

The Effect of Entitlement on the Calculation of the Rank of Imposition in University Students' Requests to their Instructors

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Abstract: The present paper examines the relationship between requester's feeling of entitlement and the types of politeness strategies they use. According to Brown and Levinson's model of politeness (1987), speakers choose their preferred super-strategy as well as the complication level of the act based on calculations they perform on the act. These calculations are influenced by three factors, namely, Power, Distance, and Rank of imposition. The first two factors relate to the assumed relationship between the interlocutors during the act incident, and they are easily measured based on the social and contextual factors governing the situation. However, the weight of the rank of imposition can not be accurately measured, and although it is done spontaneously by language users, it cannot be left to the instinctive evaluation of the researcher. Therefore, one factor that is assumed to affect the weight of the imposition, entitlement, is placed under consideration in this research. Using the sociopragmatic approach, the researcher analysed a two-question questionnaire which ask university students to freely discuss what they want from their course instructor at the time (the researcher). The only difference between the two questions is related to the sample's evaluation of their entitlement in the requested acts. In the first question they were asked to write their rights, while in the second they were asked to write their wishes. The results detected no difference in the preference of super-strategies (PP or NP) between the two questions nor in the complication of act. Moreover, a prevailing preference of the NP super-strategy and of specific NP and PP sub-strategies was detected.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Politeness theory, Requests, Grice's maxims, entitlement.

Introduction

This paper investigates one of the influencing factors on politeness choices set by Brown and Levinson (1987). While the theory defines three variables (Power, Distance, and Rank of imposition) as being the basis for decision-making on what type of politeness super-strategy to use, the theory makers did not clarify how the rank of imposition is calculated. They left this part to the cultural instinct of the speaker, and for our purposes the researcher, to determine. I, however, believe that there are some universal common grounds that can help the speaker, and the researcher, decide whether an act is highly imposing or otherwise. One of these common grounds is the feeling of entitlement. When a requester believes that he is entitled to the requested act s/he automatically assumes that the rank of imposition is relatively low and therefore reduces the use of face-saving strategies. My assumption in this article is that this is also true in case the P and D variables are high as in the case of a university student requesting from their instructor.

Literature Review

Heinemann (2006) explored the effect of feeling entitled on the request strategies used by care recipients towards their appointed care givers. The original assumption was that the kind of strategies used when the care recipients believed that they had the right to the requested act would be different from the cases where they felt that they did not have the right. Findings showed that the care recipient's

entitlement to having a specific task performed is something negotiated between the participants, rather than being a static predefined right. Moreover, the form of the request seemed to be affected by whether or not the requester felt entitled to the requested act. In instances of entitlement, the requesters used negative interrogative forms with no mitigating devices to perform the act. While when there was a lack of entitlement sense, the requesters tended to use positive interrogative forms with mitigating devices to lighten the imposition of the requested act.

Craven and Potter (2010) studied the directives produced in family mealtimes involving parents and young children in UK family settings. The main purpose was to define the difference in nature between requests and directives. The results showed that requests are dependant to varying degrees on the recipient's willingness or ability to comply while directives have no orientation to the recipient's ability or desire to perform the required act. The results also showed that entitlement was manifested more in directives rather than requests, which implies that speakers believed that directives and requests are two different actions rather than two different forces of the same act.

In their investigation of politeness strategies used by students in the emails they sent to their university instructors, Bella and Sifianou (2012) claimed that since the social variables between the interlocutors were stable (high distance and high addressee power

status) whatever change in the degree of politeness detected was attributed to the addresser's evaluation of the rank of imposition including his/her belief in his right in the thing requested. The results revealed that students' requests drew mainly from the NP (negative politeness) strategies and that they were long-winded. The NP strategies used were mainly formality markers justified by the D and P variables mentioned above.

Alabdali (2016) conducted a study on Saudi female university students where she provided them with a DCT consisting of situations that were classified differently according to the three variables P, D, and R proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). The participants were asked to complete the situations with their own responses in their local dialects. One of the interesting peripheral findings was that speaker's belief of entitlement in the requested act affected their choice of strategies and the complication of the act. Even in cases where the rank of imposition was low, the use of bold on record strategy was not preferred in cases where the speaker had no clear right to the requested act. This finding was not affected by the weight of the two other variables; namely, power and distance.

