

*A Comparison of Speech Act Performance of
Native and Non-native Speakers of English:
the case of request*

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Introduction

A number of cross-cultural studies were carried out to investigate the differences and similarities between native and non-native speakers' performance of particular speech acts (e.g. Fraser et al, 1981; Scarcella and Brunak, 1981; House and Kasper, 1981; Thomas, 1983, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Faerch and Kasper, 1984). They strive to bring forward a satisfactory answer to a major question:

« To what extent is it possible to determine the degree to which the rules that govern the use of language in context vary from culture to culture and from language to language? »
(Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984)

This issue is particularly relevant to foreign-language learning because it may allow the specification of the particular pragmatic rules of speech act performance of a particular language, which learners may need to acquire in order to communicate efficiently in that language. In effect, despite a sound grasp of the formal elements of a language, learners might still fail to achieve successful communication (Thomas, 1983).

In this paper, I wish therefore to investigate the performance of requests in English by comparing the strategies used by a group of foreign-language learners (Algerian) and a group of native speakers (advanced students). In the first part, the theoretical framework is outlined (politeness in requesting strategies). In the second part, some of the research findings are surveyed and discussed.

1. The Theoretical Framework

1.1. Requests

There are a number of reasons for focusing on requests. First, requests have been extensively studied in much more detail than other speech acts (e.g. complaints or apologies). Second, they occur frequently in everyday use of language. Third, they offer ample room for a wide range of strategies for their performance. Fourth, they involve, by their very nature, a variety of implications, particularly politeness. Finally (and as a result of the above reasons), they can be very important to language learners when taking part in cross-cultural communication.

Requests belong to the class of ‘directives’ which are ‘attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something’ (Searler, 1979). They are thus ‘face-threatening acts’: « they predicate some feature Act of the hearer and in so doing put some pressure on H to do Act (A) (Brown and Levison, 1978:70). In other words, by making a request (e.g. ‘Could you give me a lift?’), the speaker imposes certain restrictions on the hearer’s freedom of action (loc. cit). Because of such features, requests

tend to require implications like ‘politeness’ or ‘tact’ to serve as a device for the ‘avoidance of conflict, or of situations which might give rise to conflict » (Leech, 1977 : 18).

1.2. Politeness

Politeness manifests itself in requests in a variety of strategies. Brown and Levinson differentiate between two types of strategy, positive politeness and negative politeness. The former is directed towards the positive face of the hearer and serves as ‘an assurance that in general the speakers (S) want at least some of the hearer’s (H) wants’ (being for example of the same investigation).

1.3. Data discussion

The following discussion concerns the use of strategy types by each group. These strategies consist of the manipulation of ‘modality marker’ (a set of verbal means which serve to reduce the degree of imposition inherent in the request). There are two types of modality marker: ‘upgraders’ and ‘downgraders’ (House and Kasper, 1981). The former are characteristic of positive politeness (familiarity); the latter of negative politeness (social-distancing behaviour). The table below contains a list of markers which occurred in the informants’ data. Each modality marker is given an operational definition and illustrated by an example from the answers.

Modality Marker	Example
I. <u>Downgraders</u> 1. Presequence Device which accompanies directives and function to signal what follows is a directive.	a) I'm afraid I've got more of these forms for you to fill in (NS)
2. Hedge Device by means of which the speaker avoids specification of the illocutionary force of his utterance.	b) I wonder if you would do a favour for me. (NS)
II. <u>Downtoner</u> 3. Devices by means of which the speaker modulates the impact of his utterance on the hearer. II.1. <u>Grounder</u> The speaker gives reasons for the request.	c) I'm sorry, it's just for five minutes (LL-L2). d) You gonna take this rubbish out, it's your turn (NS).
4. Consultative Device by means of which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer in a bid for his co-operation.	e) Would you mind if I hand it in tomorrow (HL-L2)
5. Politeness marker Devices by which the speaker wants to convey deference to the hearer.	f) I'd like a cup of coffee, please (LL-L2)
6. Forewarn The speaker indicates his awareness of potential offence, expecting thus possible refusal.	g) I'm feeling really awkward about this. I don't suppose you could push £60 in my direction (NS).
7. Committer Devices by means of which the speaker minimises the degree to which he commits himself to the propositional content of the utterance.	h) I think it will be convenient for you and for others if you come by yourself (HL-L2)

As the above table shows, the most frequently used modality markers are downgraders. This might be due to the informant's awareness that requests are generally face threatening acts. However, native speakers' answers contained far more downgraders than L2 learners'. The overall number of these devices were 184 in the first group and 124 in the second group (75 instances in the high level group and 49 in the low-level one).

