

Cultural Effects Proposed for Salt and Parmesan Passage (Parmigiano Reggiano)

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ABSTRACT

We offer a proposed extension project on the salt passage to the parmesan cheese passage in two cultures. 160 undergraduates (80 Sicilian Italians, 80 Highland Scots) eat and rate food (spaghetti or fish and chips) with both parmesan cheese and salt shakers nearby. They are asked either by an Italian or a Scottish experimenter accomplice to pass the parmesan or the salt. From past research, subjects pass the appropriate shaker on request, but are showing differences in response times. In the proposed extension, Italians are fastest to pass the cheese for spaghetti when asked by the Italian and Scots are fastest to pass salt for fish and chips when asked by the Scot, thereby demonstrating an own culture effect.

Key words: culture differences, salt and parmesan passage.

INTRODUCTION

It seems like a simple everyday act, but passing the salt from one person to another on request is not without academic interest. Further passing of the salt into the body may not always be a good idea from a health standpoint, because of negative effects of salt (http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/problems_with_salt.htm), but when one person at a table asks another to pass the salt, norms of politeness dictate that the request will be met (Abeler, 2013). However, compliance also reflects altruism, where one person helps another, and both an altruistic attitude and actual helping behavior has health implications in that they been linked to increased subjective well-being (Kahana,

Bhatta, Lovegreen, Kahana, & Midlarsky, 2013). This means that passing the salt can make the sender feel good. Of course, it is not actually just salt that is passed, but rather the shaker that contains the salt. Symbolically, the transfer of the shaker from one person to another represents gift-giving, with the shaker being the wrapper around the present. Again, this is an act of altruistic kindness that it likely to further enhances well-being.

Such ideas have been the topic of academic discussion, particularly in the social sciences, but even in philosophy (Pencil, 1976). Moreover, "Pass the Salt" luncheons have deep religious implications (Smith, 2007), which perhaps include increased well-being. Of most relevance here, two clever reviews of the ostensible empirical social science literature have summarized the effects of many classical variables reported to determine both the frequency of compliance to pass the salt and the speed (response time) with which the request was met (Pacanowsky, 1978; Pencil 1976). Among these variables are request politeness (Was "please" included?), attitude of sender (cooperative or not), and race of sender (Caucasian, non-caucasian).

This issue has been brought to the fore once again by an important agreement on salt passing (<http://www.thebeaverton.com/world/item/2510-obama-and-trudeau-reach-historic-salt-passing-agreement>) and by a blog discussing human motivation and psychological theory (http://bobsutton.typepad.com/my_weblog/2

[010/01/salt-passage-research-the-state-of-the-art.html](http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,-195653,00.html)). It has also been argued that Pencil's (1976) work on salt passage, which Spillman (2015) characterizes as "autistic positivism", has implications for cultural sociology, most notably for critically evaluating the methodological rigour of quantification and counting and for understanding Type I and Type II errors (Spillman, 2015). Fairly recent scientific research has also demonstrated physical variables of which salt passage is a function (Bartels, Franks, Rybar, Schierach, & Wilf, 2005), and the psychological research has been re-energized by reports of the effects of the sex of the sender and requester (Minér, 2015) and of the attractiveness of the requester (Miner et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2016). Generally, writers argue that the rate of salt passing is positively related to attractiveness. Response time was reported as slower to a member of the same sex (assumed to be less attractive than a member of the sex opposite) (Minér, 2015) and was also reported as slower to a person with a longer nose (which is less attractive) than to a person with a short nose (which is more attractive) (Miner et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2016). Moreover, these investigators generalized the research by asking not only about salt passage but also about pepper passage. Reported response times were slower for pepper than for salt.