Gagne (2018) investigated how requests that belong to the category of product requests are performed in the context of service encounters. To carry out the investigation the researcher analysed naturally-occurring data to uncover the interactional circumstances in which participants select one format over another. The results indicated that the most preferred request formats were 'can I have x' followed by 'I'll have x'. Although these two formats may seem to be pragmatically identical since they are both ways of requesting rather indirectly, the data showed that their distribution of use was different. The former was used mainly when the request was not elicited; that is; when there was no offer to help on the part of the requestee, while the latter was only used when a service offer was initiated. The findings also show that although the requesters knew that they have the right to request and that their request was welcome (they were entitled to the requested good), they opted to use rather indirect request forms which indicates their acknowledgement of the face needs of the requestee.

Tanto and Tanto (2018) investigated a corpus of Whatsapp text messages to explore the ways people utilize to make requests of favours, things, or information. The data collected manifested different strategies used depending on the social variables existing between the addresser and the addressee. The social variables are those defined by Brown and Levinson (1987): Power, Distance, and Rank of imposition. The results indicated that in

communicating with people of higher power, speakers tended to use negative politeness strategies in addition to modifications devices in order to avoid threatening the face and imposing their will on the hearer. On the other hand, speakers of higher power did not use redress when posing their requests, instead, they used bald on-record strategy to achieve the purpose of the communication, sometimes adding modification devices such as 'please' to lessen the effect of their commands. Moreover, the researcher found that when a speaker considered themselves equal in power to the addressee, they tended to mix negative and positive politeness strategies in addition to the use of modification devices to lower the ranking of the imposition and reduce the threat to the addressee's face.

Curl and Drew (2019) explored the syntactic forms speakers use when making requests in regular informal phone calls between family and friends, to doctors, and to service organizations. The data collected showed a tendency to use the 'can you' format with family members and friends, while using the using the prefacing modal 'I wonder if' before the request in calls to doctors and service organizations. The difference in preferred format points to the speakers' relying understanding of the contingencies associated with the addressee's ability or willingness to grant the request and their own entitlement to the requested act.

Methodology

The present study adopts a sociopragmatic approach of analysis. In the sociopragmatic approach, the focus is on the effect of different social factors in a particular speech community on the kinds of linguistic choices made by its speakers, rather than on the choices that a language provides its speaker with in different pragmatic fields (Blum-Kulka, 1997). Hence, the focus, according to this approach, should be on the justification behind using one polite strategy instead of another in specific situations, and to attempt to find out which social factors led to such choices. It is common practice in this type of sociopragmatic research to rely on the researcher's communicative competence as a member of the speech community under investigation (Lin, 2005; Al-Qahtani, 2009). Based on their knowledge, they can decide which linguistic structures constitute the norm and which ones can be considered deviation.

The tool used in this research is an open-ended questionnaire consisting of two questions only. It was distributed to a group of fifty female university students, of which forty-two returned it back. The researcher was their course instructor, so they knew to whom their answers were directed. To ensure the

provision of accurate and genuine responses, the participants were not informed about the title or exact purpose of the study, and they were asked to write their answers down in any linguistic variety they felt comfortable using. They were also asked not to provide any personal information that may lead to disclosure of their identities to make sure they know that they have total freedom from accountability. The two questions were as follows:

- 1- In your opinion, what rights do you have that this course instructor must grant?
- 2- What are the things that you would like the course instructor to provide for you (although they are not among your rights)?

In these two questions, two of the three variables suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987); Power and Distance, are stabilized. In both cases, the addresser is lower in power and have a far distance from the addressee. Thus, any change in the choice of politeness strategies would be attributed to the third variable; namely, the rank of imposition. We assume that the calculation of the rank of imposition is affected by the requester's feeling of entitlement to the requested act.

Data analysis

In analysing the politeness strategies used in the data, the researcher referred to the coding scheme provided by Brown & Levinson (1987). The answers provided by the respondents to each one of the questions were analysed into their constituting requestive acts. Each act was categorized into one of the five super-strategies: bald-on-record (BR), positive politeness (PP), negative politeness (NP), off-record (OR), or do not do the act (DN). It is assumed that the choice of strategy is based on the addresser's consideration of three wants; the want to communicate the act, the want to be efficient, and the want to save the addressee's face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The types of strategies used within each of the super-strategies are also included in the analysis in order to arrive at the preferred ones in the speech community under investigation (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The five super-strategies and their relation to the estimated face-risk (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60)

Based on the results, and since two of the three social factors (P, D, and R) are stabilized, the effect of the S's evaluation of R in relation to her feeling of entitlement in the requested act is examined. In the first part of this section, a thorough analysis of the answers given to the first question will be provided, followed by a similar analysis of the answers given to the second question in the second part. In the findings and conclusion section, significant as well as unique findings will be discussed. The analysis will be supported by illustrative examples from the data collected.

