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Coffee, please?

Sociolinguistic influences on politeness strategies in making requests

Amy Burbee

In this paper I look at the extent to which factors of gender and context influence linguistic features such as hedging and syntax in indirect requests. I analyzed different features of indirect speech used by participants. I selected a few scenarios that focused on different social aspects where requests would be needed. Responses from men and women were compared to see if the gender of the speaker had any effect on the linguistic features used.

1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to analyze to what extent the sociolinguistic factors of gender and context influence linguistic features such as hedging and syntax in indirect requests. By collecting sample requests in six posed scenarios through a written survey, I was able to analyze different features of indirect speech used by participants. The selected scenarios focused on different social aspects where requests would be needed – two requests to someone in power, two requests within a close community, and two in a situation with expected reciprocity. Responses from men and women were also compared to see if the gender of the speaker had any effect on the linguistic features used.

Great variations in the linguistic features of the requests appeared among the different scenarios. There was a notable variation by word count, with requests towards individuals of power using 13.65 more words on average than equal power scenarios. The point of view also differed greatly between scenarios, with 90.91% of speakers requesting a glass from a family member using hearer-oriented point of view compared to 88.64% of speakers ordering at a coffee shop using speaker-oriented point of view.

On the other hand, both men and women's responses showed relatively similar patterns of linguistic features across the four metrics used. Overall word count showed a slight variation by gender, with women using 2.29 more words than men. Men were also more likely to use hearer-oriented and indirect point of view in their requests than women while women were more likely to use speaker-oriented point of view than men. More research would be needed to prove this is more than an anomaly. The directness of the speech acts and the amount and type of downgraders used were relatively consistent among men and women.

2. Background

A request is a type of speech act with special characteristics that are influenced by sociolinguistic factors. At its most basic definition, "a request may be seen as a speech act through which the speaker wants to get the addressee to do something (or commit themselves to doing something) that is generally in the interest of the speaker and demands a certain effort or exertion on the part of the addressee" (Le Pair 2004). Requests can in some cases be identified by their grammatical structure alone, but in many cases the social context of an utterance within a culture is also essential to a hearer's correct perception of a request's intent. Speakers of a request balance incorporating meaning and context to get their point across without appearing inappropriate in the social and linguistic environment in which they find themselves.

Because a request is a speech act that imposes upon another person, it is called a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson 1987). To soften the impact of the request, speakers will often use linguistic nuance by adding more formal politeness or verbal hedging to the speech act itself. “The more particles in a sentence that reinforce the notion that it is a request rather than an order, the politer the result” (Lakoff 1975: 50). The degree to which this happens is influenced by the situation surrounding the request. “The ‘gravity’ of the FTA is a function of the social relationship between speaker and addressee on one hand and the intrinsic face-threatening content of the FTA on the other” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 12).

Because the relationship between the speaker and the person addressed affects the gravity of the speech act, when making requests speakers are not just focused on choosing clear language to express their idea, but also on relationship negotiation. The speakers of a request are modifying their language to achieve the safest level of communication, one which clearly expresses the request, but also preserves the relationship. This relationship negotiation takes place across three dimensions – authority, community, and reciprocity. If either the speaker or the hearer has a level of institutional or social power over the other, it will influence the behavior used in their interactions. Likewise, the closeness between two people within a community (close friends or family members compared with strangers) influences their interactions. In addition, social interactions that involve a level of obligation for reciprocity (such as negotiations or business transactions) influence behaviors as two individuals interact (Pinker et al. 2007).

Since a demand is being placed on the hearer in illocutionary acts such as requests which in turn would offer benefit to the speaker, speakers modify language to increase the likelihood that the request will be fulfilled. To preserve relationships in these domains, speakers adhere to the Tact Maxim – speakers making a request seek to, on one hand, minimize the cost to the hearer, and on the other hand, maximize the benefit to the hearer (Leech 1983). Increasing the politeness and/or the indirectness of the request works to achieve this maximization.

Within these dimensions, the sociolinguistic factor of gender also comes into play. Requests with a higher level of politeness have sometimes been referred to as “women’s talk”. Lakoff (1975) explains that “the more one compounds a request, the more characteristic it is of women’s speech.” She identifies elements like hedging, super polite forms, and tag questions as elements of women’s language. O’Barr & Atkins (2009) argue on the other hand that these features are not necessarily characteristic of gender differences in language, but rather are characteristics of language of powerlessness. This relates to the authority/power dimension discussed by Pinker (2007) as having an effect on indirect speech. Since women have historically not been in a position of power, this influences their language, particularly by dissuading against the use of strong statements in social interactions; however, as women have gained more social status in recent years, the differences in language and politeness features may have diminished.

