales and 17 total adjective pairs (i.e., friendly - unfriendly). The items were on a seven-point scale, which were then reverse coded to reflect that higher score meant more positive attitudes toward their own nonnative accent (α = .86). The subscales are competence, ratings of intellectual achievement, and high-status speech characteristics **(**α = .82); attractiveness, or social and aesthetic appeal (α = .90); and dynamism, ratings of self-presentation (α = .68).

Malleability of Accent. Perceptions of malleability of accent were measured with three items adapted from Dweck et al. (1995) implicit theory of intelligence measure. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements regarding their perceived ability to change or improve their accent (e.g., your accent is something about you that you can't change very much). All three items used a six-point rating scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*)

to 6 (*very strongly agree*). The items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicate a high perceived malleability of accent ($\alpha = .83$).

We also asked participants about their experience in speaking the nonnative language (i.e., "prior to arriving in this country, how frequently did you interact with native speaking people?") using a six-point response scale, to indicate from never to very often.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reports mean and standard deviation for the main study's variables. The results indicate that all IM strategies were used moderately during the interactions, but on average, nonnative speakers reported greater use of defensive ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.73$) than assertive strategies ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.24$; $t(74) = 21.50$, $p < .001$). Of the single IM strategies considered, *excuse* was the most frequently used in interaction with native speakers, and *self-promotion* the least frequent (see Table 1). We examined correlations among the variables and found that the use of defensive IM strategies (apologize and excuse) was significantly associated with perceptions of anxiety and negative affect. While flattery and self-promotion independently were not associated with any outcome variables, the combined variable (assertive IM strategies) was positively correlated with partner blame.

======== Insert Table 1 about here =======

We also explored nonnative speakers' individual characteristics that may be related to IM strategies and found that attitudes toward accent predicted use of the assertive strategies. The amount of past experience with native speakers was negatively correlated with the use of all IM strategies. Perceptions of malleability were positively associated with flattery, apology, and excuse.

Consistent with past literature, defensive strategies were related to negative affect and anxiety. However, no strategies predicted liking or positive affect. In addition, past experience with native speakers was negatively related to all of the measured IM strategies. Past experience should reduce uncertainty regarding the meaning of behavior, and norms of conduct in the second language culture, as well as knowledge of more and less successful IM tactics (Ward & Ravlin, 2017). If experience results in less use of all tactics measured, then what tactics did they use? It could be that with more experience, people become less motivated to engage in impression management.

It is also possible that our reliance on existing measures of IM resulted in construct bias (Bye et al., 2011). Virtually all research on IM has been conducted in the U.S., and most measures developed there. Although found to be valid in the U.S., these scales may not adequately capture the intended constructs in other cultures (Bye et al., 2011) and may omit dimensions of IM not seen in U.S. culture. Sandal and colleagues (2014) assessed the extent of use of four tactics across 10 countries. They found cultural preferences but only in the US were all four of the tactics endorsed strongly. This measurement bias may have contributed to our results. Our methodology, which relied on post-hoc reports, may also have biased results. Besides memory bias, participants could describe an incident of their own choosing. Therefore, we could not be sure how comparable they were across individuals. Study 2 uses a different methodology, a laboratory study, without some of these limitations. We present participants with one of two conditions, an interaction with a native speaker, or an interaction with a nonnative speaker. The laboratory allows us to provide a common threat experience for all participants. We are also able to rely less heavily on self-reports. Although self-report measures are included,

independent observers were additionally used to code IM and speech performance. A physiological measure of stress, serum cortisol, was also included.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Design. Participants were 104 international graduate students studying at a large private university in New York. All participants (100%) reported a language other than English as their primary language, a prerequisite for taking part in the study. Eighty-six identified as female (82.7%) and 18 male (17.3%). Participants ranged in age from 21 - 41 years (*M* age = 26.33 years, *SD* = 4.15) with 76 identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander (73.1%), 12 as Hispanic/Latino (11.5%), 9 as White (8.7%), 6 as Other (5.8%), and 1 as African American/Black (1%).

Before coming to the lab, interested participants were sent an informed consent form and a link to a short computer administered questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about the participant's feelings toward accents, perceived malleability of accent, past interactions with native/non-English speakers, fluency speaking English, and amount of time speaking English. After the questionnaire was completed, participants were assigned to one of two conditions.

Upon arriving at the lab, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate the various ways people present themselves when getting to know each other. To do so, they would be engaging in a conversation with another study participant who would be evaluating them based on a pre-recorded video introduction. Although participants were told that the roles of 'participant' and 'evaluator' were randomly assigned, in actuality, all participants were assigned to the role of "participant", as there was no "evaluator" involved in the study.