Analysis of the requestive acts in Q1

Table 1 below shows the number of requestive acts (FTAs) performed. It also shows the number of times each type of the super-strategies was used and the number of times two super-strategies were used in the same act.

Table 1: The classification of FTAs in Q1

Total Number of FTAS	BR	PP	NP	OR	Don't do the FTA	Mixed Strategies PP and NP in 25 cases
88	2	45	94	None	2	

As we can see in table 1, most respondents demonstrated preference for negative politeness strategies. The most frequently used NP strategy was NP 7: to 'impersonalize S and H. Avoid the pronouns I and You', which was used in almost two-third of the cases. As Brown and Levinson (1987) put it NP addresses the addressee's "want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. It is the heart of respect behaviour" (p.129). Thus, by avoiding the use of You pronoun, the addresser shows respect by not directly directing the FTA to the addressee's face. The second most preferred strategy was NP 8: to 'state the FTA as a general rule'. Again, by doing so, the addresser avoids directing their request to the address, who is higher in P and D factors. Instead they present the FTA as a general rule that H needs to abide by regardless of S's needs or wants. Sometimes. A combination of this strategy and the previous one is used in one act. For example, one respondent wrote "not to give many assignments because we study 11 courses per semester, students must not be put under pressure". As we can see, in the first part she was requesting something that is explicitly linked to her situation, while in the second part she created a general rule about how to treat students to support her request. Other NP strategies used were: NP 2 'question, hedge' (six times), NP 4 'minimize the imposition, R' (twice), NP 6 'apologize' (once), NP 9 'nominalize' (nine

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times), and NP 10 'go on record as incurring a debt, or as not incurring H' (once).

In more than 28% of the FTAs performed, the requester opted to mixing NP and PP strategies in the same act. The two strategies mixed together the most were NP strategy 7 'impersonalize S and H' and PP strategy 13 'give (or ask for) reasons' which was always applied by giving, not asking for, reasons. The second most frequent combination was between NP strategy 8 'state the FTA as a general rule' and PP strategy 13 as well. In some cases, respondents used the same strategy repeatedly in the same act in combination with other strategies. For example, in one case the respondent utilized NP strategy 7 with three instances of PP strategy 13 in one act. she wrote "allocating a greater mark to semester work than to the final because there is more work done there, in addition to the cost of transportation, and kids if the student is a mother so it is not fare to make passing dependent on one day which is the final exam's day and all the work during the semester would be worthless because on the final exam's day not all students live in the same conditions". Hence, the act was performed utilizing a combination of respect, intimacy, and shared culture.

Brown and Levinson (1987) clarify that unlike NP, PP manifests "the normal linguistic behaviour between intimates, where interest and approval of each other's personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity of obligations or to reflexivity of wants" (p.101). Thus, the use of PP strategies is assumed to be an indication of intimacy and shared grounds. The most preferred PP strategy as mentioned earlier was PP strategy 13 which was used more than two-third of the time, 31 instances of use. The other strategies used were PP 4 'use in-group identity markers' (twice), PP 5 'seek agreement' (once), PP 6 'avoid disagreement' (twice), PP 7 'presuppose/ raise/ assert common ground' (three times), PP 11 'be optimistic' (four times), PP 12 'include both S and H in the activity' (once), and PP 15 'give gifts to H (good, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)' (once). The last strategy was applied by thanking the addressee at the end of the act.

The bold on record strategy, which is to perform the act without redress to the addressee' face, was applied twice by one respondent who performed the requestive act directly without using any redressive strategies. off record strategies were not used at all in the responses to this item, however, two respondents opted to the Don't do the FTA super-strategy which can

only be interpreted according to Brown and Levinson (1987) as finding the act to be too face threatening either to S's or H's face to be performed.

Analysis of the requestive acts in Q2

The following table shows the number of requestive acts (FTAs) performed. It also shows the number of times each type of the super-strategies was used by itself or in combination with another.

Table 2: The classification of FTAs in Q2

Total Number of FTAs	BR	PP	NP	OR	Don't do the FTA	Mixed Strategies
78	None	37	73	3	2	PP and NP in 15 cases

Similar to the first question, most of the respondents to the second one opted to use NP strategies. in more than two-third of the cases, NP strategy 7 was used the most (in 50 cases), followed by NP strategy 9 'nominalize' in eight responses only. The other strategies used were NP 2 'question, hedge' (once), NP 4 'minimize the imposition, R' (three times), NP 5 'give deference' (five times), NP 8 'state the FTA as a general rule' (once), and NP 10 'go on record as incurring a debt, or as not incurring H' (five times). The most frequently used combination of NP and PP strategies was between NP 7 and PP 13.