With all of this hedging and added politeness, one might question whether an indirect statement can be classified as a request at all. One way to answer this question is to look at how the brain processes these statements. Previous research has shown that when an individual hears an action-related word, such as “run”, the cortical motor cortex is activated, meaning that the brain’s underlying framework for performing the action is stimulated alongside comprehending the word. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology used functional MRIs¹ to examine the brain’s response to hearing indirect requests. They examined brain activity as

¹ A functional MRI (fMRI) is a brain imaging procedure that uses magnetic resonance imaging technology to measure brain activity by detecting changes associated with blood flow. This technique relies on the fact that increased blood flow in an area of the brain occurs as neurological activation happens in that area.

participants heard statements prompting an action indirectly, such as “It’s hot in here,” meaning the hearer should open a window, and found that the motor cortex was activated in the same way as when hearing an action word, even though the indirect request contained no action words at all. However, if this same statement, “It’s hot in here,” was made in the context where the hearer could take no action, meaning it wasn’t a request, they reliably found that there was no activation of the motor cortex. This reveals that the brain processes indirect requests in the same way as action imperatives even if the specific action being requested is not overtly included in the utterance (Van Ackeren et al. 2012).

3. Method

To examine the linguistic strategies used in requests, sample speech acts were gathered from the community at SIL-UND. Participants voluntarily completed a paper survey by responding anonymously to posed scenarios with the language they would use in each given situation to make a request (see Appendix A for the survey). Some participants declined to answer one or two of the questions on the survey, but their responses to the other scenarios were still included.² Respondents had an average age of 35, with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest 80. Twenty-nine participants were women and fifteen were men. All were native speakers of English (except two with English as their second language) taking part in the Summer Institute of Linguistics at the University of North Dakota³ (SIL-UND), as students, faculty, or staff.

The survey posed six scenarios. Within these scenarios, the social relationship between speaker and addressee varied. Two scenarios prompted for requests with a difference in power – a student requesting something from a professor and an employee requesting something from a boss. In two other scenarios, there was a high level of community – requesting something from a member of one’s immediate family and requesting something from a close friend. The final two scenarios occurred in an environment of reciprocity – ordering from a coffee shop and interacting with a store employee about an item to purchase. Each of these dimensions affected the language used by the survey participants in different ways.

4. Results

To analyze the requests, the overall length of each response was examined first through word count. Since many of the politeness and hedging tactics require adding additional words to the utterance, this gives a general idea from a bird’s eye view which factors may influence requesting behavior. The overall average for all responses was 15.24 words. Men responded with an average of 13.75 words per request, and women with 16.04 words per request, hinting that women might use slightly more hedging tactics.

Requests towards someone with a higher level of power on average had a significantly higher average word count (22.29 words per request) in comparison to situations with reciprocity (8.64 words), see Table 1. Scenarios with stronger community differed based on the level of demand of the request. Asking a family member to pass a glass was the lowest of all the scenarios (7.25 words) while asking a friend for a ride to the airport was much higher (19.59 words) but not quite as high as situations with a power difference added.

² Responses such as, “Ick. Family reunions,” “Nothing. I’d get up and get it myself,” and “Aaaah! This is too uncomfortable to write!” were classified as *declined to answer*.

³ The dense network within the SIL-UND program, as well as the distinct subculture centered on the study of language may have an influence on the results, showing language patterns distinct to the group or to the type of individuals attracted by the program.

The greatest distinction between male and female word counts appeared in the scenario of requesting an extension for a test, where, on average, females used 5.19 more words than males. This difference may have manifested here because the scenario required a request that was most unexpected socially, with both a power difference (student to teacher) and a high level of demand in the request (moving a test date).