Participants began the experiment by providing a baseline saliva sample (saliva sample was collected to assess cortisol as a measure of physiological stress). Participants were then informed that they would either be paired with a native (NS) or nonnative English-speaking (NNS) partner. The experimenter said: “We are investigating the various ways people present themselves when connecting with a new acquaintance. Today your evaluator will be a native English speaker/nonnative English speaker. In this first stage, you will record yourself speaking for two minutes, introducing yourself. When you are finished with your recording, we will give your recording to your evaluator. If he/she evaluates you positively and would like to have further contact, you will have a short face-to-face conversation.”

Before recording the video, three short articles were presented for participants to read. Following research by Shelton et al. (2005), all participants read two articles about networking and job search techniques. To heighten the salience of evaluation threat in the NS condition, the third article was about the discrimination that people with nonnative accents face in the workplace whereas for the NNS group, the third article was about the discrimination that seniors (ages 65+) face in the workplace. The age discrimination article was selected as irrelevant to interpersonal interactions for our participants. After reading each article, participants answered two reading comprehension questions to ensure their understanding of the content.

Participants were then given two minutes to prepare and two minutes to record their elevator speech (we included samples of the “elevator speech” in the Appendix). After the video recording, the participant completed the Positive and Negative Affect Scale and also completed a biology questionnaire required by Salimetrics, LLC to aid in analyzing the results of the salivary cortisol. Then participants provided a second saliva sample and completed the final post-manipulation measures assessing avoidant intentions, and partner blame. Finally, after collecting

demographic information, participants were fully debriefed and compensated ($15 Amazon or Starbucks gift card) for their time.

Measures. Measures of *attitudes toward English accent* (α = .94; competence**:** α = .91; attractiveness: α = .93; dynamism: α = .90), *malleability of accent* (α = .89), and *affect (*positive affect: α = .92; negative affect: α = .86) were same as those used in Study 1.

Past Interactions with Native Speakers. To measure respondents' past interactions with native English speakers, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had interacted with native English speakers since attending graduate school in the United States (e.g., "Since coming to this university, how much interaction have you had with native English speakers?"). This item used a six-point rating scale from 1 (*none at all*) to 6 (*a great deal*).

Anxiety. Anxiety measure consisted of four items from Plant et al. (2008), *anxious, uneasy, concerned,* and *uncertain.* A higher score indicates greater anxiety about the interaction (α = .79).

Avoidant Motivation. Motivation to avoid the interaction was assessed using six items from Plant et al. (2008), including '*I wish I did not have to participate in this interaction'* (α = .85). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a scale of 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Higher ratings indicated a greater level of avoidant motivation.

Partner Blame. Four items from Plant et al. (2008) measured the extent to which participants intended to blame their partner for a negative interaction (1 – strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree), such as *'If this interaction doesn't go well, it will be my partner's fault'* (α = .88). Higher ratings indicated a greater level of blame.

IM Strategies. Based on a review of the literature (Lee et al., 1999; Roberts, 2005), five IM strategies were included in this study. *Flattery* (*ICC* = .96) was defined as comments directed towards the other that express a positive evaluation (e.g., coming to New York was one of the best choices I ever made. I love the big city and the culture. It's so easy to make friends). Those using an *assimilation* (*ICC* = .93) strategy were associating themselves with a different, more positively valued group by making other group identities more salient (e.g., I enjoy New York City…the culture is not too distant from where I come from, because I come from a city, and I am a city girl"). *Self-promotion* (*ICC* = .78) tactics were identified by positive self-statements that highlight strengths, skills or accomplishments (e.g., I was on the rowing team all four years and voted captain my senior year. Our university has a really good sailing team). *Disclosure* (*ICC* = .81) was demonstrated through statements that reveal personal information (e.g., I was really nervous when I arrived in the US because I was afraid I was not going to make any friends). *Defensiveness* (*ICC* = .92) was defined as comments that include excuses, justifications, or apologies related to ethnicity or accent (e.g., I've tried very hard to improve my English and get rid of my strong German accent. I still have it, but it's not that bad anymore").

A transcript of each recorded video was coded for the use of these five IM strategies. Two members of the research team assessed each IM strategy independently and held calibration meetings to determine consistent rating criteria. Scores were averaged across pairs of raters. Each strategy was rated on a scale of 1-5, with 5 representing the greatest employment of the strategy.

Linguistic Performance. The videos were also rated for three aspects of communicative success. Comprehensibility, defined as "the ease or difficulty with which a listener understands accented speech" (Derwing et al., 2007, p. 360), was rated on a scale from 1 (*extremely easy to*

understand) to 5 (*impossible to understand*). Fluency, defined as "the automatic procedural skill on the part of the speaker" (Derwing et al., 2007, p.360) was rated on a scale from 1 (*highly fluent*) to 5 (*not at all fluent*). Accent strength was rated on a scale from 1 (*no foreign accent*) to 5 (*extremely strong foreign accent*). Comprehensibility, fluency, and accent strength were reverse coded to indicate that higher scores mean language proficiency closer to standard English.

