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## Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma)

# Indirectness and entitlement in product requests in British service encounters

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 12 April 2016

Received in revised form 25 May 2018

Accepted 30 May 2018

## 1. Introduction

Although there has been a lot of research on requests, as [Curl and Drew \(2008:134\)](#) underlined, there has been little empirical investigation of the distributional patterns that govern the selection of request formats, using naturally-occurring data and considering the interactional circumstances in which participants select one format over another. The article will focus on how requests that belong to the category of product requests<sup>1</sup> are performed in a stable context (service encounters). The article will argue in favour of an empirical approach that combines the sensitivity to context and sequential organization espoused by CA, whilst giving the notions of indirectness and face a prominent place.

### 1.1. Indirectness in requests

The study of requests has been central to the study of indirectness in speech acts, showing for instance that in context the meaning (illocutionary value) of an utterance such as *can I have x*, which functions as a request, relies on the recipient making an inference (*if my interlocutor is asking me if s/he can have x, it's because they want me to give them x*).<sup>2</sup> Pragmatically the utterance is therefore not a simple question (i.e. a request for information) but a request for action, and the expected action does not lie simply in answering the question (*yes, you can*) but in performing the action required (i.e. recipient giving *x* to the speaker/requester). Instead of using an utterance whose literal meaning departs from its intended meaning (i.e. an indirect formulation, in this case an interrogative), the speaker could have used a *direct* formulation (i.e. an imperative: *give me x*). As [Searle \(1969\)](#) pointed out in his seminal essay, the *raison d'être* for this type of indirectness is to be found in politeness. An idea later expounded by [Brown and Levinson's \(1987, \[1978\]\)](#) politeness theory. One of the aims of their theory was to account for the fact that the different languages of the world all seem to depart from using language *rationally*. This seemingly *irrational* divergence from the “maximally efficient mode of communication” (as outlined by Grice) converged towards pointing out a very human and universal need: the need to be polite ([Brown and Levinson, 1987: 55](#)). Central to Brown and Levinson's

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<sup>1</sup> Product requests constitute a subcategory of object requests.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, once a given formula has become conventionalized, which is the case with *can I have x*, the recipient might not make an inference and automatically understand the utterance as a request instead. However, the utterance retains two potential meanings: a direct and literal one, and an indirect one.

politeness model is the notion of *face*, which roughly consists of two sets of desires, 1) the desire “to be unimpeded in one’s actions”, and 2) the desire “to be approved of” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 55). Any act that impedes somebody else’s actions thus constitutes a *face-threatening act*. In this model, requests constitute the archetypal face-threatening act (alongside other directive acts such as orders) and must be minimized to be realized politely. This approach led Brown and Levinson to consider the different types of “strategies” used to soften face-threatening acts, and to assume a correlation between the level of indirectness of an utterance and the level of politeness it conveys (the more indirect, the more polite). In Brown and Levinson’s model, politeness is thus primarily linked to softening or avoiding face-threatening acts.

Brown and Levinson’s theory triggered a lot of studies in contrastive pragmatics that adopted the basic tenets of their approach. One of the most influential and extensive studies in cross-cultural pragmatics is Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), which focused on requests and apologies in three varieties of English and four other languages. The researchers first established the different realizations of requests in each language, which were ranked according to their level of indirectness, taking into account the *orientation* of the request (first/second person or impersonal), *external modification* (i.e. supportive utterances that surround the head act *I was wondering if I could ask something*). The data was collected from written material via the use of discourse completion tasks – informants were asked to fill in a questionnaire in which they were asked how they would react in a given situation. This methodology was used in later studies in Van Mulken (1996), Fukushima (2000), Márquez-Reiter (2000), Breuer and Geluykens (2007), Ogiermann (2009).<sup>3</sup> While this method allows gathering of a lot of data and lends itself well to quantitative research, its authenticity and applicability to everyday life situations can be questioned.

Other studies have also used Brown and Levinson’s framework (i.e. have focused on politeness and placed particular emphasis on indirectness and face-work) but have used naturally occurring data. The comparative studies on service encounters conducted by the research group ICAR at the Université Lumière Lyon 2 are illustrative of that approach (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso, 2009 for an overview). Whilst these studies vary in approach, some adopting more of a conversation analytic framework than others, they nevertheless remain in line with Brown and Levinson’s approach (1987): the type of strategy used by the customer when formulating a verbal request depends on the level of imposition of the act, the more threatening the act the more indirect the formulation. In this perspective face-work is therefore considered to be central to the selection of a particular formulation.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. Requests and conversation analysis (CA)

Recently, conversation analysis (CA), which until then had only focused on requests marginally, developed an interest in the diversity of request formats and started investigating format selection<sup>5</sup> (see Ogiermann’s editorial of volume 82 of this journal for an overview; Ogiermann, 2015a). CA researchers have questioned the validity and applicability of a model based on Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (Curl and Drew, 2008; Craven and Potter, 2010; Zinken and Ogiermann, 2013; Sorjonen and Raevaara, 2014; Fox, 2015; Zinken, 2015).

CA adopts an inductive approach and tries to avoid any form of prior theoretical assumptions. It posits that there should be no *a priori* expectations between a particular request format and the type of context in which it might be encountered, and believes that the focus on inferencing rules and processes (typically associated with the “indirectness approach”) does not provide enough information to establish why a particular format has been selected over one of those available (Curl and Drew, 2008).

Following Watts’ critique of the Brown and Levinson model (Watts, 2003), Curl and Drew (2008:133) reject the notion that certain linguistic structures would be inherently polite, and question the validity of attributing a given format a pre-established politeness value on a politeness scale. In their view politeness is a discursive phenomenon that does not bear a direct relation with the linguistic forms used – they query for instance whether the inclusion of *please* (a politeness marker par excellence) makes an utterance more polite, noting that in certain contexts *please* might have the effect of making a request more insistent, therefore not softening but hardening it. Furthermore, CA has shown that the variability of formats cannot be captured by the three variables that are central to the Brown and Levinson model (social distance, power, and the degree of imposition of the requested act itself), which are supposed to encompass all others (Ogiermann, 2015b) – as way of illustration Ogiermann points out that there are situations where requesters “use different types of requests despite all these variables being constant” (Ogiermann, 2015b: 69).

Critiques also underline that requests should not necessarily be seen as an imposition and be analysed within a politeness framework. By selecting a particular request format, requesters display their attitudinal stance “toward the ‘grant-ability’ of what is requested” (Curl and Drew, 2008:149). The study of requests should therefore not focus on how the requester positions himself/herself in relation to the recipient but in relation to the act itself. This has led CA researchers to give *entitlement* and *contingency* a central place in the analysis of requests – most notably Curl and Drew (2008), and Craven and Potter (2010) –

<sup>3</sup> The list is not exhaustive. Please note that in Van Mulken (1996), Márquez-Reiter (2000), the participants were asked to role-play the situation.

<sup>4</sup> This obviously does not mean that the researchers in question are not critical of the Brown and Levinson model (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005 for a critique).

<sup>5</sup> Following researchers (Zinken, 2015), I shall use the term format (rather than formulation or formula). This terminological choice is motivated by the desire to place the focus on the relationship between a given formula and its context of use, rather than its propositional content and level of indirectness.

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