

POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION: THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUEST

INDRA KARAPETJANA AND GUNTA ROZIŅA

University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract. Linguistic politeness plays an important role when establishing respectful interpersonal relationships in any communicative situation, the academic context including. The speech act of request can become a face-threatening act if language users are unable to adapt their language use to the social variables determined by the context of use. The present study aimed at establishing an understanding of the negative politeness strategies and request strategies used by tertiary level students in electronic communication in English. Schauer's (2009) request strategies and Levinson's (1987) seminal work on politeness strategies laid the foundations for the present paper. The framework by Biber and Conrad (2009) for analysing situational characteristics proved a valuable resource for the case study, which drew its data from a corpus of email messages written in the time period from August 9, 2010 to June 25, 2011. The obtained data demonstrated that the Latvian students tended to use direct and conventionally indirect request strategies at the same time employing such negative politeness strategies as being conventionally indirect, hedging, minimizing the imposition, and apologizing. The hedged performatives used in the direct requests mitigated the illocutionary force of the utterance. However, the imposing face-threatening nature of the speech act of requesting determines the necessity of raising English as a foreign language students' awareness of conventionally indirect request strategies and mitigating devices in a variety of contextual situations in order to guarantee the need of individuals to be respected and appropriately understood.

Key words: politeness strategies, speech acts, strategies of the speech act of request, electronic communication in English

INTRODUCTION

It is essential for the students majoring in English to possess the skills of linguistically polite communication in the academic context.

Recently, it has been observed that not all Latvian language users tend to exhibit social distancing in communication with the interlocutors of different age, position, and status in the Latvian language. Moreover, they seem to transfer their native language strategies onto the target language, which leads to sociopragmatic failure in professor-student interaction. This can be caused by the first-year students' inability to adjust their English as a foreign language (EFL) skills to a

novel situation which requires the use of more linguistically advanced politeness strategies in English.

The speech act of request has been widely studied (e.g. Clark and Schunk, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1985; Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Schauer, 2009); however, no research has been conducted on the request and politeness strategies used by EFL tertiary level learners in Latvia.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to establish an understanding of the request and politeness strategies used by EFL tertiary level first-year students in e-mail communication in the academic context. In order to reach the goal, the following research question was addressed:

How do students realize the intended meaning, i.e., perform the speech act of request in order to maintain linguistically polite communication in the student-professor email communication?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Every language has developed its own means of polite verbal behaviour, and language users are expected to employ the language appropriate to the context and social roles following the principles of linguistic politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The participants of the interaction should coordinate their utterances in order to communicate their meanings successfully, which may be achieved if the context of a communicative situation is taken into account. Considering the importance of context in communication, linguistic politeness can be defined as 'the use of situationally appropriate language' (Thomas, 1995, in Roziņa and Karapetjana, 2011:25).

In successful polite interaction, interlocutors' mutual *face* wants are respected. *Face* is contextually situated as it depends on the social roles in the interaction, which in its turn affects the interlocutors' linguistic behaviour (ibid.), and *politeness* is 'the means employed to show awareness of another person's face' (Yule, 1996: 60). The desire for the approval and to be understood by others is referred to as *positive face* (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62). The desire for something not to happen, not to be imposed on, and not to lose *face* is referred to as *negative face*. The language strategies that are applied in the above-mentioned cases are called *positive* and *negative politeness strategies* (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 102, 131). Negative politeness strategies such as being conventionally indirect, questioning, hedging, minimizing the imposition, and apologizing (ibid.) are of direct importance for this research since they are oriented towards people's negative face, i.e. their desire to maintain their territory and self-determination and the feeling of not being imposed on. Taking Brown and Levinson's theory as a basis, we can claim that in email communication, for example, the speech acts of orders, requests, and advice may threaten one's negative face, whereas criticism, complaints, and refusals may threaten one's positive face.

In academic context, a typical interaction takes place between the student and the professor. The use of politeness strategies in written academic communication by email is affected by such sociopragmatic variables as power, the social distance, which is the degree of closeness between the interlocutors, and the ranking of the kind of imposition involved between the addressor and the addressee. Thus, the student being in a position of lower power needs to employ appropriate linguistic strategies when performing a certain speech act, for example a request, to those of a higher position, at the same time making it less infringing, which respects the interlocutors' right to act freely.