Linguistic performance was assessed by two advanced Applied Linguistics graduate students who were trained in speech evaluation. After several calibration meetings, each rater independently listened to the audio files of the videos and assigned ratings, which were then averaged. The agreement between the two raters was moderately high for all three measures: comprehensibility (*ICC* = .75), fluency (*ICC* = .81), and accent strength (*ICC* = .81).

Physiological Stress. A physiological measure of stress was taken twice during the experiment via a salivary cortisol sample: once at the onset of the experiment and once after they finished recording their two-minute video. Following Dickerson and Kemeny, (2004), all lab sessions were held in the afternoon when cortisol levels are relatively stable and cortisol assessments were obtained 21-30 minutes from stressor onset, when peak cortisol response occurs.

In order to assess the reliability of the cortisol sampling technique, a total of 29 samples were assayed a second time using the same lab and the same equipment. Defined as the closeness of agreement between results, the intra-assay coefficient of variation (CV) is used to represent the extent of variability in our measure. For our samples, the individual sets of duplicate CVs varied from 0.47% to 10.91% and the overall mean of the intra-assay CV was 4.82%, which is considered satisfactory by industry standards (Akinola, 2010; Schultheiss & Stanton, 2009).

Manipulation Checks. To check the effectiveness of the manipulation, participants were asked whether they thought they would be interacting with a native or nonnative English speaker. To evaluate the success of the cover story, participants were also asked if they believed their speech would be evaluated by their interaction partner. Out of 111 participants, 7 answered one or both of these questions incorrectly and were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a sample size of 104.

Results

The means, standard deviations and correlations for the study variables are displayed in Table 2. Results show that out of the five IM strategies, participants used *disclosure* the most (*M* =2.83, SD=1.05), followed by *self-promotion* (*M* = 2.63, *SD* = 1.06), *assimilation* (*M* = 2.26, *SD* = 1.00), *flattery* (*M* = 1.81, *SD* = .98) and used *defensive* strategies the least (*M* = 1.14, *SD* =.45).

IM strategies were significantly related to several outcome variables (RQ2). *Flattery* was negatively associated with avoidant motivation (*r* = -.21, *p* =.041), *assimilation* was positively associated with speech comprehensibility (r = .26, p =.009), *Self-promotion* was positively associated with positive affect (r = .27, p = .006) and speech fluency (r = .35, p < .001) and negatively associated with avoidant motivation (r = -.31, p=.001) and physiological stress (r = -.27, p = .011). *Defensive* IM on the other hand, was positively associated with physiological stress (r = .30, p =.006).

Speech attitudes were positively associated with self-promotion (r =.21, p = .035), positive affect (r = .42, p < .001), avoidant motivation (r = -.34, p <.001), and speech fluency (r = .27, p < .01). Past interactions with native speakers were also positively associated with self-promotion (r = .26, p <.05) as well as positive (r =28, p <.01) .and negative affect (r = -.23, p

<.05). We tested for differences in these relationships by condition using PROCESS model 1 (Hayes, 2013) for all outcome variables and results showed that the interaction effect between condition and flattery on speech fluency was significant (β = .43, SE= .15, $t(99) = 2.78$, $p = .007$) (see Figure 1). In the NNS condition, usage of flattery was negatively associated with fluency but in the NS condition, flattery was positively associated with fluency.

The interaction effect between condition and flattery on positive affect was also significant (β = .51, SE= .19, $t(99) = 2.70$, $p = .008$) (see Figure 2). In the NNS condition, usage of flattery was negatively associated with positive affect but in the NS condition, flattery was positively associated with positive affect.

General Discussion

In this research, we conducted two studies to examine IM strategies of nonnative speakers. Study 1 utilized post-hoc self-report measures of all variables using established scales, asking participants to choose and describe a past experience interacting with a native speaker. Study 2 controlled the interaction context for all participants who were randomly assigned to prepare for an anticipated interaction with either a native speaker or another nonnative speaker. This study was not totally reliant on self-ratings but included a physiological measure of stress and independent observer ratings of verbal IM behaviors and nonnative language speech performance. This use of different methodologies with different strengths and limitations allows a fuller picture of IM.

Together these two studies demonstrated that nonnative speakers tend to use more than one single IM strategy in an interaction episode. In Study 1, participants reported the heaviest use of defensive strategies (excuse and apology), and the least use of self-promotion. This pattern

of strategy use was almost reversed in Study 2. Here, disclosure and self-promotion were most frequent, and defensive strategies the least often observed in participant statements.

