

Intercultural Miscommunication and the Noun 'Girlfriend'

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Abstract

This report investigates possible intercultural miscommunication due to linguistic differences between Australian English and Serbian in relation to the noun 'girlfriend'. In order to clarify the meanings, understanding and use of the noun 'girlfriend', three Australian corpora were explored and interviews were conducted with Australians and Serbians. According to corpus data, Australians usually use the noun 'girlfriend' to refer to a close female friend of a man, to emphasise female friendships or to differentiate close friends from acquaintances. However, even corpus data shows that the meaning of the noun 'girlfriend' could be ambiguous and cause misunderstanding. Both cultures recognised the 'lesbian partner' meaning as problematic and they use the noun 'girlfriend' with care in order to avoid any misunderstanding. However, Serbians are more often unsure about the lesbian implications because in the Serbian language the noun 'girlfriend' does not cover the 'female friend' meaning and Serbians are more familiar with the 'partner' meaning of the noun 'girlfriend'. Consequently, intercultural miscommunication may be possible.

1. Introduction

People across cultures tend to be very sensitive when talking about personal relationships. Scollon & Scollon (2007:7) state that "language is ambiguous by nature" and we carefully choose words e.g. girlfriend, boyfriend, friend, partner, in order to express ourselves and avoid misunderstanding. When you are speaking in a second language, the selection of the right word becomes even more complicated. As there are no true counterparts in Australian English and Serbian in relation to the noun 'girlfriend', it is worthwhile to clarify its meaning. Let us look in the following sentence:

She is my girlfriend.

If spoken by a man, the meaning of the sentence would be clear to the author. The man is referring to a woman who would be his close friend with whom he has an emotional relationship. However, the meaning becomes ambiguous to the author

if spoken by a woman. Is the woman referring to her female friend or a lesbian partner?

According to House (2000), inappropriate linguistic comprehension can be a cause of intercultural miscommunication. Considering that intercultural miscommunication is possible if native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English perceive the same word differently, the aim of this research is to investigate how Australians and Serbians understand and use the noun 'girlfriend'. This investigation will further explore whether word 'girlfriend' could form a basis for intercultural miscommunication.

First, the report will present research findings in the field of intercultural miscommunication, followed by the methodology used for data collection. The report will conclude with analysis of data, which would lead to the conclusion. This report claims that intercultural miscommunication is possible due to perceived meanings and use of the noun 'girlfriend'.

2. Literature Review

"Intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" and might become difficult or impossible due to cultural diversity, since our cultural presuppositions, values and worldviews are reflected in our use of language (Samovar & Porter 2003:12). Hopper (1981) agrees that members of different cultures possess dissimilar 'taken-for-granted' and Fitch (2002) further explains that the 'taken-for-granted' complicate language use and cause miscommunication. House (2000) also observes that cross-cultural differences in communicative preferences cause mismanaged rapport and miscommunication.

As Samovar & Porter (2003) point out, language differences may not be influenced deeply by cultures, but they do account for intercultural miscommunication. Bazzanella & Damiano (1999:821) have also included "troubles caused by the use of a foreign language" in their list of triggers that cause misunderstandings.

In order to avoid communication breakdown and handle linguistic misunderstandings, at least one speaker should reorganise his/her mental structures and processes (Rehbein, 2006). According to Bazzanella & Damiano (1999), either the speaker or interlocutor can reconstruct what caused the wrong interpretation and indicate the meaning more clearly. Difficulties with communication can also be resolved through awareness of the structure and analysis of meanings (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1988).

3. Methodology

The following approaches were chosen for data collection in this research:

- a. corpus analysis
- b. participant interviews

These were chosen with the aim to clarify the meaning of the noun 'girlfriend', to find out how native speakers (NS) of Australian English and non-native speakers (NNS) of English (NS of the Serbian language) use the word and, explore the possibilities of intercultural miscommunication in relation to its understanding.

3.1. Corpus Analysis

Three corpora of Australian English were used:

- a. Australian Corpus of English (ACE)
- b. Australian ICE Corpus (a component of the International Corpus of English)
- c. AUSTGRAM Corpus (Australian talkback radio)

The Australian Corpus of English (ACE) was used in order to explore the use of 'girlfriend' in Australian written literature. Entries were found in the following categories: press – reportage (4), popular lore (4), letters, biography and essays (2), general fiction (2), adventure/western (bush) (1) and romance/love (1). The other two corpora (Australian ICE Corpus and AUSTGRAM Corpus) were used to explore the use of the noun 'girlfriend' by Australians in private dialogues and general conversations.