Every utterance performs certain kinds of speech acts (Austin, 1962). Searle (1976) asserts that 'the basic unit of linguistic communication is the illocutionary act' and proposes five kinds of illocutionary acts: assertives, directives, expressives, commissives, and declaratives. Directives are 'attempts [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something' (1976:11).

The directive speech act of requesting is defined as 'an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker' (Trosborg, 1995:187). Requests may be referred to as face-threatening acts, as 'orders and requests are those acts that primarily threaten the addressee's negative face want' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:65). By performing the speech act of request, the addressor indicates that he/she wants the addressee to do or not to do something, thus interfering with the addressee's freedom of action. In fact, the speech act of request can pose a threat to both interlocutors, as the addressor's public image may be damaged due to the fact that the addressee may refuse his/her request. In order to save one's face, the addressor prefers to use an indirect request and politeness strategies instead of a direct request.

There have been numerous studies of requests in English, including a comparative analysis of requests used by English native and non-native speakers (e.g. Clark and Schunk, 1980; Wierzbicka, 1985). The most extensive study of requests has been the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). Schauer (2009), who based her taxonomy on the latter study as well as on Trosborg's (1995) and van Mulken's (1996) research (in Schauer, 2009: 123), proposes three core request categories: direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and non-conventionally indirect requests.

Searle (1975:64) states that 'ordinary conversational requirements of politeness normally make it awkward to issue flat imperative sentences or explicit performatives, and we therefore seek to find indirect means to our illocutionary ends' (ibid.). An indirect speech act is an illocutionary act performed by way of performing another illocutionary act (Searle, 1975:59-60). Leech (1983:108) contends that indirect requests are more polite: '(a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be'.

According to Schauer (2009), direct requests are subdivided into: imperatives, unhedged performatives, hedged performatives, want statements, and locution derivable. Conventionally indirect requests are suggestory formulae, availability, prediction, permission, willingness, ability. Non-conventionally indirect requests are hints (2009: 123).

METHODS

In order to answer the research question posed at the beginning of the research and reach the goal of this paper, i.e., to establish an understanding of the request and politeness strategies used by EFL tertiary level first-year students in e-mail communication in the academic context, a case study was employed. It used the data yielded from the analysis of a corpus of 45 emails written by first-year undergraduate students majoring in English, received in the time period from August 9, 2010 to June 25, 2011 and stored on an email account. The emails were analysed using Schauer's taxonomy of request strategies (2009) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) linguistic strategies of negative politeness. The case study used the framework by Biber and Conrad (2009:40) for analysing situational characteristics of the corpus of emails.

Considering the characteristics of interlocutors, in order to minimize a negative effect, the addressors were expected to select the most appropriate strategy by taking into account the following social variables: the social distance between the addressor and the addressee; the relative power and the ranking of imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 74-75). The corpus comprised emails written within one university, and the addressor(s) were either individual students or a group of students, but since group emails were written by one student on behalf of the whole academic group, they can be considered as single addressors, too. All the addressors were first-year students, whereas the addressee of the emails was their professor and the director of their study programme. Thus, in terms of their social roles, the interlocutors were not equal. In addition, the addressee had certain authority in the specialist knowledge which the addressors were acquiring. The above mentioned factors, accordingly, had implications on the relative status and power, and on the language choices the addressors should have made. The social characteristics as well as the relations among the interlocutors, being important determinants of linguistic variation, were expected to have a major influence on the use of request and politeness strategies in the corpus.

The physical context of communication, namely its setting, was virtual communication with shared information about the time of production. The register presupposed a high degree of interactiveness in communication, as the interlocutors directly responded to one another, but the interaction could have spread over days or weeks. The mode of the register and the specific medium of electronic email communication largely determined the linguistic forms employed. The mode of the register affected the production circumstances: since

the emails were scripted, the mode permitted the written texts to be revised and edited so that they conveyed the intended meaning.