As expected, the strategies varied in their effectiveness. Most studies of IM have defined effectiveness in terms of its goal: making a favorable impression on the perceiver. However, in this research we defined success in terms of the speaker's experience. In Study 1, our dependent variables were participants' positive and negative feelings about the incident, their liking of their interaction partner, and the extent to which they placed responsibility for any difficulties with their interaction partner. Study 2 additionally assessed willingness to meet their purported interaction partner as well as their performance in speaking a second language.

Both studies revealed negative effects associated with the use of defensive strategies: excuse and apology. The use of these strategies was associated with more stress, anxiety, and negative affect on the part of speakers. In Study 1 this effect was strong. In Study 2 the effect was more subtle. Self-report measures of stress were not affected, but only the physiological measure of stress (cortisol level) was significantly related to defensive strategies. Differences between self-reported and physiological measures of stress have often been reported by other researchers (Wheeler & Petty, 2001). Schmader et al (2008) argue that people experiencing identity threat may not be aware of their level of anxiety, repress the experience of it, or be unwilling to report it, so self-reports may not be the most accurate measure. Our studies confirm the detrimental effects of defensive behavior and strategies, in both studies they were only related to negative outcomes.

Study 2 confirmed benefits of assertive strategies: self-promotion and flattery. Self-promotion was related to a greater willingness to meet their native-speaking partner, positive affect, lower cortisol, and higher speech fluency. In Study 1, none of the strategies were

associated with positive outcomes, but those who reported greater use of assertive strategies were more likely to place blame for difficulties on their communication partner than on themselves. As noted by Major and Schmader (1998), denying or minimizing one's own contribution to difficulties provides self-esteem protection. In this sense, assertive strategies were the least harmful to the speaker.

Research on IM has shown that self-promotion generally increases listener perceptions of a speaker's competence (Proost et al., 2010). The identity threat literature can help explain why there are benefits for speakers as well. People are motivated to maintain and protect their sense of self-esteem (Steele, 1988), and a view of the self as good and competent. Identity threat challenges this desired self-image by raising the possibility of failure and negative feedback. One of the effects of this is decreased working memory (Schmader & Beilock, 2012), due to distracting negative thoughts and worries about how one is perceived. These activities cause cognitive depletion, heighten anxiety. And are a major cause of performance deficits. Research has revealed that a reliable, powerful intervention for reducing identity threat effects is self-affirmation, reminding oneself of one's cherished attributes and values (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This restores a sense of self-worth and decreases the cognitive accessibility of threatening thoughts (Klein et al., 2001; Koole et al., 1999). Self-affirmation is often induced in the laboratory by asking participants to write briefly about their important values, positive personal characteristics, and experiences that made them feel good about the self (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In Study 2, engaging in a self-promoting IM strategy required participants to think and speak about their positive qualities and experiences, similar to a self-affirmation manipulation. The positive effects on mood, speech fluency and cortisol support this interpretation as evidence of threat reduction.

Another possibility is that participants who used self-promotion expected positive evaluations from the perceiver. A series of studies by Scopelliti and colleagues (2015) found that self-promoters consistently overestimated positive responses of perceivers to their promoting strategy and underestimated negative reactions. In Study 2, increased positive affect and reduced stress may have resulted from the anticipated/expected success of their self-promotion efforts.

In Study 2, flattery also provided benefits for the speaker. In the IM literature, flattery has been less consistently beneficial for making favorable impressions (Bolino et al., 2016) except in job interviews, where flattery is most useful at the beginning of an interview as a means of building rapport. In Study 2 flattery reduced avoidance in the total sample. Participants may have believed that by signaling their positive regard for their partner using flattery, they were reducing the probability of critical judgment. As a result, they were less reluctant to engage in a face-to-face interaction.

In the NS condition, flattery had additional benefits, where it uniquely influenced positive affect and speech fluency. In this condition, the relationships were strongly positive, similar to the effects of self-promotion. Yet flattery is the opposite of self-promotion, so why would it reduce threat? Studies have found that another effective intervention that reduces the influence of threat is explicit instruction to form an impression of one's interaction partner (Lord & Saenz, 1985; Saenz & Lord, 1989). Vorauer (2006) argues that this occurs because engaging in forming an impression of the other successfully diverts attention from concern about how oneself is being perceived. She further suggests that impression formation is incompatible with the extreme self-focus of evaluative concerns. So perhaps flattery, which requires thinking about what might flatter the interaction partner, may reduce self-focus and its negative impact.