Table 1: Word count by scenario

	A <i>Coffee</i>	B <i>Test</i>	C <i>Glass</i>	D <i>Store</i>	E <i>Reunion</i>	F <i>Airport</i>
Average words per request	7.43	23.89	7.25	9.84	20.68	19.59
Female average	7.79	25.66	7.62	10.31	20.72	20.24
Male average	6.40	20.47	6.53	8.93	20.60	18.33

Another request element examined was the point of view of the request. Each request was classified as speaker-oriented, hearer-oriented, speaker/hearer-oriented, or indirect (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984). This gives a closer look into the piece of Leech's Tact Maxim being employed by the speaker. Hearer-oriented point of view, such as "Can you show me where to find the baking soda? (M, 27)" more obviously reveals the cost to the hearer by putting him or her at the forefront of the request. It can also highlight the benefit to the hearer, like this request that appeals to the positive feeling of helping a friend, "How would you like to help someone out and give them a ride this weekend? (M, 27)".

On the other hand, speaker-oriented requests attempt to soften the request by moving emphasis from the hearer's cost to the speaker's cost, as in: "Where can I find baking soda? (F, 46)". Speaker-hearer oriented point of view likewise puts the emphasis on a shared responsibility, "Could we talk about the test? (F, 47)". Indirect point of view goes even further by removing both speaker and hearer from directly being in the utterance, "Where is the baking soda? (M, 51)".

Table 2: Point of View of Requests by gender

	Female	Male
Hearer-oriented	35.6%	40.0%
Speaker-oriented	50.0%	43.3%
Speaker/Hearer	3.4%	3.3%
Indirect	6.3%	12.2%
Declined to answer	4.6%	1.1%

The most dominant point of view employed by both genders was speaker-oriented, but women used this to a slightly greater extent than men, see Table 2. Although very few of the

responses employed indirect point of view, men utilized this strategy more often than women. The least common used by both genders was the speaker/hearer perspective.

There was greater variation overall in the strategy chosen by respondents to each of the question types, see Table 3. In ordering at a coffee shop, 88.64% of responses were speaker oriented, while 90.91% of requests to a family member to pass a glass were hearer-oriented. In some of the scenarios, both genders showed the same preference for point of view, but in others variation did manifest. For example, in the store scenario, over half of both the men and women chose the most direct point of view, hearer-oriented.

However, for those who chose a less direct point of view, about one third of the female respondents used speaker-oriented strategies, placing the focus of the request on themselves: “I am looking for the baking soda (F, 20)”, while about one third of the male respondents chose instead to use an indirect point of view, not mentioning the speaker or the hearer: “Where’s the baking soda located? (M, 29)”.

Asking a friend for a ride to the airport was the scenario that showed the most variation among the genders. All but one male responded with something other than the speaker-oriented response. The majority used a hearer-oriented point of view, emphasizing the friend in the request, and several others used the indirect, emphasizing the situation, see Table 3. In contrast, women included themselves as a point of reference in the request over 40% of the time and used no indirect forms.

Table 3: Point of View of Requests by scenario

	A <i>Coffee</i>	B <i>Test</i>	C <i>Glass</i>	D <i>Store</i>	E <i>Reunion</i>	F <i>Airport</i>
Hearer-oriented	2.27%	4.55%	90.91%	56.82%	2.27%	65.91%
Female	6.67%	6.90%	89.66%	55.17%	3.45%	58.62%
Male	6.67%	0.00%	93.33%	60.00%	0.00%	80.00%
Speaker-oriented	88.64%	77.27%	4.55%	25.00%	70.45%	20.45%
Female	86.67%	72.41%	3.45%	34.48%	72.41%	27.59%
Male	86.67%	86.67%	6.67%	6.67%	66.67%	6.67%
Speaker/Hearer	2.27%	6.82%	0.00%	2.27%	2.27%	6.82%
Female	3.45%	3.45%	0.00%	3.45%	0.00%	10.34%
Male	0.00%	13.33%	0.00%	0.00%	6.67%	0.00%

Indirect	6.82%	9.09%	0.00%	15.91%	13.64%	4.55%
Female	6.90%	13.79%	0.00%	6.90%	10.34%	0.00%
Male	6.67%	0.00%	0.00%	33.33%	20.00%	13.33%

Another element of the requests that was evaluated was the directness or indirectness of the speech act itself. The requests were sorted into three groups based on those that used direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and non-conventionally indirect strategies based on the framework developed by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984). Five types of direct strategies were ranked 1-5 based on the level of minimizing of the imposition of the request that they displayed. Additionally, the conventionally indirect strategies and non-conventionally indirect strategies were each divided into two subcategories, ranked 6-7 and 8-9 respectively - see Table 4 for definitions and examples of each type.

