

Applying Mitigation Devices in Request Speech Act: Do Gender and Language Proficiency Have any Effect?

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Abstract. This study aims to examine how Iranian EFL learners perceive and apply mitigation devices in request speech act in 4 asymmetrical situations. Role-play interactions and questionnaires were used to elicit the required data from Iranian informants (male vs. female). The results obtained from the analysis of data revealed that in identical situations, male requestors were comparably more certain than females that the addressee would not be offended from their requests using fewer mitigation devices. In addition, the perception of social power and social distance variables by men and women differed; females were more concerned about the social power and social distance between the interlocutors. Moreover, it was found that language proficiency played an important role in the type of request strategy applied by Iranian EFL learners. Advanced learners were found to use more externally mitigated requests than intermediate and elementary levels.

Keywords: Gender, language proficiency, mitigation devices, politeness, request speech act.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence is at least as important for linguistic performance, in general, and especially in contexts with speakers of different mother tongues as linguistic competence-command of syntax, vocabulary, idiom and pronunciation (Thomas, 1983). Linguists'

attempts to discover a universal theory to be applied in diverse cultures and languages (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983) have culminated in the idea that every culture has its own norms and different cultures have different realizations of politeness. The strategies appropriate for maintaining face and the relative sensitivity of different aspects of face may vary from culture to culture and such differences should be considered in EFL instruction.

A great deal of research has been done on different speech acts and has shown that there are cross-cultural differences with regards to either speech act production or the realization of various speech acts (Abdolrezapour, 2012; Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012; Abdolrezapour & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2013; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1991). Different perceptions of speakers from heterogeneous backgrounds concerning the contextual appropriateness of various politeness strategies might cause communication breakdowns.

The focus of this attempt is on mitigation devices applied in request speech act, which has previously appeared in the literature (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Márquez-Reiter, 2000; Usó-Juan, 2007). Requests are face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987, 978), which endanger both the requestor's and the requestee's face as his/her request might be rejected. This study is the first attempt at investigating the production of mitigation devices by Iranian EFL learners. Moreover, the effect of informant's gender and their language proficiency on applying and perceiving mitigation devices will be scrutinized.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Request speech act

Second language performance is both affected by one's grammatical and linguistic competence as well as his/her communicative competence. According to Hymes (1972), second language learners with high-level of linguistic repertoire may fail to have successful communication if they do not understand the cultural norms of the foreign language speech community. To avoid such miscommunications, second language

researchers and applied linguists have addressed the question of appropriate norms of performing speech acts in various studies.

A request may be seen as a speech act through which the speaker wants to get the addressee to do something that is generally in the interest of the speaker and demands a certain effort or exertion on the part of the addressee (Haverkate, 1979; Searle, 1976). This speech act is important both from a sociolinguistic perspective, as they are sensitive to social factors such as age, gender, social power as well as social distance between the interlocutors, and from a pragmatic perspective, as different forms are used to make a request to be in accord with matters of politeness.

Because of the large degree of imposition that making a request places upon one's interlocutor(s), numerous studies have examined its functions to better understand its use and interpretation in different cultures. Fukushima (2000), for example, conducted a cross-cultural study of polite request strategies in British English and Japanese. She showed that British and Japanese undergraduate respondents used different politeness strategies when making requests and concluded that perceptions of power, social distance and the weight of the imposition influenced politeness strategy choice in the two cultures differently.

Examining request strategies in a variety of languages, namely, English, French, Hebrew, and Spanish, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) found that conventional indirectness is the most desirable strategy. They defined conventionally indirect strategies as "strategies that realize the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalized in the language" (Blum-Kulka, *et al.* 1989, p. 47). The preference for conventionally indirect requests, which is documented in some other contrastive speech act studies such as Tamil, Tzetal (Brown & Levinson, 1987 [1978]), English and Greek (Sifianou, 1992), and English and Spanish (Márquez-Reiter, 2000), can be interpreted by the politeness theory; the higher the level of indirectness, the lower the impositive nature of the request. So, it can be argued that when there is a fear of loss of face or when there is a lower expectation of compliance, formulaic conventionally indirect requests are employed.