In native speakers' answers, the most frequent downgrader is 'grounder'. It occurred 51 times, especially in situations 6, 7, 8 and 9 which were characterised by (+D) between the interlocutors and (+R) (the degree of imposition involved in the request). Examples of grounders are as follows:

Native Speaker

Situations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Modality Markers											
1. Downgraders											
Presequence		1		6	3		4	3	2	1	20
hedge		1		1				1	1		4
downtoner	3	4		3	9	1		4	4	1	29
grounder	3	5	6	6	6	7		9	8	1	51
consultative	1		1	1	2		1		2	1	9
politeness M.		1	1	3			6			5	16
forewarn	1		2	3	1	2			2	1	12
committer		1		1	1	1				1	5
preparator						3		1	1		5
differential address terms					2				1		3
address terms	1	2								2	5
impersonalizing		2					1				3
gambits	3	1			2	3		1			10
II. Upgraders				2	3	1		1			7
intensifiers											
lexical intensifiers	1		2								3

Low level L2 speakers

Situations	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Modality Markers											
I. Downgraders											
Presequence								1			1
hedge	1										1
downtoner	1			3							4
grounder	1	4	1	4	4			4	4	1	23
consultative			2	1			1				4
politeness M.			1	1			4		2	1	9
forewarn											
committer						1					1
preparator											
differential address terms								1	1		2
address terms								1			1
impersonalizing							1				1
gambits											
II. Upgraders											
intensifiers											
lexical intensifiers											

2.4. Some Illustrating Examples

(1) customer to salesman)

I'm sorry; I don't like any of these. I don't suppose you've got any others in my size (NS).

(2) employee to manager)

Two friends of mine are arriving from Paris tomorrow morning and I would like to meet them. I wonder if I could have the day off (NS).

In L2 data, grounders occurred relatively rarely (18 occurrences in HL-L2 data, 23 in LL answers). These occurred particularly in situations 5, 6 and 8 which were (+D) and (+R). The following are some examples:

(3) (motorist to policeman)

I'll be very quick, I'm really starving and I need some food (HL-L)

(4) (employee to manager)

I want to wait for two of my friends at the airport at 10.30.
Could you give me tomorrow off? (LL-L2).

A point in case about the use of grounders concerns the difference in linguistic realisation between native speakers and L2 speakers. While the latter restricted themselves to formal language, native speakers varied their forms according to the particular situation.

Consider the following examples:

(5) (student to fellow student)

When the hell are you going to empty that bin? This place stinks (NS)

An important downgrader used in native speakers' answer is 'presequence' (20 times) Presequences were used mostly in situations characterised by (+D) and (P), e.g.,

(6) (employee to manager)

Excuse me sir, but I've got a slight problem here. Two of my friends are coming tomorrow... I was wondering if it would be possible to have the day off tomorrow (NS).

In L2 answers, high-level students used presequences 10 times. The low-level group used them only once.

(7) (student to lecturer)

I'm sorry but I couldn't finish it on time. I will be obliged to have some more time (HL-L2)

(8) I'm sorry I haven't finished writing my report. Would you mind if I hand it in tomorrow (LL-L2)

Another device that occurred relatively frequently in native speakers' answers is 'forewarn'. This occurred in situations where the degree of imposition involved in the request is relatively high, e.g.

(9) (lecturer to student)

Some rather tedious forms, I'm afraid, but we all had to do them some time. Could you do the necessary? (NS)

(10) (customer to salesman)

Sorry to be such a nuisance, but do you think I could just try on those black ones? (NS)

Forewarns occurred very rarely in L2 data (once in the HL group and none in the LL group).

The markers discussed so far appear to be the only ones frequently used by L2 students (both groups). The other downgraders were used very rarely. By contrast, these were fairly evenly distributed in the native speakers' answers. For example, 'consultative' occurred nine times, 'preparators' five times and committers five times.

The following are some examples:

(11) (employee to manager)

Do you think that you'd manage if I took tomorrow off? (NS)
(consultative)

(12) (friend to flatmate)

Can you do me a great favour? Can you lend me £60? (NS)
(preparator)

(13) (customer to salesman)

I don't really think these shoes suit me either, do you? You wouldn't happen to have any other pairs of this colour? (NS)
(committer)

Conclusion

Although the form and the amount of the collected data cannot allow one to make generalisation, certain points can still be made about speech act performance of L2 learners.

First, the comparison of modality markers shows that both groups are well aware of the implication of politeness in requests. This is clearly shown in the frequent use of downgraders.

Second, native speakers employed far more varied linguistic devices than L2 learners. In effect, such students seemed to lack a repertoire of modality markers which serve to convey positive politeness in situations characterised by familiarity. They rather relied on formal language and negative politeness in most situations. Finally, a noticeable difference emerged in the data, namely, the relatively frequent use of explicit performatives by L2 learners. As a matter of fact, there is a strong tendency for these learners to address their interlocutors directly and name explicitly the request. This might be due to the influence of the Algerian culture which tolerates the use of explicate performatives for performing requests, especially in situations where the speaker has relative power over the hearer. These appear to be the main points to be made for the time being. For sure, further adequate and natural research procedures will yield more reliable results about cross-cultural comparison of speech act performance.

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