Table 4: Requesting strategies ranked

Direct Strategies	Definition	Example
1) Imperative mood	The grammatical mood of the request is imperative	“Pass me the glass there, please” (F, N/A)
2) Explicit performative	The speech act itself is explicitly mentioned	“I am asking you to give it to me.” (N/A)
3) Hedged performative	The speech act is mentioned with modification to lessen the impact	“May I ask you the favor of driving me to the airport, please?” (F, 64)
4) Obligation scenario	The request is made through a direct statement obligating the hearer to comply	“I’ll have a tall latte with soy.” (M, 45)
5) Want statement	The request is expressed through statement of the speakers want or desire	“I’d like to take a couple days off at the end of this month.” (F, 30)
Conventionally Indirect	Definition	Example
6) Suggestion	The intent of the request is phrased as a suggestive statement	“How about you help someone out and give them a ride this weekend?” (M, 27)

7) Preparatory question	The request is preceded with questioning the ability, willingness, or possibility of the speaker to comply	“Could you tell me where the baking soda is?”(M, 22)
Non-Conventionally Indirect	Definition	Example
8) Strong hint	The statement contains partial reference to the request but must be interpreted through context	“I’m just trying to figure out how to get to the airport.” (F, 29)
9) Mild hint	The request is only evident by context that indirectly implies the speech act	“Excuse me...I have a scheduling issue.” (M, N/A)

The most common strategy employed in this study was the conventionally indirect strategy preparatory question (level 7), used in 62.12% of the responses, see Table 5. In evaluating the intersection of the scale with politeness in different language communities, Blum-Kulka (1987), the developer of the scale, has found that English speakers regard this strategy, level 7, as the politest. Strategy 5, a want statement, was a distant second in this data. The choice of strategy did not differ significantly between the genders, see Table 5.

Comparing among the scenarios, the differences in directness strategy chosen are much greater, see Table 6. A few strategies on the outer edges of the scale (explicit performative, hedged performative, and mild hint) showed up barely, if at all. The preparatory question, the most common strategy overall, was used by 86.36% of the speakers asking a family member to pass a glass and by 81.82% of speakers asking for a test extension. However, only 34.09% of speakers ordering coffee used this conventionally indirect strategy, and the direct strategy of a want statement was the more common tactic, used 40.91% of the time (“I would like a short latte with whole milk please.” F, 80)

Table 5: Directness of responses by gender

Strategies	Overall	Male	Female
1) Imperative mood	5.30%	5.56%	5.17%
	14	5	9
2) Explicit performative	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
	0	0	0
3) Hedged performative	0.38%	0.00%	0.57%

4) Obligation scenario	15.91%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	2.27%
5) Want statement	40.91%	6.82%	0.00%	2.27%	22.73%	9.09%
6) Suggestion	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	6.82%	2.27%	4.55%
7) Preparatory question	34.09%	86.36%	81.82%	43.18%	59.09%	68.18%
8) Strong hint	0.00%	2.27%	0.00%	20.45%	4.55%	4.55%
9) Mild hint	0.00%	2.27%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.27%
<i>Declined to answer</i>	0.00%	2.27%	2.27%	0.00%	11.36%	2.27%

The last element of the requests that was examined was the use of lexical and phrasal downgraders (adapted from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984; Savić 2014). Lexical downgraders are words added to the core of the request which increase the politeness and phrasal downgraders are additional phrases surrounding the head act of the request which increases politeness. See Table 7 for classifications and examples. Overall, the most common type of downgrader used was the lexical downgrader address in 33.25% of the responses, followed by the phrasal downgrader explanation in 25.33% of responses. The least common was the hedge/filler, in 3.17% of responses, which most likely reflects the fact that these surveys were collected in written form and these types of words are generally omitted in writing, even if they may have been said aloud in making a request in that scenario.

Table 7: Lexical & Phrasal Downgraders

Lexical Downgraders	Definition	Example
Politeness marker	A polite word used to soften the request	“Pass me that glass, please . Thank you. ” (F, 57)
Address	A term of address or phrase used to catch the hearer’s attention before the request	“ Excuse me sir/madam . Could you tell me where the baking soda is?” (M, 21)
Understater	A device used to minimize the size of the request	“Would it be possible for me to take the test a little early?” (F, 29)
Hedge/Filler	Words or phrases that fill spaces in the request or add a tone or uncertainty	“ Um I’d like a latte.” (F, 29)