The purpose of the present proposal is to extend previous work on subject variables, particularly on race (Pacanowsky, 1978; Pencil 1976) to culture, as called for

by Minér (2015). Although the recent studies involved people from Canada and from France, their reactions were not compared. Present chief authors took advantage of their own backgrounds and locations to cooperate in a cross-cultural study proposal in Italy and in Scotland, between which there has been much intermixing over the years (<http://www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0,-195653,00.html>). Theoretically, our own-culture effect was expected. That is, it was hypothesized that although subjects in each culture would respect a request made by someone from another culture, they would probably act more quickly when the request was made by a fellow countryman. So, for response time, there would be an interaction between culture of sender and culture of requester. Model I shows expected results (see Table 1). Fastest time, donated by 1, occurs for a Scot asking a Scot and an Italian asking an Italian. Time will be one step slower (2) when an Italian asks a Scot or a Scot asks an Italian. This prediction also has a basis in similarity theory (Ajbzn, 1974; Byrne & Nelson, 1965) according to which people is more predisposed toward people like themselves than people who are different from themselves. Furthermore, the prediction follows from empirical research demonstrating that people are more likely to comply to a request made by others they perceived as similar (Burger et al., 2004; Lichtenbarger, 2000).

Table 1: Theoretical Models I and II for Response Times

Model I			Model II		
Sender	Requester		Food	Substance Passed	
	Scot	Italian		Salt	Parmesan
Scot	1	2	Fish and chips	1	2
Italian	2	1	Spaghetti	2	1

Note. Numbers represent speed of response time, with a smaller number being faster.

The study also proposes to extend previous research on salt and pepper in another way: to parmesan cheese (parmigiano reggiano). Given that parmesan cheese is associated with Italian spaghetti (<http://www.eufic.org/article/en/nutrition/sal>

[t/artid/Cheese-European-tradition/](http://www.historicuk.com/CultureUK/Fish-Chips/), and that salt is associated with fish and chips (<http://www.historicuk.com/CultureUK/Fish-Chips/>), it was hypothesized that parmesan would be passed faster than salt with spaghetti whereas salt would be passed

faster than parmesan with fish and chips. That is, there would be an interaction between food and substance (see Model II in Table 1 for expected results). The fastest time (1) is for salt with fish and chips and for parmesan with spaghetti, with a slower time (2) for parmesan with fish and chips and for salt with spaghetti. However, it was also hypothesized that these two effects (culture person effect and food/substance effect) would be additive (see Model III in Table 2 for expected results), slowing response times for combinations of variables. That is, for the basic food/substance conditions, two fastest times (1, 2) would occur with a Scot asking a Scot and an Italian asking an Italian. However, each of these times would increase (from 1 to 2 and from 2 to 3; see middle part of Model III in Table 2) for an Italian asking a Scot or a Scot asking an Italian respectively. Also notable is that salt consumption is high in Scotland (Ji & Cappuccio, 2014), where fish and chips are very popular, so this combination (Scottish sender, Scottish requester, salt, fish and chips) might result in a very fast reaction time (perhaps below 1). Because this idea is rather speculative, it is not built into the theoretical model, but it may occur once data are collected.

Table 2: Theoretical Models III and IV for Response Times

Food	Model III		Model IV	
	Substance Passed		Substance Passed	
	Salt	Parmesan	Salt	Parmesan
Scottish Sender, Scottish Requester				
Fish and Chips	1	2	1	2
Spaghetti	2	1	3	2
Scottish Sender, Italian Requester				
Fish and Chips	2	3	2	3
Spaghetti	3	2	4	3
Italian Sender, Scottish Requester				
Fish and Chips	2	3	3	4
Spaghetti	3	2	3	2
Italian Sender, Italian Requester				
Fish and Chips	1	2	2	3
Spaghetti	2	1	2	1

Note. Numbers represent speed of response time, with a smaller number being faster.

Finally, given that Italians traditionally eat spaghetti more than fish and chips and that Scots traditionally eat fish and chips more than spaghetti, it was expected that Italians would be faster to respond with spaghetti and slower with fish

and chips, and that Scots would be faster to respond with fish and chips and slower with spaghetti. This factor is built into Model IV in Table 2. That is, in the first part of the model (Scottish sender, Scottish requester), the times for spaghetti increase from 2 and 1 in Model III to 3 and 2 in Model 4, for salt and parmesan respectively, and in the last part of the model (Italian sender, Italian requester), the times for fish and chips increase from 1 and 2 in Model III to 2 and 3 in Model 4, for salt and parmesan respectively. Finally, in the middle parts of the model, the times for spaghetti with the Scottish sender and Italian sender increase from 3 to 2 to 4 and 3 for salt and parmesan respectively, and the times for fish and chips with the Italian sender and Scottish requester increase from 2 and 3 to 3 and 4 for salt and parmesan respectively.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