A number of studies have been devoted to identifying, and trying to explain, the cross-cultural differences which exist between Persian and English, focusing on the request speech act (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh 2012; Ahangar & Amoo Ali Akbari, 2007; Eslami-Rasekh, 1993). Eslami-Rasekh (1993), comparing American and Persian speakers' request strategies, posited that Persian society is less individualistic and more psychologically dependent on group mentality, which leads to strategies of positive politeness as opposed to negative politeness used by American society. In fact, in her study, Persian speakers were found to use direct strategies 70% of the time, compared to 12% of the tested cases for American speakers. Her results were in disagreement with a later attempt by Ahangar and Amoo Ali Akbari (2007), who found that Iranian requestors use more negative politeness strategies. In a recent study, Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012) documented differences in the type of mitigation devices used in the request speech acts by Persian and American native speakers. Also, their results indicated different perceptions of politeness in situations involving the social power and social distance variables by these groups, as will be explained later in this study.

2.2. Mitigation devices in request speech act

The notion of mitigation has been used technically since the late 1970s, when the concept of illocutionary act was operationalized in discourse analysis. This term was introduced in pragmatics by Fraser (1990) referring to those linguistic devices used by speakers to protect themselves against various interactional risks. Holmes (1984) regards mitigation as a particular case of attenuation which is used when the predictable consequences of a speech act utterance are negative. Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) treat mitigation as a synonym of politeness and it is the core of Goffman's (1967) notion of *face* and Leech's (1983) *maxims of politeness*, in particular, the *Tact Maxim*.

Both external and internal modifications are used to soften the threatening impact of the speech act. External modifications are optional clauses which occur in the immediate context of the speech act (e.g. *I missed the previous lecture, would you give me your notes?*) and indirectly modify the illocutionary force, while internal modifications

occur within the speech act itself (e.g., *Could you possibly give me your pen?*) (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Both kinds of modifiers (i.e. internal and external) could either soften or intensify the force of the whole request.

Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) argued that the degree to which interlocutors use mitigation devices and the type of mitigation devices used can be affected by some contextual factors such as social distance, social power and the degree of imposition of the act. The crux of their argument was that there is a direct and linear relationship among these social variables, such that the greater the hearer's power, the social distance between interlocutors and the degree of imposition of the act, the greater the face-threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness and modifications to be employed by the speaker. Following Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]), Nikula (1996, cited in Salazar Campillo 2007, p.211) proposes the following five contextual factors that may affect the appropriate use of peripheral modification devices:

- a) *Power*: those who have more power can express themselves without employing modifiers (for example, boss-employee)
- b) *Social distance*: those who are strangers will tend to use more modifiers
- c) *Ranking of imposition*: how demanding the request is implies that more or less modification will be used
- d) *Type of interaction*: whether the interaction is for transactional or interactional purposes will have an impact on the use of peripheral modification devices
- e) *Type of speech act*: the more the speech act is face-threatening, the more modifying devices are needed.

The effect of some contextual factors such as power and social distance on using peripheral modification devices in performing various speech acts in Iranian and American cultures has been investigated in a number of studies. Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012), in their study on the effect of social variables of power, distance and the rank of imposition of the request speech act, found that the degree of mitigation

devices used correlates positively with the power of the requestee and imposition of the request in the Iranian culture while Americans were found to be less concerned with the power of the requestee and considered themselves at the same social level with no interlocutor exerting power over the other. In another study on refusal speech act, Abdolrezapour and Vahid Dastjerdi (2013) reported that social variables such as social power and social distance made a difference in the way Iranians used mitigation devices when refusing while Americans' refusals did not change considerably with regard to social variables. Afghari (2007) investigated the possible effects of the two context-external variables, namely, the social distance and dominance between the interlocutors, on the frequency of the apology intensifiers and found that the most intensified apologies were offered to friends and the least intensified apologies were offered to strangers. In addition, he found that the addressee's dominance over the speaker resulted in a more intensified apology utterances.

The modification of a speech act has been the focus of a number of studies (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989; Caffi, 1999; Holmes, 1984). This area of research is of central importance in cross-cultural studies for finding the appropriate norm of using language in communication, as a number of studies have pointed to the existing cross-cultural differences with regard to using mitigation devices in a number of speech acts such as request (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008) and refusal (Abdolrezapour & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2013; Bella, 2011).

Investigating the form and function of requests in British English and Uruguayan Spanish, Márquez-Reiter (2000) found that the Britons employed higher levels of modifiers across the role-play situations than the Uruguayans did and a preference for external over internal modification was observed. She concluded that Uruguayans, who used mitigation less frequently, appeared to be less motivated by considerations of 'negative' politeness as compared to the British.

In another study, Márquez-Reiter et al. (2005) investigated whether requestors' lower perceptions of request compliance by their requestees induces them to internally mitigate their requests. They observed that speakers appeared to be more certain of request compliance when no

softening devices were used. Addition of a softening device led to a decrease in the degree of certainty expressed by their participants.