But the direction of this relationship was reversed in the NNS condition, where higher use of flattery decreased positive mood and fluency. The accent literature overwhelmingly considers the bias that native speakers have towards nonnative speakers. Consistent with this focus, we began our research with the belief that speaking with another NNS would pose less threat than speaking with a NS. But our results did not support this belief. There were no significant differences between the two conditions on any of our variables, and similar relationships among the variables were also found in each condition, with the exception of flattery. Being evaluated by a peer nonnative speaker may not induce identity/stereotype threat, but poses a different kind of threat, that of social comparison. Not speaking as well as a native speaker is almost a given and a negative evaluation by a native speaker can always be discounted as due to listener prejudice. But not speaking as well as another nonnative speaker is a greater and much closer social comparison threat that can't be as easily dismissed. Someone similar to you is a much more informative comparison than someone very dissimilar to you (Wood, 1989). While we are motivated to compare ourselves to others, at the same time we are motivated to perceive ourselves as superior (Tesser 1988; Wood, 1989). Much research has shown that perceiving oneself as less competent than others is aversive and constitutes a threat to self-esteem. It results in feelings of inferiority, envy, and hostility toward the other, creating a desire to denigrate them in some way (Downes et al., 2021). Yet flattery is the opposite of denigration. This may explain why using it had a negative impact for this group. Praising a competitor, giving them an advantage, was aversive.

In addition to exploring the effects of IM strategies, we examined the role of speech attitudes, past experience, and malleability as predictors of IM. Gluszek and Dovidio (2010a) and Cargile (2000) suggested that more positive attitudes towards one's accent would result in the

use of more assertive IM strategies. This was supported for self-promotion in both studies, but not for flattery or assimilation. Previous work has also linked speech attitudes to willingness to speak a nonnative language (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010a). In Study 2, attitudes were positively related to speech performance and greater willingness to engage in a face-to-face meeting. In Study 1, those who reported more positive attitudes towards their accent were more likely to place blame for poor outcomes on their communication partner, than on themselves.

Much research has found that malleability beliefs are important for learning (Dweck, 2007). These beliefs sustain motivation in spite of falling short of one's level of desired performance. In Study 1, malleability was related to greater use of defensive strategies. In Study 2, greater malleability was associated with less positive affect and stronger objectively rated accent strength. So, as accent strength increased, so did beliefs that improvement was possible. During the study those with higher malleability were less happy, but importantly, not more anxious, and not more avoidant. This held in both the NS and NNS conditions. Previous work suggests that malleability beliefs may protect people from negative consequences of social comparison threat. When improvement is believed possible, another's higher performance can be interpreted as also possible for oneself, and upward comparisons are more likely to function as motivating instead of discouraging (Waltré et al. (2023) .

In a number of ways, the differences between Studies 1 and 2 were striking. The heavy use of defensive strategies in Study 1 was somewhat unexpected and this may be partly due to our methodology. The bias for remembering negative events over positive is well documented (Vaish et al., 2008). But beyond methodology, it is clear that our two samples had very different experiences with native speakers. For Study 1 participants, greater experience is associated with more negative attitudes about their accent, and weaker beliefs that they can improve it. In

addition, no IM strategy that we measured was able to increase positive outcomes for the speaker. Study 2 participants indicate a much more positive experience. For these participants, experience brings more positive attitudes and more positive affect during the interaction. Self-promotion is beneficial, and its use frequent. Malleability beliefs are related to less positive feelings during the experiment and stronger accent strength rated by observers, but not to speech attitudes or anxiety. These differences are likely a result of the populations we sampled. In Study 1, our sample consisted of both blue- and white-collar workers using a nonnative language at their place of employment. The decision to work in a nonnative country may not necessarily have been by choice. In Study 2, we sampled from a much more homogeneous group - international graduate students at a prestigious, private university. There are great differences between these groups in economic status, resources, and support.

Practical Implications and Conclusion

IM is an essential component of small talk and pragmatic language competence. However, it is often not done consciously (Ward & Ravlin, 2017). This research shows that the strategy chosen can make a difference for the speaker. We hope our results can help nonnative speakers make more deliberate choices about their self-presentation. For example, despite being the most frequent strategy chosen by participants in Study 2, disclosure had no impact on any of our measured outcomes. Instead, self-promotion was the best choice, especially in the U.S., but in both studies, it always worked for the speaker's benefit. The dilemma of using this strategy is to avoid being seen as bragging or self-interested, which can provoke negative reactions by listeners (Bolino et al., 2016). Perceivers typically view self-promoters as competent, but not very likable (Scopelliti et al., 2015). However, recently VanEpps and colleagues (2023) found

that a strategy of dual promotion (promoting not just oneself, but also colleagues or others who contributed to one's successes) increased listeners' perceptions of speakers' competence *and* likability over self-promotion alone. In addition, some studies have reported that when interpersonal themes are included in a self-affirmation, it is more effective in reducing identity threat (Knowles et al., 2010). IM that acknowledges the importance of others may be the most likely to have a positive impact on both the speaker and the listener.