3.2. Participant Interviews

There were ten interviewees conducted with 5 Australian (NS) and 5 Serbian (NNS) participants. The interviewees were of different ages and consisted both males and females. Thus, the data represents the use of 'girlfriend' among different age groups and perspectives from both genders. The interviewees were contacted beforehand to agree on the time for a one-on-one interview. The focus was on the *female friend of a female person* meaning of the noun 'girlfriend'. The aim of the interviews was to collect data about the salient meaning of the noun 'girlfriend', context and frequency of use, forms of use and possible intercultural miscommunication. The interviews were recorded and later analysed. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of Corpus Data

"A corpus is a collection of pieces of language text in electronic form, selected according to external criteria to represent, as far as possible, a language or language variety as a source of data for linguistic research" (Sinclair, 2005:19). Using corpora in speech research is important because it provides broad and naturalistic samples of speech (McEnery & Wilson, 2001) and we can draw conclusions based on attested language use rather than on our intuitions (McEnery & Gabrielatos, 2006).

The noun 'girlfriend' can mean a close female friend of a man, with whom he has a romantic or sexual relationship, or a female friend of a woman (Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995). Although not included in dictionaries, in contemporary social contexts, the term 'girlfriend' can be used to refer to a lesbian partner. In order to condense the two uses of the noun 'girlfriend', for the purposes of analysis and discussion, the first meaning will be marked as a *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning and the second meaning as a *female friend* meaning. Through analysis of the selected corpus data, this paper looks at the noun 'girlfriend' and the frequency, context and forms of use.

4.1.1. Frequency

Table 1. Corpus entries

Corpus	Total entries	<i>female friend</i> meaning	<i>girlfriend/ boyfriend</i> meaning	undetermined meaning*
Australian Corpus of English (ACE)	14	2	10	2
Australian ICE Corpus (AIC)	14	4	9	1
AUSTGRAM Corpus (AC)	7	1	6	0

* '*undetermined meaning*' refers to ambiguity in the use of 'girlfriend' – whether it was used to refer to a female friend of a man, a female friend of a female person or a lesbian partner

Of the 32 entries (excluding undetermined meanings), only 7 represent the use of the noun 'girlfriend' to refer to a *female friend of a female person*. According to these results, the noun 'girlfriend' is used much more often to refer to a *close female friend of a man*.

4.1.2. Context

All seven entries for the *female friend* meaning were analysed with the aim to clarify the context of use. In the following examples (1) – (3), 'girlfriend' was used in general conversations to refer to a person who was not present at the moment of speaking.

- (1) F05 911: When I was about seven months pregnant with Ry I was support partner for a **girlfriend** who gave birth with the aid of acupuncture
- (2) S1A-048(B):220 Oh dear I had my **girlfriend** and her five children stay with us
- (3) S1A-033(D):227 Do you know um did I tell you you know that **girlfriend** that lives up at works at the um Swiss embassy

In example (4), if a 'married friend' was used instead of a 'married girlfriend', we would not get the complete message of this sentence – that the person who might suspect something in this case is a woman. Therefore, we might use 'girlfriend' to emphasise the female friendship.

- (4) F06 1035: If the divorcee has left her partner and not been deserted by him, a married **girlfriend** may suspect that the divorcee is chasing after other men, regardless of the reasons for the breakup.

In examples (5) and (6), we notice that women might not use the noun 'girlfriend' easily; they would have to refer friends that are close. Therefore, the noun 'girlfriend' can be used to differentiate close friends from acquaintances.

- (5) S1A-018(C):15 A **girlfriend** well she's not really a **girlfriend** of mine she's an acquaintance through work she worked for my brother-in-law at the Station Master's Cottage
- (6) S1A-046(A):215 I I recently had a um I s'pose a **girlfriend** a close **girlfriend** of mine who's now actually my sister-in-law 'cos she introduced me to her brother-in-law

In the following example (7), the noun 'girlfriend' is used more generally. It does not refer to two close friends, which could suggest that it is easy for a person to call two other women 'girlfriends'. On the other hand, a woman would only call her close female friend a 'girlfriend'.

- (7) ABCnat2:[E1] I won't pass the verb the the oral I just know it. Um but it's it's very odd um it's really I guess the only equivalent wuh would be be y'know an old photo album of y'know how you looked at school 'n' your daggy haircut 'n' the **girlfriend** who y'know only spoke to you for nine minutes of your entire life y'know it's a <> it's such a long time ago. I mean I wrote this book in the nineteen-eighties. And I had a I had a y'know a toddler uh who's now <> twenty years old <P1 laughs> so it's it's y'know and and he has brothers and sisters so <> so it's a y'know it's a very long time ago and it's it's almost as though <> it was written by somebody else but I have to say y'know hearing Ramona uh r read it uh I there was a flicker of recognition <inaudible> <all laugh>.