2.3. Gender differences in request speech act

As noted before, there have been considerable number of cross-cultural studies on various speech acts (e.g. Abdolrezapour, 2012; Abdolrezapour, Dabaghi & Kassaian, 2012; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1991) and due to the degree of imposition that making a request places upon requestees, there have been numerous cross-gender and cross-cultural studies on this speech act (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2008; Márquez-Reiter et al, 2005). As Mills (2003) argues, there is no general rule about the general behavior of men and women for all cultures, rather “decisions about what is appropriate or not are decided upon strategically within the parameters of the community of practice” (p.235). However, considering gender as an influential factor in determining language production or perception for all women and men makes research and experimental work simpler; thus, different attempts have been made to find the effect of gender on the performance of different speech acts and most have found that female speakers do use more positive politeness strategies than males in the context under investigation (e.g. Baxter, 2000; Mikako, 2005).

With regard to request speech act, a multitude of studies were conducted to identify and explain differences in the request strategies applied by men and women. Lakoff (1973) found that female speech "sounds much more 'polite' than men's" because of features such as tag questions and the greater use of compounded requests (p. 56). And according to Fishman, "[O]ut of a total of 370 questions asked in twelve and a half hours of conversation, the women asked 263" (1990 , p.36).

Macaulay (2001) in an investigative attempt on indirectness and gender in requests for information in Canada found that females employed more indirect requests for information than did the male interviewers. Conversely, in another investigative attempt, Ishikawa (2013) found that women tended to use direct requests more, which the author regarded as less polite in terms of politeness strategies, than men did.

2.4. Language proficiency and speech act performance

According to Bachman (1990), communicative language ability is considered to be multi-componential in the sense that it encompasses two main areas including *organizational competence* and *pragmatic competence*. Organizational competence, as Bachman argues, refers to both linguistic units and the rules which are used to put these units together in the form of well-structured sentences. Pragmatic competence, on the other hand, comprises illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Previous studies have indicated that learners of a second language use pragmatic knowledge differently from native speakers of the target language (Ellis, 1994; Kasper & Dahl, 1991); hence, their communication with a native speaker might fail due to these differences.

With regard to speech act performance, a number of studies have shown that more advanced learners would show more similar patterns in their choice of linguistic expressions in speech acts to native speakers. Trosborg (1995), for example, used a role play method to elicit speech acts of requests, complaints, and apologies, and compared linguistic expressions over three L2 proficiency groups. His findings pointed to the fact that advanced learners used more mitigating expressions to reduce the potential threat, thereby approximating native speaker patterns. In another investigative attempt, Rose (2000) used an oral production task to examine the speech acts of requests, apologies, and complaints by L2 English learners of three age groups: Seven, nine, and eleven years old. Comparing linguistic expressions by the CCSARP coding framework pointed to pragmatic development, in the movement from the use of direct to more indirect expressions. Advanced learners applied more indirect expressions and supportive moves to frame their speech acts, approximating native speaker patterns. Taguchi (2006), in a study on Japanese college students of English at two different proficiency levels for their ability to produce a speech act of request in a spoken role play task, found significant L2 proficiency influence on overall appropriateness, but only a marginal difference in the types of linguistic expressions used between the two proficiency groups. Following this line of study, this article intends to find the effect of language proficiency on the use of mitigation devices in 4 asymmetric situations.

Research Questions

Taking into account the contribution of previous studies, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does the gender of Iranian EFL learners have any effect on the type of mitigation device applied when requesting?
2. Does Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level affect the type of mitigation device applied when requesting?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Sixty five Iranian EFL learners were selected based on a stratified sampling procedure. The informants were all full-time EFL learners enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Isfahan (Iran) for the 2012 academic year. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 36 years (Mean= 25) and approximately half of them were male (31) and half female (34). They were chosen as the target population in order to ensure as much homogeneity as possible in terms of educational background, social class and their possible future occupation.

3.2. Instruments

The data were collected via open role plays¹ and questionnaires. The role-play tasks comprised four situations resulting in the elicitation of requests and responses to these requests. The situations realized in the role plays were assessed before conducting the study to make sure that they were natural in the foreign language context. Initially, we had six situations which were used mainly in the Iranian culture. We asked ten American native speakers to assess the naturalness of the situations by assigning a number from 1, indicating that the situation occurs rarely, and 5, showing that the occurrence of the situation is highly probable and two situations which were unnatural in American culture were excluded.

1. Open role plays were used to collect data as they are closer to naturally occurring speech events and they give us the opportunity to record or/and videotape them for further careful analysis. In these role plays only the requestor is aware of the communicative goal and the requestee has been informed of his role.