Flattery was also an effective IM strategy, but only when interacting with native speakers. Used with nonnative speaking partners it had negative effects, we speculate most likely due to increased social comparison threat. Research has overwhelmingly emphasized evaluation of nonnative speakers by native speakers. Our research suggests that this emphasis may be misplaced, especially when considering English. Nonnative speakers far outnumber native speakers of English (Fiedler, 2022) and nonnative English speakers more frequently interact in English with other nonnative than native speakers. Thus, evaluation by other nonnative speakers is probably more salient and more common than that by native speakers. Yet very little research has examined social comparison threat for nonnative speakers. One exception is Zarrinabadi and Khodarahmi's (2017) qualitative study of adult students' evaluation and presentation concerns in a second language classroom. Future research should examine both evaluation and social comparison threats and their impact on nonnative-language learning and speaking.

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Marcello Russo is Professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Bologna and the Global MBA director at Bologna Business School in Italy and. He is an expert on work-life balance, with a focus on what individual strategies and organizational factors can help individuals accomplish their ideal model of work-life balance and it has published in leading scholarly journals, including Harvard Business Review, MIT Sloan Management Review, Journal of Management, Academy of Management Annals.

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Appendix

Excerpts from Study 1

Example 1. "I think the language is a medium and not the ultimate goal of the conversation. When you master a foreign language is an extraordinary effort and this should be appreciated. I remember a couple of times when I was very stressed. Before starting a presentation at work, I was very nervous even though I was supposed to speak about a topic I knew well. That kind of experience was destabilizing for me...I do think that my reaction could vary according to the size of the team you were talking to, the context and the presence or absence of interaction. Here in France, you are very much judged according to your level of French. This is so pity. Yes, it is true...you do not have the same language fluency but it does not mean you are incompetent at all. I remember the first times I talked with native French people... they looked at me like I was like a barbarian man. This was really frustrating. Here, the language is very much related to status and hierarchy in the society."

Example 2. "I have both positive and negative experiences with my accent. […] Very often, the negative ones concern my daily life in Paris. For instance, when I order food. It happens over and over. When I order food [in French] the other person realizes I am English and he or she automatically assumes I do not understand their language and so he or she starts replying to my order in English, then I reply in French, and they reply again in English…I do not know why it happens, but it is fun! Moreover, it is a bad English and much more difficult to understand for me than their French. When I work, I have more positive experiences. But this I believe is related to my profession. I am a musician and the music creates a cosmopolitan language that replaces any accent or language diversity. When I have rehearsals with my band, I switch back and forth across the languages because there are some technical terms I do not know

in French. However, there are moments when I am nervous to speak in French and it does happen when I do not have my instrument with me. In that case I am really really nervous…when I have my instrument I fell much more confident because I know I will play my music and my music skills can compensate for my language flaws. I rarely experience problem in my work setting. Only in exceptional cases people initiate to emphasize the fact that I have a different accent…I believe it happens because they want to show their superiority and use the language as an obstacle."

Elevator Speech from Study 2

Example 1. Hi, my name is ____ , and I am an EDD student here. I am in the movement sciences department and I am basically a physical therapist and I work with children with cerebral palsy, basically, children who can't walk since their birth and find a lot of difficulty with that. I have a lot of interest in that and that's why I'm here. It's been around a year since I am here and I am really fascinated by this place-New York City-and the pace of the life here. I should say I was very nervous when I came here because I didn't know many people here but there have been a lot of new experiences and, I should say a lot of good experiences, this place is amazing. I love it here because people here are really friendly and I really find it easy to make friends here to get around, even though people may not be of the same country or the same race as I am but it's not difficult. And, it's good to be here. Also, this has been my first winter here, and, I should say it was very cold, I was freezing, but, I came over that too, and, I like to say that, I love the way it's here, I am able to do my work, I am able to study, at the same time I am able to make friends-be comfortable with people-and it's really nice getting with people. My hobbies include reading, traveling, meeting new people, and listening to music. And, I love finding new places to have good food in New York City.