The examples with undetermined meanings were separated to show that if we do not know the context, it might be difficult to conclude the meaning of the noun 'girlfriend'. In examples (8) and (9), 'girlfriend' can refer to a close female friend of a man or a female friend of a woman. Alternatively, it can also refer to a woman's lesbian partner.

- (8) F10 1847 : So says the **girlfriend**
 (9) F22 4315 : All my **girlfriends** did the same ; some still do

Moreover, in example (10), it is not certain whether 'girlfriend' refers to a female friend of a woman or a lesbian partner.

- (10) S1A-010(A):259 I know I know I know So if if she had um she was inclined to have a **girlfriend** sort of sort of thing and move in then she'll just tell her parents you know I'm moving out and that will be OK and you're mine

4.1.3 Forms

'A girlfriend of mine' is the only form that stands out in the examples of the 'female friend' meaning, like in examples (5) and (6). 'A ... of mine' form implies there is more than one. Since women usually have more than one girlfriend, it is very appropriate to use that form. On the other hand, it eliminates the meaning which is that of a lesbian partner, because usually women do not have more than one partner.

Among the examples of *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning there are the following consistencies:

- (11) S1A-060(B):186 I wouldn't want to have a girlfriend now It's so bad
 (12) S1A-060(A):181 Ahyou wish Have you got a girlfriend

Examples (11) and (12) indicate the expression '*to have (got) a girlfriend*'. Men use the expression in order to refer to their close female friends with whom they have emotional or sexual relationships. If a woman uses the expression, it sounds strange and seems as if she is referring to her lesbian partner. Therefore, it seems as the expression '*to have (got) a girlfriend*' is reserved for the *girlfriend/boyfriend* and *lesbian partner* meanings of the noun 'girlfriend'.

In addition, examples (13) and (14) show expressions '*new/ex girlfriend*' where women can use '*new/ex girlfriend*' to mark the beginning or the end of their female friendships, but the expression is usually reserved for men in relation to the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning.

- (13) K28 5365 : He was becoming very involved with a new girlfriend whom he had met at a political meeting
 (14) S1A-095(B):119 And then there's all these ex-girlfriends and things Oh yeah so they sat him down and

In the example below (15), it becomes obvious that the noun 'girlfriend' is ambiguous.

- (15) COMe8:[Caller 5a: Leigh, F] Yeah fantastic. I have my **girlfriend** with me Sarah <P1 oh s> she's not my **girlfriend** she's my friend.

In example (15), a man probably wanted to emphasise that his friend is a woman. Then, he had to clarify the meaning of 'girlfriend'. Thus, the first understanding when a man uses the noun 'girlfriend' is the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning. That is not surprising and the example suggests that only women can use 'girlfriend' to refer to their female friends. However, in contemporary use, women can use 'girlfriend' to both refer to their friends or lesbian partners.

Therefore, according to the corpus data, the primary use of the noun 'girlfriend' is to refer to a close female friend of a man. Women use 'girlfriend' to refer to their female friends who are not present at the moment of speaking, in order to emphasise the female friendship or differentiate close friends from acquaintances. It is not possible to draw any conclusions about the *lesbian partner* meaning of the noun 'girlfriend' through corpus data. However, there are evidence to indicate that the noun 'girlfriend' can be ambiguous. In order to clarify further the meanings and uses

of the noun 'girlfriend' and to explore the Serbian perspective in this matter, participant interviews were conducted.

4.2. Analysis of Participant Interviews

The analysis of data collected from the interviews starts with the most salient meaning of the noun 'girlfriend'.

4.2.1. Salient meaning

From the 5 Australian interviewees, 2 said that the *female friend* meaning comes first into their minds when they hear the word. The other 3 Australian interviewees stated the opposite, that is, the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning would be the first they would think of when they hear the word 'girlfriend'. After explaining that the noun 'girlfriend' can also be used to refer to a lesbian partner, they all agreed to the possibility of this reference. However, they did not connect 'girlfriend' with a lesbian partner meaning on first hearing. Since the opinions were divided, it can be concluded that NS consider the two meanings of 'girlfriend' equal and more salient than the *lesbian partner* meaning.

