

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION IN PERCEPTION OF POLITENESS NORMS

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ABSTRACT: *This study aims to discuss the speech acts of requesting and apologizing cross-culturally and cross-linguistically. At a more specific level, the study investigates the connection between politeness and indirectness. In the present study, multiple choice discourse completion tasks (MDCT) are used to collect data. MDCT is a method of data collection which provides fully comparable data in different languages, making it possible to draw conclusions about culture specific politeness norms. The data is based on requests elicited from Bosnian and Turkish university students. The study focuses on a qualitative analysis of data. However, a quantitative analysis is provided for cross-cultural comparison. The description of data analysis also contains gender variable, which is provided for further extension of research. The findings display that strategies elaborated for request and apology realizations vary across cultures and across gender.*

KEYWORDS: politeness, request, apology, cross-cultural pragmatics, discourse strategy

INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of sociolinguistic studies, language of interaction is one of the most widely studied fields. In addition to face-to face interaction, other speech genres such as, interviews, public lectures and classroom language are among the principal research varieties (e.g. Wierzbicka 1991; Fraser 1990; Chen 2001; Watts 2003). The primary focus of research in this area can be linguistic phenomena or the interaction itself. Language of real communication can be the source of data for linguistic analysis, which aims to explain the linguistic structures identified in it. On the other hand, knowledge of linguistic phenomena can be used to justify for the processes and outcomes of interaction. This type of study is within the scope of interactional sociolinguistics. Interactional sociolinguistics is primarily concerned with culturally identified interactional strategies.

Most of the studies within this framework reflect on cross-cultural communication as an inquisitive issue (Tannen 1984). Interactions that can be considered successful are the ones in which signals and intentions are interpreted correctly by the hearer. In cases when speakers do not share the same cultural background, the signals can be misinterpreted, which leads to unsuccessful interaction. This study aims to discuss the

speech acts of requesting and apologizing cross-culturally and cross-linguistically. At a more specific level, the study investigates the connection between politeness and indirectness. Since requests need to be constructed according to social and cultural norms, they are seen as a “threat to hearer’s negative face” (Brown & Levinson 1987). Reformulation of requests is closely connected with certain lexical and syntactic structures in a language, which can be displayed through comparison with other languages.

In the present study, multiple choice discourse completion tasks (MDCT) are used to collect data. The MDCT is a method of data collection which provides fully comparable data in different languages, making it possible to draw conclusions about culture specific politeness norms. The data is based on requests elicited from Bosnian and Turkish university students, at International Burch University in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Forty three students, in their first and second year of study, in the English Language and Literature Department have been engaged in the study.

The study focuses on a qualitative analysis of data. However, a quantitative analysis is provided for cross-cultural comparison. The description also contains gender variable, which is provided for further extension of analysis.

The next section overviews the relevant theories of politeness and provides definitions of requesting and apologizing. Section 3 explains methods implemented for collecting and analyzing the data. Further, the obtained results are discussed and explained. In the final section, conclusions are drawn based on findings, and suggestions for future research are proposed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interactional Sociolinguistics

Interactional sociolinguistic research aims to restructure the politeness phenomena, and the notion of ‘face’ initially proposed by Erving Goffman in his influential book ‘Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior’. He proposes that speakers serve two ‘face’ requirements: ‘the positive face’ and ‘the negative face’ (Goffman 1967). In essence, the positive face implies a need for interpersonal interaction, i.e., involvement with others, and the negative face requires respect for others and avoiding to offend them. The choice of linguistic components results from utilization of ‘rules of rapport’ (Lakoff 1979). According to Lakoff (1979), speakers make specific choices in order to say what they want to say. Out of respect for their interlocutor’s face need, speakers do not exactly state what they mean; they make an indirect implication in order to respect the social requirements of social interaction. There are three pragmatic rules, among which one is chosen by a speaker, and each of which results in three distinct communicative styles (Lakoff 1979):

1. Don’t impose (known as a distant style).
2. Give options (known as a different style).
3. Be friendly (known as a camaraderie).

These rules have been formulated into universals of politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987).

For organizing and sequencing information and to imply what they mean to say, speakers use 'contextualization cues' that is, prosodic and paralinguistic features, familiar formulaic expressions and conversational routines (Gumperz 1982). Saying what they mean involves choosing certain speech activity, i.e., what they think they are doing in each step of the reciprocal action. Conversational inference is another core concept in Gumperz (1982)'s theoretical framework in which participants extract meaning from words and phrases as they occur in conversation, and they also foretell what will come next, depending on on-going interaction. Speakers are directed by interpretive patterns which are incessantly supported in continuing explanation. The analysis of such an interaction requires interpreting specific occurrences of discourse, which is referred to as "hermeneutic approach" (Tannen 1984).