Example 2. “Hi, I am ___and I am a first-year graduate student and my program is international educational development. I am from China and my Chinese name is ___and my hometown is Tsingdao. It’s a beautiful coastal city in northern part of China, in between Beijing and Shanghai. So, if you are a beer lover, you should definitely come to my hometown because it’s home to the most favored Chinese beer brand, Tsingdao beer. Actually, I’ve been here, in New York City just for a month. I just graduated from Tsingdao university in China. It’s top 3 universities. and my undergraduate major is Russian, Russian language so you will be surprised, maybe. I really love to work with people around the world with different backgrounds, diverse culture and actually, I spent the summer working in NGO for street children in Ukraine and the next summer, I spent the whole summer in Seattle as an exchange student in University of Washington. I enjoyed it there. And then, next year, I will spend my senior year in Russia. So, now I’m here in New York City, and I just feel the culture exposure–I love it. And I would like to know more about you and introduce more of my culture to you and we can communicate more and be friends. Actually, my hobby is a lot. I love reading, I love swimming, I love shopping, and watching movies so you can call me anytime you want.”

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study 1 Variables.

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Attitudes toward accent	5.48	.97														
2. Malleability of accent	3.79	1.78	.19													
3. Investment in speaking	5.81	1.01	.43**	.18												
4. Past interactions with NS	11.23	9.62	-.26*	-.32**	.04											
5. Positive Affect	3.26	.68	-.01	-.17	-.01	-.01										
6. Negative Affect	2.21	.76	-.07	.16	.05	.05	.07									
7. Anxiety	2.65	.93	-.17	.06	.01	.01	.24*	.83**								
8. Partner Blame	3.03	1.95	.42*	.24	.19	-.27	-.22	-.13	-.26							
9. Liking of Partner	5.01	1.38	.12	.05	.26*	.15	.15	-.29**	-.31**	-.33*						
10. Flattery	3.12	1.30	.30**	.24*	.44**	-.27*	.09	.19	-.02	.32	.18					
11. Self-Promotion	3.07	1.70	.37**	.08	.29*	-.19	.15	.04	.01	.28	.13	.46**				
12. Apologize	3.37	1.81	-.11	.32**	.07	-.36**	-.04	.49**	.50**	-.17	-.06	.10	-.03			
13. Excuse	3.44	1.84	-.01	.29**	.12	-.45**	.10	.34**	.35**	-.11	.01	.24*	.14	.84**		
14. Assertiveness	3.10	1.24	.39**	.20	.44**	-.27*	.14	.15	-.01	.36*	.19	.89**	.81**	.04	.23*	
15. Defensiveness	3.34	1.73	-.04	.33**	.12	-.45**	.06	.42**	.43**	-.16	-.01	.21	.08	.92**	.97**	.18

Note. N=75; (*)p <.10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study 2 Variables.

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Attitudes toward accent	5.02	.86										
1. Malleability of accent	3.11	1.27	-.30**									
2. Investment in speaking English	4.68	1.02	-.12	.02								
3. Past interactions with NS	4.66	.1.22	.41***	-.03	-.27**							
4. Positive Affect	2.76	.91	.423***	-.20*	-.04	.28**						
5. Negative Affect	1.38	.44	-.113	-.09	.14	-.23*	.06					
6. Anxiety	1.78	.74	-.071	-.02	.17	-.18(*)	.14	.72***				
7. Avoidant Intentions	1.91	.95	-.34***	.09	.04	-.19(*)	-.27**	.12	.06			
8. Partner Blame	1.83	.94	-.03	.02	.06	-.03	-.02	.17(*)	.12	.26**		
9. Flattery	1.81	.98	.10	.04	-.18(*)	.09	-.08	-.16	-.08	-.21*	-.18	
10. Assimilation	2.26	1.00	.01	.19	-.03	.12	-.06	-.02	-.01	.07	.07	.04
11. Self-Promotion	2.63	1.06	.21*	-.03	.11	.26*	.27**	.04	-.01	-.31**	.02	-.01
12. Disclosure	2.83	1.05	.02	-.06	-.01	.01	.13	-.14	-.18(*)	-.15	-.15	.28**
13. Defensiveness	1.14	.45	-.12	.08	-.01	-.09	-.11	-.04	-.01	.01	-.01	-.07
14. Comprehensibility	3.90	.73	.17(*)	-.07	-.19(*)	.38***	.14	.01	-.04	-.02	.12	-.01
15. Fluency	3.71	.74	.27**	.01	.03	.35***	.29**	-.10	-.04	-.28*	-.06	.07
16. Accent Strength	3.18	.83	.21*	-.23*	-.19(*)	.37***	.19(*)	-.01	-.02	-.01	.09	-.15
17. Physiological Stress (cortisol)	-1.42	5.21	-.12	.08	-.01	-.16	.03	-.04	.03	.17	-.03	.01

Note. N=104; (*)$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study 2 Variables (Continued).