In the following example, an Australian woman (aged 40) did not just choose the 'female friend' meaning, she also added an adjective 'good'. In that way, she confirmed the observation from the corpus data analysis that women use the noun 'girlfriend' to refer to their really close friends.

- 1 T: ...when you hear the noun [girlfriend]↑... what is the first=
- 2 NS: [yeah]
- 3 T: =meaning that comes into your mind?
- 4 NS: uhm...a good↑ friend
- 5 T: a good friend?=
6 NS: yeah
- 7 T: =like::... your female↑ friend?
- 8 NS: yeah↑...good female friend

What is interesting about the Serbians' responses was that all the 5 interviewees chose the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning. That suggests that Serbians primarily understand the noun 'girlfriend' as a man's female partner. One reason for this consensus could be that the noun 'girlfriend' is most often used to refer to a man's female partner, as shown by the corpus data. The Serbians, who are NNS speakers of English, are thus more familiar with the generic use. Another reason could be the lack of a word in Serbian that at the same time means a close female friend of a man

and a female friend of a female person. That is, in Serbian, there are two separate words for the *girlfriend/boyfriend* and *female friend* meaning.

Table 2. Serbian translation of 'girlfriend'

Emotional/Sexual Relationships			Friendships		
English	girlfriend	boyfriend	English	girlfriend	friend
Serbian	<i>djevojka</i>	<i>momak</i>	Serbian	<i>prijateljica</i>	<i>prijatelj</i>

Hence, the *female friend* meaning of the noun 'girlfriend' could be excluded because in Serbian, 'girlfriend' (*djevojka*) does not cover the *female friend* meaning. This linguistic difference could cause trouble for Serbians (and other NNSs) and serve as a misunderstanding trigger, as explained by Bazzanella & Damiano (1999).

4.2.2. Frequency

Concerning the frequency of use, responses from the Australian interviewees varied. Some Australian interviewees use 'girlfriend' to refer to a female friend often, some rarely or never. The use depends on the personal style of expression. Moreover, no problems were identified with the use of 'girlfriend' to refer to a female friend.

On the other hand, 4 Serbian interviewees who use the noun 'girlfriend' never do so to refer to a female friend. The following is the response of a Serbian woman (aged 30):

- 1 T: ... how often[↑] do you use girlfriend to refer to your female friend?
- 2 NNS: ...I don't
- 3 T: you don't use it?
- 4 NNS: we::ll no...
- 5 T: is there any particular reason[↑] for that?
- 6 NNS: it just sounds strange to me...uhm (.) it's enough to say friend
- 7 T: why is it strange for you to say girlfriend?
- 8 NNS: well(.)it's like I have a girlfriend but I like the boys(.)you know hahh

4.2.3. Context data

In generally, context data collected from the interviews matches the selected corpus data used in this investigation. The Australian interviewees use the noun 'girlfriend' to refer to a female person, not present at the moment of speaking. As one of the Australian female interviewees (aged 29) said:

- 1 T: ..how often do you use the term to refer to your female friend
- 2 NS: as a girlfriend? ...uhm...not that often but↑
- 3 T: ...in which situations?
- 4 NS: ...when I`m talking to another female
- 5 T: would you say (.) for example... my girlfriend and I went shopping
- 6 NS: yeah yeah... my girlfriend and I went↑ or did↑ something... generally ...just referring to a female friend and what I did with her generally or some history↑ that I have with her

4.2.4. Forms

In order to investigate the implication of the *lesbian partner* meaning, the interviewees were asked the frequency of use between the expressions: 'my girlfriend' and 'a girlfriend of mine'. The interviewees were further asked which of these two expressions is more common: 'I went shopping with my girlfriend' as opposed to 'I went shopping with my girlfriends'. All of the interviewees chose 'a girlfriend of mine' and 'with girlfriends'. In a way, both expressions reduce the ambiguity and the possibility of misunderstanding. By emphasising that you have more than one girlfriend, listeners would not think that you are talking about your lesbian partners. Although people might use these expressions without thinking, it suggests that women do not use the noun 'girlfriend' in the singular form very often to refer to their female friends. According to the interview responses, Australian women become more aware of the possible misinterpretation and use the noun 'girlfriend' less often.

