

# Indirectness and politeness in Turkish–German bilingual and Turkish monolingual requests

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## Abstract

This study focuses on both the realisation and politeness perception of requests made by Turkish monolingual speakers and Turkish–German bilingual returnees. It investigates the possibility that the Turkish–German bilingual returnees' pragmatic performance may have been affected by pragmatic transfer from German. As an initial step, a discourse completion test (DCT) was administered to Turkish monolinguals and Turkish–German bilingual returnees, in order to elicit requests in 10 different situations. Second, a politeness rating questionnaire was used to measure the perceived politeness of requests in Turkish in order to investigate the relationship between indirectness and politeness. The results of the questionnaire showed that indirectness and politeness are related, but not linearly linked concepts. In regard to indirectness, a cross-cultural comparison revealed that Turkish monolingual speakers seemed to prefer more direct strategies when compared to German speakers. Although the overall results of the DCT did not confirm pragmatic transfer, in some strategies the bilinguals preferred indirectness more than Turkish monolinguals did – a finding which is consistent with the hypothesis that they experienced some influence from German. Furthermore, this study explores the nature of requests beyond the limits of traditional speech act theory. Adopting a broader perspective when analyzing the DCT data (i.e., moving beyond the Blum-Kulka et al. [1989] framework), my study shows that informants employ strategies other than those reported in most studies using DCTs: deliberate choices of opting out, providing alternative solutions, and attempts at negotiation. A re-analysis of the DCT data revealed that in some situations, the Turkish monolinguals tended to be more reluctant to make a request, whereas the Turkish–German bilinguals opted out less frequently, but preferred indirect strategies. Thus, further investigation needs to cover

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not only the ‘said’, but also the ‘unsaid’ responses of the requestees, in order to shed more light on the issue of indirectness.

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## 1. Introduction

Indirectness occupies a central role in studies of politeness. One large study, the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), has been administered to university students in eight cultures or languages (later this number rose to 13, see [Holmes, 1991](#)) to investigate cross-cultural and intralingual variation in two speech acts: requests and apologies ([Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984](#); [Blum-Kulka and House, 1989](#)). In a similar study, [House and Kasper \(1981\)](#) investigated the directness levels of German and English speakers. That study revealed that different norms of verbal behavior exist in different cultures, in particular, that German speakers, when compared to English speakers, in general use higher levels of directness in requests and complaints. This might serve as an explanation of why native speakers of English usually perceive the verbal behavior of German learners of English as being rather impolite (for details see [House and Kasper, 1981](#); and also [House, 2000, 2005](#)). This issue is particularly important to me, since many returnees from Germany (including myself), upon taking up residence in Turkey, have encountered instances, where we, as returnees, were categorised as too *direct*, *disrespectful* or even too *naïve* or *unrestrained*. Some of the reasons why returnees were judged to be ‘direct’ might be: lack of linguistic competence, cultural differences, as well as lack of knowledge of the values or rules of Turkish society. However, as the [House and Kasper \(1981\)](#) study shows, different norms of verbal behavior could be a further reason why the bilinguals were perceived as ‘direct’.

This study aims to explore the following questions: *Are Turkish–German bilingual returnees more direct than Turkish monolinguals?* and *How direct are Turkish speakers compared to speakers of other cultures or languages?*

Among the few studies investigating speech acts in Turkish is [Huls’s \(1989\)](#) study on directness. She recorded and analyzed the family interaction of a working or lower class Turkish migrant family in the Netherlands. The results of her analysis are compared with a “higher” and “lower class” Dutch family ([Huls, 1989:154](#)). The findings suggest that the Turkish family, in comparison to the Dutch families, used imperative forms more frequently. In other words, according to [Huls \(1989\)](#), the Turkish speakers were perceived to be more direct than the Dutch speakers.

In order to investigate directness in Turkish, I used a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), comprising 10 situations where informants were asked to provide requests. The DCT developed in the CCSARP collected requests and complaints from different cultures (see [Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984](#)); the focus of the present study is on requests, one of the most investigated speech acts in cross-cultural pragmatics ([Blum-Kulka et al., 1989](#); [Garcia, 1993](#); [Hickey and Steward, 2005](#); [Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999](#); [Sifianou, 1992](#);

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