160 male university students (80 Italians from Sicily and 80 Scots from the Highlands) take part as people who are asked to pass the salt or parmesan (sender). The experiment is conducted completely in Italian in Italy and completely in English in Scotland. Some Scots speak the Gaelic (pronounced "Glaikit"), but only as a second language and not in sufficient numbers to employ the language in the study. Subjects are recruited from courses at the two local universities (one in Italy and one in Scotland) and assigned randomly to eight conditions from the combination of culture of sender (Italian, Scottish), culture of requester (Italian, Scottish), and food (spaghetti, fish and chips). Substance passed (parmesan cheese, salt) is a within-subjects variable. There are 20 subjects in each group.

Materials and Procedure

The main materials are a salt shaker with salt and a parmesan cheese shaker with parmesan cheese. Standard meals of fish and chips and spaghetti are also prepared.

Based on procedures adopted in recent proposal and studies (Minér, 2015; Minér, et al., 2016; Patrick et al., 2016), subjects are tested individually in the laboratory setting. They sign up for a study of taste preferences. When subject arrives, the experimenter explains that they and the other subject will sit opposite each other at a table where they will eat and taste food, taking 12 to 15 minutes. The other subject is also a male student but is an accomplice of the experimenter and plays the role of requester (the person who asks for the salt or parmesan to be passed). That is, he makes the request and true subjects are senders (they are asked to pass the salt or parmesan). Because salt and parmesan shakers must be placed nearer to sender, the subject and accomplice are given their places opposite each other according to a rigged random draw.

When students are seated, they are given plates of fish and chips or spaghetti, asked to start eating, and to think about the quality of the taste of the food. Water is also available should they wish to drink. After about 4 minutes, subjects are given a sheet of paper on which they rate quality on a scale from 1 very low to 7 very high. They continue eating for another 4 minutes and then rate again. These ratings were not analyzed because they were not relevant to the purpose of the experiment.

An Italian student and a Scottish student (each bilingual in Italian and in English) are confederates of the experimenters (the authors) and play the role of requester. Each of them is paired with an Italian sender or Scottish sender (experimental subjects) to form four groups: Italian sender-Italian requester, Italian sender-Scottish requester, Scottish sender-Scottish requester and Scottish sender-Italian requester. The confederates eat, taste and rate food as if they are a true subject, but they ask the real subject (potential sender) to pass salt or parmesan. The first request is made after two minutes and the second one after six minutes. For half of the

subjects, first request is for salt and second is for parmesan and for the other half the requests are made in counterbalanced order. The first and second requests are delivered as follows respectively (in Italian to Italian subjects and in English to Scottish subjects): “*Mi scusi, vuoi passare il sale (parmigiano)?*” (*Excuse me, would you pass the salt (parmesan)?*)

And “*Scusa se ti disturbo ancora una volta, ma vuoi passare il parmigiano (sale)?*” (“*Sorry to bother you again, but would you pass the parmesan (salt)?*”). If request is honoured, recipient returns the salt or parmesan shaker to its original location on the table (nearer the sender).

Whether or not the sender complies with the request is independently observed by two experimenters through a one-way mirror. In addition, they use stopwatches to independently record the time from the moment when they hear request being started until they see the shaker landing on the table closer to the requester after it has been passed.

RESULTS

All analyses are conducted using SPSS (PASW Statistics 18), with alpha at 0.05. In the expected extension of previous work with this paradigm (Minér, 2015; Patrick et al., 2016), every participant honours request to pass salt or parmesan cheese. That is, 20 out of 20 people in each condition comply. However, differences show up on response time.