Tannen (1984) expands the paradigm of cross-cultural interaction and states that individuals develop certain conversational signaling habits which are specific to certain speech community. Members of that speech community learn those habits from their peers, with whom they share common features such as, regional, ethnic, class, age, and gender characteristics. Shared patterns of conversational style, contributes to an individual's system of signaling and interpreting meaning. When similar systems are used by speakers, meaning is interpreted as intended. On the other hand, in case systems are relatively different, the meaning is misinterpreted. As an example, we can mention turn-taking, inter-turn pauses, overlap, interruption and silence (c.f. Bennett 1981; Tannen 1984).

Research on linguistic devices and strategies is in the core of interactional sociolinguistics, with abundant attention on narrative and questions. Analyses of such strategies focus on the ethnography of speaking, which provides invaluable cross-cultural evidence. Other strategies analyzed within the framework of interactional sociolinguistics include discourse markers, hesitation, topic, power and solidarity, figures of speech, repetition, reported speech, and the latest trend being expression of emotion or affect.

To sum up, interactional sociolinguistics is a primary field of research at the concatenation of linguistics and anthropology. It aims to shed light on cross-cultural communication, since it identifies discourse strategies as incorporated with culturally referable speakers and investigates the outcomes on interaction of the varying strategies of culturally distinct speakers. Moreover, interactional sociolinguistics contributes to theoretical matters in linguistics by illustrating the essence of meaning in language, and the essence of language in interaction.

Cross-cultural politeness research

Politeness is not embedded within linguistic structures per se, yet every language possesses a variety of culture-specific routine blueprint which are charged with “politeness default values” (Escandell – Vidal 1996:643).

The culture-specific nature of politeness is closely connected with certain lexical and syntactic structures in a language, which can be displayed through comparison with other languages. Since the politeness theory was first introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987), analyses of different speech acts in various languages have unveiled cross-cultural features of politeness and also depicted certain challenges that foreign language learners face in recognizing politeness norms of the language.

Both in theoretical and empirical studies of politeness, the speech acts of requesting and apologizing have been analyzed widely. These speech acts are in the heart of the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research. Requests need to be constructed according to social and cultural norms, since they are seen as a “threat to hearer’s negative face” (Brown & Levinson 1987). That is, they restrict the hearer’s freedom of action by imposing a certain wish, from speaker’s side, to be fulfilled.

Correspondence between politeness and indirectness

Empirical studies of politeness phenomena demonstrate that there is a close relationship between indirectness and politeness, as it was initially proposed in numerous politeness theories (c.f. Leech 1983; Brown & Levinson 1987). As proposed in Leech (1983), the extent of an utterance on politeness level is higher when “more and more indirect kind of illocution” is elaborated. However, not all cultures value indirectness, on the contrary, directness is seen to be associated with honesty. Russian perception of politeness, for instance, relies on directness and openness (Rathmayr 1994: 271). Being indirect is accepted as ‘a waste of hearer’s time’ (Zemskaja 1997: 297). English and German, on the other hand, display a preference for indirectness (Wierzbicka 1991).

Marti (2005) studies the realization and politeness perception of requests made by Turkish monolingual and Turkish- German bilingual speakers. The results of her study show that monolingual Turkish speakers elaborated various strategies to negotiate choices. As for Turkish-German bilinguals, they elaborated more indirect strategies.

DATA COLLECTION**Method**

In numerous studies speech act analysis has been based on empirical data, linguistic corpora, or literary data (e.g., Wierzbicka 1985; Berger 1997; Betsch 2003). The present study is based on data elicited by means of a multiple choice discourse completion task (MDCT). This method is particularly efficient in investigating politeness phenomena in cross-cultural and cross-linguistic frameworks. The MDCT

is a method of data collection which provides fully comparable data in different languages, making it possible to draw conclusions about culture specific politeness norms. The MDCTs also display the pragmalinguistic and sociolinguistic criteria of the culture under analysis (Beebe and Cummings 1996: 75).

The MDTC

The MDCT elaborated to collect data for the present study consists of twenty scenarios, formulated in English, specially designed to elicit requests and apologies. In order to affirm the comprehension, possible situations from everyday academic life were provided. For each situation three possible answers were given, ranging from most to least polite.

Request scenario

Within the request scenario there are various situations in which the participants are asked to make a request. An example appears as follows:

Situation 1

'Suppose you need a recommendation letter for teaching at an English language institute very urgently for tomorrow. How would you ask your teacher to do that?'

