

In/directness in Polish children's requests at the dinner table

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Abstract

This paper provides some new insights into the concept of in/directness by analysing Polish children's requests. Based on video-recordings of family interactions, it examines how Polish children request and obtain objects during mealtimes, and considers a number of factors related to their choice of request forms. The paper highlights the central role want statements play in child–adult interactions, the different uses of performative requests in Polish homes, and the impact of recurrent routines on the use of the so called off-record strategies, making them similar to direct requests.

The study also makes a contribution to research on children's socialisation. Unlike many previous studies which seem to equate child agency with resistance, it shows how children who are positioned by their parents as equals at the dinner table adopt a more formal language style by using conventionally indirect requests.

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Keywords: Object requests; In/directness; Children; Polish; Family mealtimes

1. Introduction

Family mealtimes have been studied extensively – and in a wide range of disciplines. Not only are they one of the few activities bringing all family members together, and thus play a central role in constructing the family as a unit, they are also important sites for the socialisation of children into competent members of a social and cultural group.

Work on children's socialisation during mealtimes has also made a significant contribution to the study of requests, which play a central role in forming children's eating habits and table manners. However, as these studies focus on parental directives, the insights they provide into children's language use are derived mainly from their responses – which often contest and resist rules for food consumption (e.g. [Hepburn and Potter, 2010](#); [Kent, 2012](#)). Although there is a consensus that mealtimes provide “the essential testing-ground where children hone their skills as communicators” ([Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis, 2003](#), online version), the available studies do not tell us much about children's displays of communicative competence and reproduction of politeness norms.

The present study examines requests for objects produced by Polish children during family mealtimes, thus shifting the focus from parental ‘control acts’ to children's use of requests at the dinner table. A close analysis of the different request forms used by the children not only reveals some factors pertaining to the choice of request formats in the analysed setting, but also challenges the classification of particular request forms as in/direct suggested in previous research (e.g. [Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987](#)).

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2. Literature review

2.1. In/directness

The concept of indirectness in pragmatics goes back to Grice's (1967 [1975]) work on conversational implicatures and Searle's (1975) work on indirect speech acts, in which he states that "in directives, politeness is the chief motivation for indirectness" (Searle, 1975:64). Pragmatic politeness theories equate indirectness with politeness as it increases optionality for the hearer (Leech, 1983) and mitigates face-threat (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Brown and Levinson distinguish between three suprastrategies representing different levels of in/directness: *Off-record* strategies, such as hints, flout Grice's maxims, and are least direct and most polite. *On-record* strategies, which consist of indirect forms conventionally associated with requesting, such as *Can you*, are regarded as both face-saving and unambiguous. And the most direct and face-threatening requests, such as imperatives, are referred to as *bald on-record* and associated with clarity and efficiency.

Empirical work conducted in the area of cross-cultural pragmatics has confirmed the correlation between indirectness and politeness underlying Brown and Levinson's framework, and a scale of in/directness distinguishing between *direct*, *conventionally indirect* and *non-conventionally indirect* requests has been proposed (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, see Appendix). Within this framework, in/directness is equated with "the relative length of the inferential path needed to arrive at an utterance's illocutionary point" (Blum-Kulka, 1987:133). Direct (*bald on-record*) requests are syntactically marked as requests or explicitly perform the speech act of requesting. Conventionally indirect requests "realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in a given language" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984:201), and non-conventionally indirect (*off-record*) requests rely entirely on contextual clues.¹

Research conducted in cross-cultural pragmatics has further demonstrated that speakers of different languages opt for different levels of directness, with Polish speakers showing a relatively strong preference for direct forms, notably imperatives (e.g. Lubecka, 2000; Ogiermann, 2009a).² Some researchers have also argued that interpretations of in/directness are culture-specific (e.g. Wierzbicka, 1985; Sifianou, 1997; Ogiermann, 2009a) – a claim that finds ample support in studies of parent–child interactions conducted in different countries.

Clancy (1986), who defines indirectness as "the amount of room a directive leaves for noncompliance" (Clancy, 1986:222) demonstrates how Japanese mothers teach their children to be indirect through the "pairing of indirect with direct utterances having the same communicative intent" (Clancy, 1986:229). Blum-Kulka (1997), in contrast, finds that over 70% of parental directives in her Israeli and Jewish American data take the form of imperatives, and she rejects the scale of indirectness proposed in her early work as invalid for family discourse. At the same time, researchers examining parental directives in British families have concluded that request formats "vary in the degree to which the speaker assumes control over the recipient's actions, or the recipient retains autonomy over their own conduct" (Kent, 2012:712, see also Craven and Potter, 2010).

Recent work in anthropology and child studies reflects the increasing democratization of families in Western countries and emphasizes children's agency and self-regulation. In this context, directives play a crucial role in balancing "parental involvement and interference and children's individual action" (Aronsson and Cekaite, 2011:138). The studies often focus on conflict episodes in family interaction, where parents use increasingly direct request forms (Goodwin, 2006; Aronsson and Cekaite, 2011; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2013, see also Ervin-Tripp, 1977). In Aronsson and Cekaite's study (2011), for instance, parents' attempts to get their children to have a shower or clean up their room took the form of prolonged sequences starting with hints, followed by mitigated request forms, which were then reformulated as direct requests and even threats.

2.2. Factors underlying the selection of request forms

While there is a consensus in previous work conducted in different areas that requests can be placed on a continuum of in/directness, the explanations provided range from considerations of illocutionary transparency and politeness to issues of autonomy and control. Similarly, the factors suggested as impacting on speakers' choices of request formats vary across studies.

¹ Although off-record requests are understood as being most polite within both frameworks, it should be borne in mind that they are actually defined as strategies that reduce accountability for the speaker (Brown and Levinson, 1987:73) and increase the interpretative demands on the hearer (Blum-Kulka, 1987).

² While this preference is even more pronounced in Polish family interactions (Zinken and Ogiermann, 2013), research into the use of a Polish verb expressing deontic modality in the impersonal, declarative construction *trzeba x* (one needs to x), which can be regarded as an off-record strategy, has illustrated how unaddressed participants involve themselves in an action deemed necessary by another family member (Zinken and Ogiermann, 2011).

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