With trained observers, and following previous reports (e.g., Minér, 2015), recorded times for the two experimenters are close (within 200 ms of each other), allowing reliable data for analysis to consist of the mean of the two estimated times for each subject. Numbers were assembled according to hypotheses with systematic random variation, entered into SPSS, and then analysed as follows. To check for order effect, response time data (see Table 3) are examined first with a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 (Culture of Sender X Culture

of Requester X Food Tasted X Substance Passed X Order of Substance Presentation) mixed model crossed over ANOVA linear regression between and within subjects with repeated measures on substance passed and order of substance presentation. Order is not significant and does not interact significantly with any other variables. Datas are collapsed over it to allow a 2 X 2 X 2

(Culture of Sender X Culture of Requester X Food Tasted X Substance Passed) mixed ANOVA regression analysis. For simplicity, "Culture of Sender" will hereafter be referred to as "Sender", "Culture of Requester will be referred to as "Requester" and "Substance Passed" will be referred to as "Substance".

Table 3: Mean Response Times (sec) in Each Condition for Entered Data.

				Salt		Parmesan	
Sender	Requester	Food	n	M	SD	M	SD
Scottish							
	Scottish	Fish and Chips	20	3.02	1.36	4.01	2.76
		Spaghetti	20	4.42	5.82	3.52	1.36
	Italian	Fish and Chips	20	4.01	2.76	5.00	2.53
		Spaghetti	20	5.50	2.53	4.42	5.82
Italian							
	Scottish	Fish and Chips	20	4.41	5.97	5.51	2.59
		Spaghetti	20	5.00	2.53	4.01	2.76
	Italian	Fish and Chips	20	3.52	1.36	4.42	5.82
		Spaghetti	20	4.01	2.76	3.02	1.36

When this 3-way between-within analysis was conducted on the data entered as expected according to predictions, none of the four main effects was significant. However, the intercept was significant, $F(3, 151) = 13502.82, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .989$, showing that the grand mean exceeded zero, and there were three significant interactions: sender X requester, $F(3, 151) = 661.76, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .814$, food X substance, $F(3, 151) = 588.36, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .796$, and sender X food, $F(3, 151) = 139.60, p < .001, partial \eta^2 = .480$. Because small, medium and large percentages of variance accounted for are 1, 6, and 14 respectively (<http://core.ecu.edu/psyc/wuenschk/docs30/EffectSizeConventions.pdf>), all effect sizes are extremely large, with 48% to 81% of the partial variance accounted for in the ANOVA regression. In the first interaction, Table 3 shows that response time is faster when the sender and requester are either Scots or Italians than when one comes from one culture and one comes from the other. In the second interaction, Table 3 shows that salt is passed more quickly with fish and

chips than with spaghetti, and parmesan is passed more quickly with spaghetti than with fish and chips. In the third interaction, Scots respond faster with fish and chips than with spaghetti and Italians respond faster with spaghetti than with fish and chips.

Finally, to interpret the within-subject part of the food X substance interaction, Table 3 shows that salt is passed faster than parmesan for fish and chips and parmesan is passed faster than salt for spaghetti. We computed the absolute difference between the salt and parmesan response times for each of the eight conditions in the experiment and conducted one-sample *t*-tests to compare them with 0. All results were significant, with values ranging from $t(20) = 6.63$ to $15.45, ps < .001$. Standardized effect sizes (*d*), computed from the difference divided by its standard deviation ranged from 1.48 to 3.45, all of which exceed Cohen's (1977) standard of $d = 0.80$ for large. The difference scores were also subjected to a one-way ANOVA univariate linear between-groups regression across all eight conditions in the experiment, which was not

significant, $F(8, 151) = 0.21, p = .98$. Furthermore, post hoc Bonferroni comparisons among the eight mean response time difference scores were also not significant ($ps > .99$).