- a. Can you write me a recommendation letter? And I need it by tomorrow.*
- b. I wonder if you could possibly give me a recommendation letter for my workplace.*
- c. Could you please write me a letter of recommendation really quickly? The deadline is tomorrow and it's really important!'*

The relationship between the participants in the above situation can be characterized as high distance and unequal social power. Therefore, the correct choice for this situation is the most indirect one, since indirectness is considered as polite. The most indirect request in the example, answer (B) is the expected most polite choice.

Apology scenario

The second type of scenario used for data collection is an apology situation. These scenarios featuring for apology contain three choices too. The most suitable choice in participant's opinion for a given situation has been elicited. An example situation appears as follows:

Situation 2

You are daydreaming in the class and lose track of what the teacher has said. At once, he asks you a question about the topic under discussion. You are totally unaware of what has been going on in the class. How do you apologize?

The teacher: What are you thinking about? Are you following me? You

- a. Sorry; I wasn't listening to you. What did you say?*
- b. I'm really sorry I got sidetracked for a moment.*
- c. I was thinking of something else; I don't understand what you are saying.*

This situation too, is an example of unequal power hierarchy; therefore formal, polite apology is the accepted norm here. The best option appears to be choice (B) given the relationship between interlocutors.

Population

The current study examines requests elicited from Bosnian and Turkish university students. The data were collected at International Burch University in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Forty three students, in their first and second year of study, in the English Language and Literature Department have been engaged in the study. As for the demographics of participants, 28 are Bosnian which accounts for 65% and 15 are Turkish with 35% of total number. Female participants account for 67.5%, the number being 29 and 14 male students account for 33.5% of total.

Analysis

The focus of analysis of the present study is to investigate the preferences of the participants in direct vs. indirect realizations of the speech acts, request and apology. The study also aims to answer the question of correlation between politeness and indirectness. The categorization of data is based on Birjandi and Rezaei 2010).

Answers to the questions have been categorized from most to least polite and participant answers have been analyzed according to two variables, nationality and gender.

Analysis according to gender of participants

Elicited answers from all participants have been first tabulated according to their gender. Values for answers ranging from 3-2-1, from most to least polite respectively have been codified. Total of female participants' polite and impolite answers have been charted, and the same has been done with answers obtained from male participants. Obtained results are demonstrated according to their number and percentage in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of answers according to gender.

Gender	Total number	Polite answers	Impolite answers	Percentage
Female	29	21	8	74%
Male	14	8	6	56%

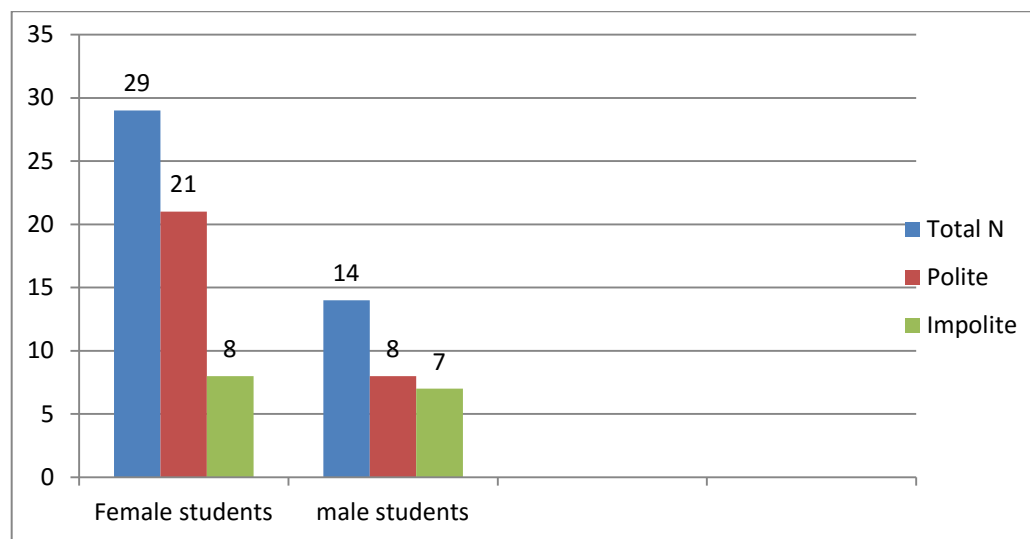


Chart 1. Distribution of answers according to gender.