The situations described in the role-play (see Appendix) reflect everyday occurrences of the type expected to be familiar to both American and Iranian university students. They vary according to the social distance between the speakers, the relative social power of the interlocutors and the rank of imposition of the request. Table 1 presents a description of the contextual variables involved.

Table 1. Classification of role-plays according to contextual variables

Situation	Social Power	Social distance	Rank of Imposition
Borrow a book	$S < H$	+SD	Low
Type the letters	$S = H$	- SD	High
Swap seats	$S = H$	+SD	Low
Give a lecture	$S > H$	+SD	High

S= Speaker, H= Hearer, SD= Social Distance.

In the first situation (Borrow a book) a student needs a book and asks the lecturer to lend him/her the book. Whereas the second situation (Type the letters) concerns the interaction between two friends: one asking his/her friend to type some letters for him. Two students are in the school bus in the third situation (Swap seats) with one requesting the other to swap their seats. And the fourth situation (Give a lecture) concerns the interaction between a lecturer and his/her student; the lecturer asking the student to give his/her lecture sooner.

In these situations, social distance is a function of how well interlocutors know each other: either close (-SD) or distant (+SD); social power, on the other hand, refers to the “vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure” (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.52).

3.3. Data collection and coding procedure

The informants participated in role plays in groups of two; every informant acted once as a requestor and once as a requestee. The role plays data were then transcribed and coded by two trained native speakers from each culture. Using the taxonomy of modifications developed by Márquez-Reiter (2000), the coders independently coded all strategies used in each request utterance based on the request head act and the mitigation devices used. The classification was based on the type

of mitigation devices used, i.e. request with no mitigation, requests containing internal mitigation and requests with external mitigation devices. Then, in order to establish whether the frequency of the use of each type of mitigation differs significantly between the two genders, i.e. to answer the first research question, Chi-square tests were used. Participants' language proficiency level was checked applying the grammar part of the 'Oxford Placement Test 2' (Allan, 1992) and their responses were scored on a scale of 100 points. Scores higher than 75 were taken as advanced learners; those of 50 to 75 were taken as intermediate group and the scores lower than 50 were known as the elementary EFL learners. The second research question dealt with the effect of EFL learners' proficiency level on the type of mitigation device applied when requesting, for which Kruskal-Wallis tests were applied.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of data analysis pertaining to each research question. The frequency and the types of mitigation devices used by both groups of informants are measured.

4.1. Gender and the type of mitigation device applied

In order to answer the first research question, role plays were analyzed and the frequency of the use of each type of mitigation device, based on the taxonomy provided by Márquez-Reiter (2000), was calculated. Then, chi-squares were run to determine the significance of differences.

Results of the chi-square tests point to significant differences for all types of requests (i.e. with no modification, internally and externally modified requests) between male participants and females. Analyzing the situations revealed that the differences in the type of mitigation used were due to social power of the requestee and the degree of imposition concerned, i.e. in situation one where there was an interaction between the professor and student (+SP) and situation two which involved a high degree of imposition.

Table 2. General results for each type of modification used by female and male requestors

Situation	M1		M2		M3	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Borrow a book	5	0	20	11	6	23
Type the letters	12	4	15	12	4	18
Swap seats	8	3	15	20	8	11
Give a lecture	15	5	13	15	3	14
Total frequency	40	12	63	58	21	66
Percentage	32.25%	8.82%	50.80%	42.64%	16.93%	48.52%
Chi-Square test	p = .00*		p = .00*		p = .00*	

M1= Requests with no modification

M2= Requests with internal modification

M3= Requests with external modification.

M= Male participants

F= Female participants

* Indicates that the percentages of the two groups differ significantly ($p < 0.05$).

This part of results which confirm the difference between the speech act performance of males and females is in line with previous request speech act studies (Fishman, 1990; Ishikawa, 2013; Lakoff, 1973; Macaulay, 2001). The results obtained showed that women generally make more use of mitigation devices (8.82% direct requests as compared to 91.18% modified ones) and they are more likely to apply external mitigation devices when requesting someone, compared to men (48.52% vs. 16.93%). Such difference is more evident when addressing someone of higher/lower status (situations one and four) in which females applied significantly higher number of externally modified requests. The findings obtained here contradicts a number of previous attempts, namely, Abdolrezapour et al (2012) who found no gender specific difference in the perception of complaint politeness and Ishikawa (2013) in that he pointed to the more use of direct requests by females.

4.2. Language proficiency and the type of mitigation device applied

To find the answer of the second research question, the role plays were analyzed according to the informants' proficiency level. Table 3 shows the results of Kruskal-Wallis tests conducted to check whether the

differences between the perceptions of these three groups (Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced) were significant or not.