Variables	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
11. Assimilation							
12. Self-Promotion	.26*						
13. Disclosure	-.27**	-.09					
14. Defensiveness	-.09	-.04	.18(*)				
15. Comprehensibility	.26**	.12	-.16	.11			
16. Fluency	.11	.350***	.02	-.03	.56***		
17. Accent Strength	.05	.02	-.10	.11	.85***	.54***	
18. Physiological Stress (cortisol)	-.12	-.27*	.14	.30**	-.01	-.10	.02

Note. N=104; (*)$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

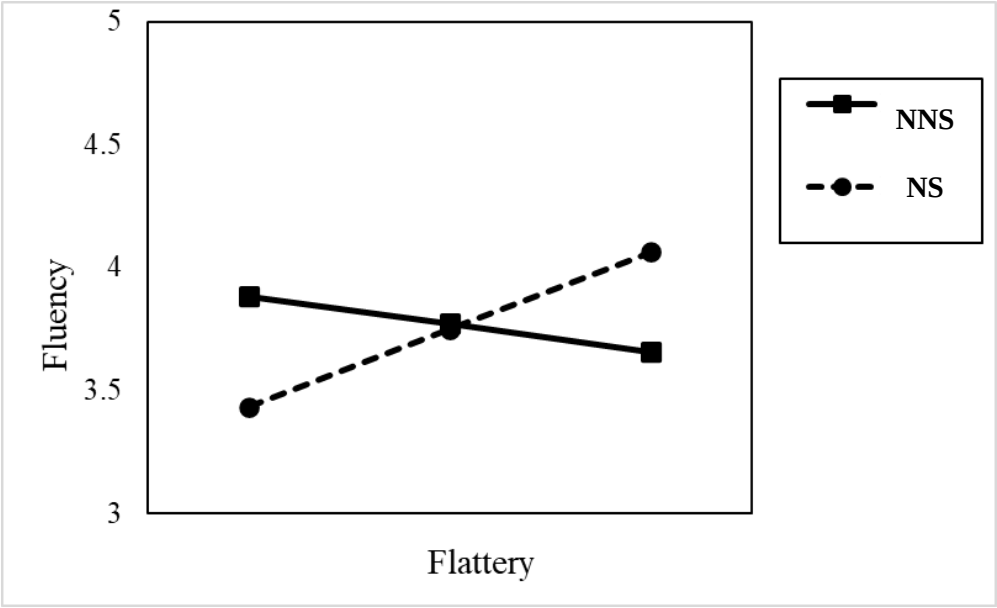

Figure 1. Interaction effect between condition and flattery on speech fluency (Study 2).

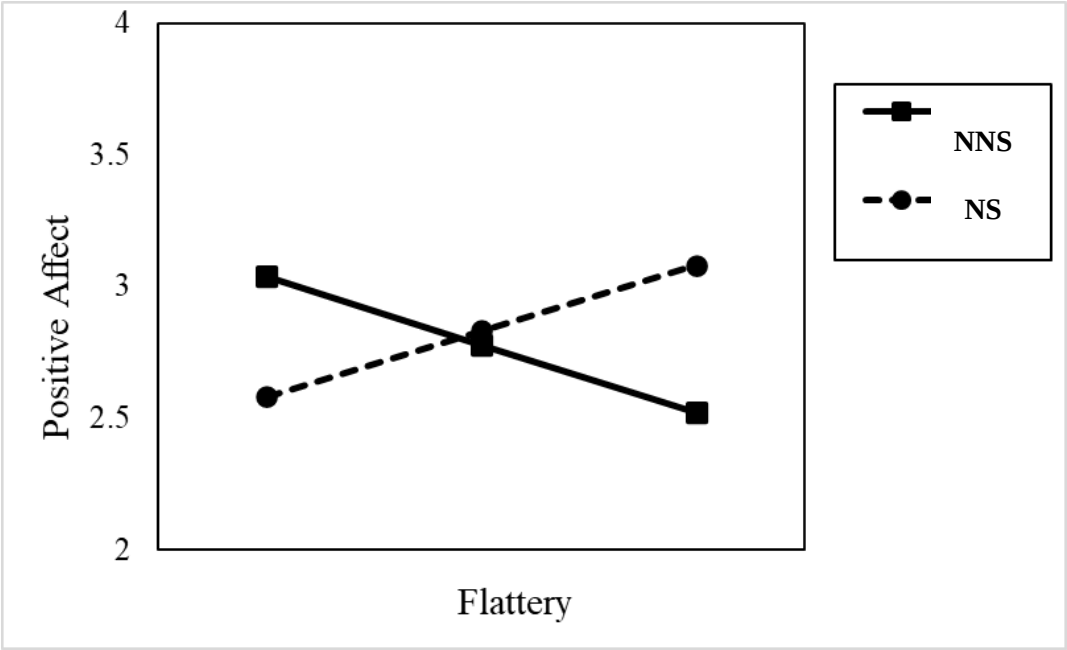

Figure 2. Interaction effect between condition and flattery on positive affect (Study 2).