As seen in the chart above, 21 out of 29 female students chose the most polite answers for given questions. This number accounts for 74% of total female participants. On the other hand, only 8 out of 14 male participants in total preferred polite answers, which accounts for 56% of all male participants. These results may further support the widely accepted notion of women's being more polite than men. However, this study's scope is not wide enough to make general conclusions based on these findings. These results are relevant to the current context in which the study has been carried out, and the current profile of participants.

Analysis according to nationality of participants

The second categorization has been done according to nationality variable. The aim was to see whether elicited answers showed any difference in terms of elaborated politeness strategies. Values for answers ranging from 3-2-1, from most to least polite respectively have been codified. Total of Bosnian participants' polite and impolite answers have been charted, and the same has been done with answers obtained from Turkish participants. The results are categorized according to their number and percentage in *Table 2* below.

Table 2. Distribution of answers according to nationality.

Nationality	Total number	Polite answers	Impolite answers	Percentage
Bosnian	28	20	8	72%
Turkish	15	9	6	59%

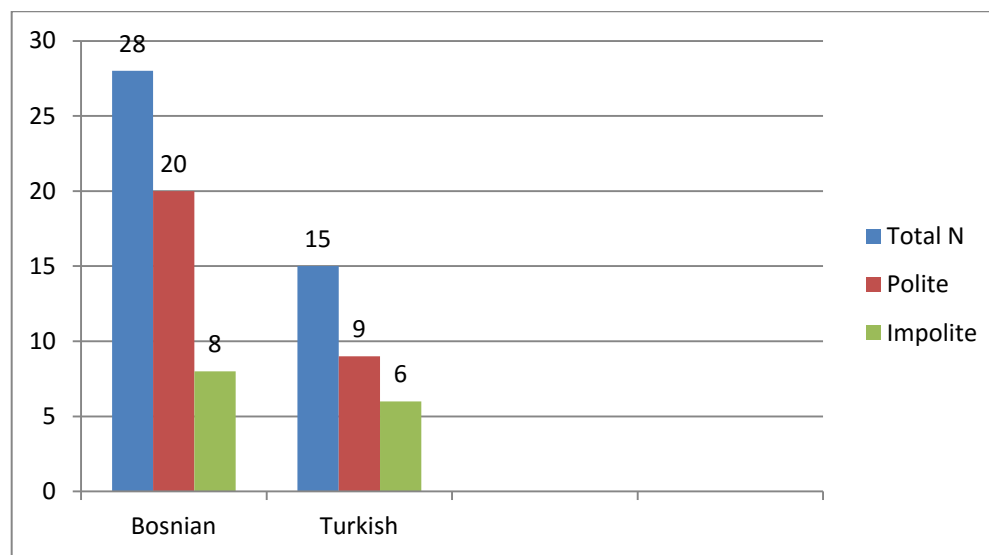


Chart 1. Distribution of answers according to nationality.

Results based on answers by nationality variable reveal that majority of Bosnian students, 72% of the total number, elaborate related strategies “preparing the hearer for the ensuing request by announcing it or asking permission to perform it” (House and Kasper 1987: 1277). That is, indirect strategies are used more often than direct act that expresses the speaker’s negative assessment of the hearer’s positive face. More than half of the Turkish students with 59%, on the other hand, preferred bald on-record strategies, which are widely utilized in situations between equal parties, such as family members or close friends. Given the fact that situations involve teacher-student relationships, these strategies are considered less polite, or even inappropriate in some cases.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that requests and apologies are realized at various levels of directness and politeness. Both cross-cultural variations and variations according to gender have been established. Conclusions may be drawn based on linguistic realizations of the strategies, and situations in which they are used. Contrary to generally accepted belief that indirect constructions increase from Western cultures to Eastern ones (e.g. Ogiemann 2006), in this study Bosnian participants showed higher range of polite answers than the Turkish participants. These culture-specific preferences exhibit that different cultures assign different level of importance to negative face. This further supports positive and negative face cultures initially proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Although it is difficult to draw precise and categorical cross-cultural distinctions, it can be suggested that differences are a matter of degree. Moreover, it should be born in mind that utterances are open to interpretation and negotiation, and no lexical unit is inherently polite.

Appropriateness of a particular utterance in a certain context may also vary even among the members of the same culture. The question of elaborated strategies being “polite” or “politic” (Watts 2003) is insignificant, provided that the non-native

speaker can evade being deliberately rude. Research in intercultural communication is essential in terms of unveiling cultural differences and facilitating communicative styles. This is especially compelling in continuing course of globalization. This study can be developed further by using other methods of data collection for advantages of comparability with MDCT elaborated for the present study. Furthermore, collecting data from different groups of participants may help to make more refined statements about cross-cultural politeness.

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