The communicative purposes of emails were established, the speech acts were specified, and the emails comprising requests were selected. The topic of email communication was identified as belonging to the general academic domain. The discussion below uses typical cases examples from the corpus in order to answer the research question.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First-year students start communicating in English with their professors with the knowledge gained from their previous experience about the appropriateness and inappropriateness of linguistic behaviour in email communication. Their knowledge is constructed through their own personal experience both in their mother tongue and the English language in different contexts of use, but they may lack the experience of communicating in English in academic context.

Since the requests were made to an addressee with a higher status, imperatives were not observed in the corpus, which indicates that the addressors were aware of their inappropriateness in the academic context. This is in line with previous research (e.g. Clark and Schunk, 1980), which states that people generally tend to avoid imperatives. The illocutionary force of imperatives is clear enough as they possess a very high level of directness, which makes them acceptable only in a very restricted set of circumstances.

According to other studies (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995), performatives are one of the most frequent request strategies used in communication. They contain a performative verb, e.g. *ask, request, wish*, explicitly stating the purpose of the utterance and its illocutionary force. These explicit or unhedged performatives are considered impolite in academic context. However, if performative requests have a mitigating device preceding the performative verb, e.g. *want, I am afraid*, it decreases the force of the request and a performative becomes less explicit. (Downing and Locke, 2006: 198). Conventionally indirect requests or hedged performatives have a lesser degree of illocutionary force.

The examples in the italics below are taken from the corpus of emails to discuss the most typical cases of politeness and request strategies.

I just wanted to ask when the deadline is, when I should give You [sic] my report of presentation? Could I send it electronically?

In the example above, the addressor uses a direct strategy, in which his/her intent is clear. The main purpose of writing the email is a request to obtain the permission to submit the report electronically, which is expressed in the last utterance using the modal verb *could* (which is a conventionally indirect request asking for permission). However, before making the actual request, the addressor uses other direct strategies related to the one expressed in the last utterance. He/

she uses the performative *ask* in the first utterance. The verb *want* preceding the performative makes the request more tentative and polite. By using the hedged performative *want*, the illocutionary force is mitigated. Moreover, the hedge *just* minimizes the imposition even more. The second person pronoun *You* is capitalized, which is an impact of the Latvian language on the target language, in which the pronoun *Jūs* is capitalized when used as a polite form of address.

In general, it has been observed that the emails contain a considerable number of hedged performatives softening the illocutionary force.

Sorry for troubling you in summer. I wanted to ask you if I could count on your support as to writing a reference letter.

The strategy employed by the addressor is based not only on a core request, but also on an external modification such as a pre-request strategy. The message starts with a politeness strategy of apologizing, at the same time using a conventionally indirect request strategy – availability, i.e. checking the addressee's availability to perform the speech act. It focuses on the addressee's temporal unavailability in summer when the staff is on summer holidays. This gives the addressee a chance to refuse the request and not perform the act. The degree of the addressee's commitment is not taken for granted, which also accounts for the use of a hedged performative *I wanted to ask you....?* The addressor is obviously aware that the request, being imposed on the addressee, is threatening to her face. The addressor is polite and lessens the threat to the addressee's face caused by the request made during holidays.

In the following example, *I am truly sorry that I had not sent You [sic.] the notes even though I did prepare and use them during the lecture in [sic.] Wednesday [...]. I would be honoured [sic.] if You exceptionally [sic.] accepted my homework [...]* the addressor uses the apology *I am sorry*, which is intensified by the adverb *truly*. The request *if You exceptionally accepted my homework* is a conventionally indirect request, which employs the willingness strategy, with the help of which the addressor acknowledges the lack of obligation on the addressee's part to accept the homework. The addressor seems to be concerned with the linguistic choices and honours the addressee's face. The request is preceded by the explanation that he/she used the notes in the lecture but failed to submit them, which proves the addressor's desire to be understood by the addressee, i.e. exhibits his/her positive face wants.