The use of the term '*friends*' is definitely more common than '*girlfriends*' according to the Australian interviewees, as this 15-year-old girl said:

- 1 T: ok... how often↑ do you use the term to refer to your female friend?
- 2 NS (15): like:: never...uhm because everyone knows my best friend who is a girl so I can say anna... and I usually hang out with her (.) and (.) uhm.. my friends are usually girls... so I just say I`m hanging out with my friends and just generalise them as girls really

4.2.5. Intercultural miscommunication

When asked would they ever say something like '*this is my girlfriend*' when introducing a female friend to someone, all responses were negative. The following is the response of a Serbian female interviewee (aged 27):

- 1 NS: ...no..(.) I wouldn't
- 2 T: and why is that?
- 3 NS: we::ll. there is just no need to say girlfriend↑ it's enough to say friend... (.) also↑ there is no need to create any space for misunderstanding

Moreover, 3 Australian and 4 Serbian interviewees agreed that the noun 'girlfriend' is ambiguous and can cause misunderstandings. Most of the Australians said that they would not necessarily think that a woman refers to her lesbian partner by using the noun 'girlfriend'. However, their judgment depends on the familiarity with the woman. If they know her beliefs, values and way of life, they would not have any doubts.

However, the Serbian interviewees' responses support the possibility of this misunderstanding more strongly. Since the noun 'girlfriend' is increasingly used to refer to a lesbian partner, the Serbian interviewees become more confident with the *girlfriend/boyfriend* meaning of the noun 'girlfriend' and can misunderstand the *female friend* meaning when spoken by a woman. They would not necessarily think that two women are lesbians if they refer to each other as girlfriends. However, they would have doubts more often than Australians would. Once again, the reasons for these doubts could be the linguistic difference previously mentioned and the fact that NNS speakers are more familiar with the 'partner' meaning of the noun 'girlfriend'. From the cultural perspective, Australians are generally more open about lesbian relationships than Serbians. Consequently, Serbians are aware that Australian women easily admit having lesbian partners, which could give rise to doubts.

When asked if they would ask for clarification if they are not sure whether two women are friends or partners, all Serbian interviewees answered negatively. The following is the response of a Serbian female interviewee (aged 30):

- 1 NS: hahh no no↑... probably not
- 2 T: why not?
- 3 NS: we::ll it would be awkward just to suddenly ask are you a lesbian↑ hahha no:: (0.2) I'd rather wait a little bit and conclude from other things that they may say or do.

Although the Serbian interviewees would prevent miscommunication by seeking clarifications, they can also put the hearer's face at risk. The hearer (NS) might become embarrassed because of the speaker's (NNS) doubts. The NS is not aware where the doubts come from and could think that NNS doubts are caused only by NNS beliefs that the NS has lesbian preferences. Hence, often NNS of

English (Serbians) would not say anything, which could lead to the communication breakdown at the later stage in the conversation.

Concerning the male interviewees, the Australian male interviewees said that when they hear other women call each other 'girlfriends', they do not find anything puzzling about that. In a way, that suggests that women are more conscious about how, when and with whom they use the noun 'girlfriend' to refer to their female friends. On the other hand, the Serbian male interviewees gave similar responses to those of the Serbian female interviewees to all interview questions, confirming that Serbians generally understand the noun 'girlfriend' as a man's partner and all the consequences which that might cause.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Australians and Serbians have different understandings of the noun 'girlfriend'. People are faced with many difficulties when speaking and interpreting a foreign language as words rarely have true counterparts between languages. In order to acquire an understanding of a foreign word appropriately and accurately, NNSs have to become familiar with all complexities and uses of that word. Moreover, NNSs often have to restructure their mental processes in relation to the word itself. As shown, one of the problematic words that can cause intercultural miscommunication between NSs of English (Australians) and NNSs of English (Serbians) is the noun 'girlfriend'. However, concerning the small size of the research data, further research on this topic would be of benefit.

*Author notes

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APPENDIX: Interview Questions

1. When you hear the word 'girlfriend', what is the first meaning that comes into your mind?
2. Are you familiar with all three meanings of the noun 'girlfriend'?
3. Do you clearly see the differences between them?
4. How often do you use 'girlfriend' to refer to your female friend?
5. In what situations do you most often use it?
6. Do you hear other women refer to their female friends as 'girlfriends'? If yes, how often?
7. Which generations use 'girlfriend' the most?
8. What would you rather say: 'my girlfriend' or 'a girlfriend of mine'?
9. What would you rather say: 'I went shopping with my girlfriend', 'I went shopping with my girlfriends' or 'I went shopping with my friends'?
10. Would you ever think two women are partners if they say they are 'girlfriends'? Why would/would not you think that?
11. Do you agree that misunderstandings are possible due to the implications of a lesbian partner meaning?
12. Have you experienced any misunderstandings with the use of 'girlfriend'?