PP strategies were used 37 times in the responses to this item. The most preferred strategy was PP 13 'give (or ask for) reason' which was used 16 times, in all of which the respondents gave, instead of ask for, reasons. The second most frequently used strategy was PP 11 'be optimistic' which was used 11 times. PP 1 'notice, attend to H (his interests, wishes, needs, goods)', and PP 6 'avoid disagreement' were each used twice. Finally, PP 2 'exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)', PP 7 'presuppose/ raise/ assert common grounds', PP 12 'include both S and H in the activity', and PP 15 'give gifts to H' were each used once.

In three cases, respondents opted to off-record strategies, where S implies or hints the FTA instead of stating it on record. In two of the three cases, the respondents chose to 'give association clues' (OR 2), a strategy by which the addresser reminds the addressee of a former experience in S's or H's past to associate it with the present situation in order to help the addressee understand the requested act. in the remaining case, the addresser opted to 'use tautologies' (OR 6). By doing so, "S encourages H to look for an informative interpretation of the non-informative utterance" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:220). None of the respondents performed the FTA in a bold on record manner in this question, while two used the Don't do

the FTA super-strategy by refraining from answering this question.

Findings and Conclusion

The underlying assumption of this paper, and according to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987) is that the lower the rank of imposition is the less weight the FTA will have, as long as the value of the other two factors is stabilized. Feeling entitled to request the act, as in the case when the requested act is one of the requester's rights, is supposed to lower the rank since there is no imposition on H's face to give S what is their right. However, the results showed that in the questions related to the respondents rights, the number of strategies, mainly NP strategies, was higher and the complication of acts was also higher (almost 29% mixed strategies in questions 1 as opposed to 19.2% in question 2). This finding does not counter the principles of Brown and Levinson's theory, instead it supports them. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that sometimes S may intentionally underestimate or overestimate the danger of the FTA in order to redefine one of the social variables P, D, or R. they claim that

In trying to re-rank R, S may take advantage of mutual-knowledge assumptions between S and H of their respective social distance D and social power P, and S may choose to act as though Rx is smaller than he in fact knows (and knows that H knows) it really is (p. 228).

Manipulating politeness markers and flouting politeness rules for the purpose of communicating certain social or contextual meanings was detected in other works as well (Okamoto, 1999; Li, 2008; and Sandi, 2014). Thus, I believe the reason behind having a higher order super-strategy associated with what is supposed to be a less dangerous act is because the respondents did not actually believe that what they were requesting was among their rights. They listed their wishes as their rights in order to manipulate the addressee into granting them. This assumption is supported by the fact that in almost half of the responses, the same requested act in the first question was repeated or paraphrased in the second, which means that what was requested was actually a strong wish rather than a right. For example. In one case the respondent requested as a right that the students choose their preferred method of marks distribution, and in the second question, she practically listed her preferred method of marks distribution. Since the identity of the respondents was not known to the researcher/ the addressee, as opposed to the case of emails or face-to-face interactions, they felt free to perform this kind of manipulation without fearing

threat to neither S's nor H's face.

Moreover, having the same finding in many of the previous reviewed studies were P and D variables were stable, and high towards the addressee's direction (Bella and Sifianou, 2012; Gagne, 2018), suggests that the effect P and D have on the calculation of the weightiness of the act is higher than that of R. In other words, when H has more Power and far Distance from S, S is more likely to use strategies associated with riskier FTAs even if the R variable is low.

Another finding relates to the relation between Grice's conversational implicature theory (1975) and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987). When explaining the different politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson related to Grice's theory only in their discussion of off-record strategies. they claimed that off-record strategies result from violating the Gricean maxims. However, I believe that a direct relation should be made between these maxims and NP and PP strategies. it was observed in the data a pattern where the respondents would violate the quantity maxim in order to convince H of their entitlement of the requested act. For example, three respondents mentioned, and to some extent elaborated on, the fact that they had children. Two other respondents mentioned the number of other courses they had to take and the amount of work associated with them. Thus, although the most preferred super-strategy was NP, flouting the quantity maxim was an observed pattern. This pattern was also observed in other previous research on the relationship of politeness theory and Grice's maxims (Waget, 2015)

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