Phrasal Downgraders	Definition	Example
Downtoner	Elements of the request that offer the hearer an option of non-compliance	“ Say no, but , could you give me a ride to the airport this weekend?” (F, 47)
Pre-commitment	An introductory question checking availability or obtaining a lesser commitment	“ May I speak to you for a moment please... ” (F, 64)
Explanation	A statement preceding or following the request explaining the reasoning	“I was wondering if it would be possible to take this exam early. I will be out of town for a family wedding. ” (F, 28)
Sweetener	An attempt to soften a request through a compliment, positive association, or promise of a reward	“Could you take me to the airport Friday night? I’ll pay for gas. ” (F, 80)

As in response strategies, there was a wide variation in the amount of downgraders used in each scenario. In asking a teacher for a test extension 107 downgraders were employed in all by the 44 participants, as opposed to only 33 in asking a family member to pass a glass and 37 in asking a store employee to help locate an item.

Some of these elements overlap with elements of speech that Lakoff (1975) identifies as features of women’s language, such as lexical hedges and fillers, tag questions, and super-politeness. Thus, it would be expected that women respondents would include more of these elements in their requests (Holmes 2013). Table 7 shows the percent and number of total responses by each gender which employ each type of downgrader. Very little variation appears between the genders.

Within each scenario, there were a few gender differences, see Table 8. In asking a family member for a glass, women did use every downgrader with slightly more frequency than men, but in other scenarios, men used the same downgraders more frequently than women. In asking a friend for a ride, women were 25% more likely than men to use a pre-commitment question, and in requesting a test date change, they were 14% more likely to do so. These two scenarios potentially represent the most unexpected demand on the hearer, which might explain the use of an introductory low-commitment question. Overall, this strategy was not used significantly more by women.

Table 8: Responses with downgraders by gender

Downgrader	Female	Male
Politeness marker	12.55% 33	12.93% 15

Address	31.18% 82	37.93% 44
Understater	3.04% 8	4.31% 5
Hedge/Filler	2.66% 7	4.31% 5
Downtoner	9.89% 26	8.62% 10
Pre-commitment	9.89% 26	5.17% 6
Explanation	25.86% 68	24.14% 28
Sweetener	4.94% 13	2.59% 3

5. Conclusion

Although very little distinction appeared in the politeness strategies of the responses of men and women, which was different from what was anticipated, significant variation did appear among the different scenarios. The only areas where gender differences could potentially be noted were the areas of word count, with women using more words on average than men, and in point of view where men showed slight preferences for hearer-oriented and indirect strategies and women for speaker-oriented strategies. One possible explanation for the lack of variation between participants could be the homogenous nature of the community that was surveyed. Especially given that the linguistic features of heightened politeness could reflect powerless speech rather than merely gendered speech, a community like SIL-UND which attracts a specified group of individuals and promotes a strong sense of collaboration and community could mitigate the need for powered and powerless language features.

Among the different scenarios in the survey, all four metrics revealed significant variation. The most noteworthy difference in word count appeared as situations with relational closeness required 13.65 fewer words than situations with power difference, meaning fewer politeness strategies and explanations were added in. Considering point of view, there were notable differences, for example, 88.64% of speakers choosing speaker-oriented in ordering coffee versus 90.91% asking for a glass choosing hearer-oriented.

Although the overall most common directness strategy was overwhelmingly the preparatory question, within each scenario there were preferences for others. For example, 20.45% of

speakers asking for help in a store used strong hints but no speakers used this strategy for ordering coffee or asking for a glass.

Though very few gender differences were detected in this data, analyzing responses by different criteria may have revealed more signs of powerless language, such as looking at other markers of general social status like education level and occupation. Although education level and occupation were collected in this survey, they were gathered through a free response question, and the large variation in the types of responses made it difficult to sort into discrete categories to analyze.

Given that this study was conducted in a university context, another way to evaluate the data with social status in mind could be to look for differences between faculty, students, and staff, but this information was not collected on the survey.

For future study, collecting data of actual requests uttered in real scenarios instead of collecting written language samples may produce a more accurate look at language use. This would also allow supra-linguistic factors, such as intonation and pause time to be analyzed. Another factor unaccounted for in this analysis is the gender of the hearer and its effect on the politeness strategies used by the speaker. It is possible that requests between members of the same gender would show different features than requests across genders. In addition, this analysis looks at language decisions within the community of SIL-UND, which attracts speakers with exposure to multiple languages and contact with a variety of cultural contexts along with a heightened awareness of linguistic features, all of which may influence their language in ways that would not appear across a wider population.

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