Because we are investigating effects of culture of sender, culture of requester and food for the passing of both salt and parmesan, and because the response times for salt and parmesan passage were not significantly correlated, $r(df = 159) = .062, p = .439$, a confirmatory 2 X 2 X 2 (Culture of Sender X Culture of Requester X Food Tasted) linear MANOVA was conducted, with salt and parmesan as the two joint dependent variables. Significant results were as follows: intercept, $F(3, 150) = 24093.08, p = .000, partial \eta^2 = .997$, food, $F(3, 150) = 292.23, p = .000, partial \eta^2 = .796$, sender X requester, $F(2, 151) = 328.69, p = .000, partial \eta^2 = .814$, and sender X food, $F(2, 151) = 69.34, p = .000, partial \eta^2 = .480$. In the univariate tests that followed, the effect of food, the sender X requester interaction and the sender by food interaction were all significant ($ps = .000$ with Bonferroni corrected) for both salt and parmesan. From Table 3, for food, it can be seen that salt is passed more quickly for fish and chips than for spaghetti and that parmesan is passed more quickly for spaghetti than for fish and chips. For the sender X requester interaction, both salt and parmesan are passed more quickly when the sender and requester are both Scottish or Italian, and both are passed more slowly when one is Scottish and one is Italian (be it sender or requester). For the sender X food interaction, both Scots and Italians passed the salt faster for fish and chips than for spaghetti, but the difference was greater for Scots (3.51 vs 5.00) than for Italians (4.0 vs 4.5). In addition, and asymmetrically, both Scots and Italians passed the parmesan faster for spaghetti than for fish and chips, but the difference was greater for the Italians (3.5 vs 5.0) than for the Scots (4.0 vs. 4.5).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the project is to extend previous work on the factors involved in the passage of salt to investigate possible crossed-cultural effects. In a completely cross-over experimental design, the idea is to compare salt and parmesan passage when the request is made to Scots or Italians by Scots or Italians when they are tasting fish and chips or spaghetti.

Expected results show strong effect size evidence of an own culture effect in which Scots are faster at responding to a Scot than to an Italian and Italians are faster at responding to an Italian than to a Scot. This is consistent with similarity theory where people act more favourably towards people like themselves (Ajbzn, 1974; Burger et al., 2004; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Lichtenbarger, 2000). Also, Scots are faster at responding when tasting fish and chips than when tasting spaghetti and Italians are faster at responding when tasting spaghetti than when tasting fish and chips. Finally, although not a person effect, salt is passed more quickly for the food with which it is usually associated (fish and chips) and parmesan is passed more quickly for the food with which it is usually associated (spaghetti). However, the size of these differences depended on the culture of the sender: salt is passed more quickly for fish and chips than for spaghetti, but more so for Scot; parmesan is passed more quickly for spaghetti than for fish and chips, but more so for Italians. At the same time, the differences between salt compared to parmesan were all large and not significantly different in size for each of the sender/requester./food combinations.

The reported results reflecting hypotheses also show that these three interactive effects are additive so that the fastest response times occur with a match among sender, requester, food and substance (Scots responding to a Scot asking for salt for his fish and chips, Italians responding to an Italian asking for parmesan for his spaghetti). Because of the particular

Scottish affinity for salt (Ji & Cappuccio, 2014), Scots may be more attached to sprinkling salt on their fish supper than Italians are at shaking parmesan over their spaghetti, but this does not appear as a faster response time in data here.

Going forward, it would be interesting to extend the present experimental conditions to include women, so that sex of sender and sex of requester could be combined with Scots and Italians. Given that attractiveness plays a role in helping and compliance, there is particular interest in how Scottish women would respond to Italian men because of their great interest in displaying muscularity (Nerini, Matera, Baroni & Stefanile, 2015), and perhaps also how Italian women would respond to Scottish men, who have a reputation for being rugged (<https://prezi.com/vjihf60v3gyu/stereotyping-the-scottish/>). The present experiment could also be replicated with other cultural groups, for example with Indians tasting Indian curry (asking for hotter spices) and Americans eating hamburgers (asking for tomato ketchup). Another interesting twist would be to test people from the Italian immigrant community in Scotland not only with fish and chips and spaghetti, but also with ice cream, because they are known for running high quality fish and chips and ice cream shops, particularly in the Lowlands. Going forward, we will see what research reveals: “*Que sera sera.*”

In addition, given the relationship between helping and well-being (Kahana, et al., 2013), future research might directly investigate the feelings of people after they have passed the salt and the pepper. Does meeting the request make them feel good? Are these feelings correlated with passing times? If so, is this a negative relationship (faster or shorter passing makes you feel better) or a positive relationship (slower or longer passing times makes you feel better)?

In sum, present analysis claims that all the people at a table pass salt or parmesan cheese when asked. However,

they are faster to honour request made by someone from their own culture when the food being tasted and the substance to be passed are connected to that culture. This adds to the literature on own-group effects and compliance (Burger et al., 2004; Lichtenbarger, 2000) and opens the door to future research going forward with other foods and cultures.

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