In the corpus, the illocutionary force of the utterances is often softened by the use of mitigating modifiers, most often employing the politeness strategy of being conventionally indirect. For example, the student uses the past tense modal *could* to reduce the illocutionary force in the utterance *Could you please allow me to submit the report tomorrow?* Other modifiers such as *if* clauses, appreciators (e.g. *That would be really kind of you*), downtoners (e.g. *maybe*) and grounders providing an explanation for the request (e.g. *I could not find any articles*) are frequently used. Many requests start with a pre-request, i.e. a short utterance that intends

to prepare the addressee for the request (e.g. *May I ask you a favour?*), which is followed by the actual request.

I would be happy to get at least something from you and then later I will find out the details. If you have the time, please write me back.

In the example above, the addressor seems to acknowledge the social distance and the difference of status between the interlocutors. The email is written during summer holidays, and the student is aware that actually she/he might receive no answer at all. Nevertheless, she/he hopes *to get at least something* from the professor, which, though, is rather vague. As the rank of imposition is determined by the importance, time, and effort required for the addressee to perform the request, the more time and effort are required, the more modifiers should be used to soften the request. The student uses the internal modification *I would be happy* in the first utterance and the if clause *If you have the time*, which actually checks the addressee's availability to perform the request, and the internal politeness marker *please* before the actual request *write me back*.

I would be grateful if I could settle this debt tomorrow by handing in the report which I failed to do on time.

We can see from the example above that the internal modification, i.e. the linguistic expression *I would be grateful* is used within the request proper, which is *if I could*. The basic message *I would like to hand in the report* is phrased in a polite way. In this request, the addressor is protecting his/her own face as he/she runs the risk of losing face: the request may be rejected because the deadline has been missed. The addressor's positive face is under threat. To minimize the risk, the addressor uses an indirect strategy – the modal verb *could*. He/she is offering the addressee the authority to grant him/her the permission or reject it. Finally, he/she adds an explanation *which I failed to do on time* to make the addressee see the awareness of his/her own fault. Thus, we can see that the addressor has used politeness strategies to protect his face.

[...] *Might I ask you to extend the submission date.*

Instead of using the modal verb *may*, the addressor employs *might*, which increases the politeness of the utterance, as it makes clear that the addressee can decide whether to grant the permission or not.

The non-conventionally indirect requests or hints were not identified, which might have been conditioned by the mode of the corpus.

CONCLUSIONS

Politeness in email communication is taking into account the effect of the linguistic forms used on the addressees; it is showing respect and consideration to the addressees, acknowledging them, and not imposing unnecessarily on them.

On the basis of the yielded data, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Being conventionally indirect, hedging, minimizing the imposition, and apologizing are the negative politeness strategies employed in the corpus, apologizing being the most popular politeness strategy.
2. The students tend to be linguistically polite when they maintain relationships with their professors who enjoy social power over their students; thus, ensuring the perlocutionary success of the speech act.
3. Direct requests are employed by the students; however, they prefer hedged performatives to unhedged performatives, using the strategies with lower illocutionary force. Thus, politeness is achievable through the selection of the verb in the locution.
4. The availability strategy used in the requests shows the students' awareness of their high imposition status.
5. The use of conventionally indirect requests in the corpus is generally consistent with Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that language users select increasingly indirect request strategies, as the perceived threat to the addressee's face increases.

In spite of the fact that the students applied both politeness and request strategies quite successfully, the impositive face-threatening nature of the speech act of requesting determines the necessity of raising EFL students' awareness of conventionally indirect request strategies and mitigating devices in different contextual situations, including e-mail communication.

Although the observed cases reflect a certain development stage of the language users' linguistic competence in English, exhibiting certain limitations in their language use, it is expected that students will exhibit a higher awareness of politeness and request strategies when exposed to specific contexts and input as their proficiency in English increases.

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Indra Karapetjana (Dr. Philol., Assoc. Prof.) is currently working at the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Latvia. Her research interests include discourse analysis and applied pragmatics. Email: indra.karapetjana@lu.lv

Gunta Roziņa (Dr. Philol., Assoc. Prof.) is currently working at the Faculty of Humanities, the University of Latvia. Her research interests include anthropological linguistics, applied pragmatics, and stylistics. Email: rozina.gunta@inbox.lv