Table 3. General results for each type of modification used by elementary, intermediate and advanced requestors

Situation	M1			M2			M3		
	E	I	A	E	I	A	E	I	A
Borrow a book	8	4	2	5	8	10	4	11	13
Type the letters	8	4	7	5	10	12	4	9	6
Swap seats	11	5	7	3	11	11	3	7	7
Give a lecture	12	10	5	3	5	9	2	8	11
Total frequency	39	23	21	16	34	42	13	35	37
Percentage	57.35%	25%	21%	23.52%	36.95%	42%	19.11%	38.04%	37%
Chi-Square test	p =.00*			p =.04*			p =.02*		

M1= Requests with no modification

M2= Requests with internal modification

M3= Requests with external modification.

E= Elementary students

I= Intermediate students

A= Advanced students

* Indicates that the percentages of the three groups differ significantly ($p < 0.05$).

Results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests illustrate significant differences for all types of requests (i.e. with no modification, internally and externally modified requests) between participants of all proficiency levels (Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced). The finding obtained in this part of study agrees with Trosborg (1995) and Rose (2000), who pointed to the fact that advanced learners used more mitigating expressions to reduce the potential threat, thereby approximating native speaker patterns. However, according to Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012), Iranian native speakers tend to use more mitigated requests (especially externally mitigated ones) compared to Americans. Thus, the higher use of mitigation devices does not necessarily point to their higher pragmatic knowledge; rather, it might be due to their obtained skill in linguistic knowledge.

5. Conclusion

Contrasting the female and male requesting strategies was the main objective of this study. Overall, a careful analysis of the role play interactions has provided an insight into the preferred requesting strategies and perceptions about appropriate requesting style in the foreign language (i.e. English) by female and male Iranian EFL learners. Also, it gives us an understanding about the effect of social power and social distance in each group. Investigating the female and male speech act strategy preferences for requesting across the four situations show that social distance and social power are the determining factors in the way the females request while it is not the case for males. Women generally used more externally mitigated requests than men did in all situations.

Moreover, it was found that language proficiency plays an important role in the type of request strategy applied by Iranian EFL learners. Advanced learners were found to use more externally mitigated requests than intermediate and elementary levels. Considering previous cross-cultural studies on Iranian and American requestive strategies, which pointed to the higher tendency toward using mitigated requests by Iranians, the importance of mitigation devices and indirect strategies in their requests can be primarily attributed to the desire to save face and their tendency to be respectful when interacting with someone of higher status or someone with a distant relationship.

Given the fact that the presented findings are based on the comparison of frequencies of use of external and internal mitigation devices in an arguably limited amount of data with a few number of participants, the present study is exploratory, and its findings must be confirmed or corrected by future studies carried out on these two variables (namely gender and proficiency level). Nevertheless, this study does call attention to the cross-gender differences with regard to mitigation devices used in request speech act. The results, which lend support to the idea that language, particularly in speech acts, is laden with gender, yields two significant pedagogical implications: (a) the inclusion of pragmatics in language teaching; (b) the design and development of textbook materials which emphasize the pragmatic aspect of language.

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Appendix: Open role plays

Instructions

You will be asked to read some brief situations in which there are two participants. You will role play one of the participants and another person will role play the other. You both know who you are and where you are; however, one of you does not know what the other one wants. The interaction will be recorded. You will have to act as you would in an actual situation: you will have to act the situation and interact with the other person, thus expect there could be some social chat. Do not think too much and try to be as spontaneous as possible.

Situation 1 (Borrow a book)

Informant A:

You are a university student. Your lecturer recommended you a book which would be helpful for your research. The library is closed and the only person who has the book is your lecturer. On the way to his/her office you meet him/her in the hallway. What do you say?

Informant B:

You are a university lecturer. While leaving your office you meet one of your students in the hallway. Respond to him/her.

Situation 2 (Type the letters)

Informant A:

You have been put in charge of a project at university. You go to the desk of a classmate of yours who cooperates with you and ask him/her to type a few letters for you. What do you say to him/her?

Informant B:

Your classmate has been put in charge of a project at university. S/he comes to your desk and talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation 3 (Swap seats)**Informant A:**

You are on the school bus with one of your friends. There are plenty of seats on the bus but there are not any for two people together. You ask a passenger who is sitting on his/her own on a two seater to change seats with you so that you can sit next to your friend. What do you say to him/her?

Informant B:

You are on the school bus. You are sitting on your own on a seat for two people. There are plenty of seats on the bus but there are not any for two people together. A passenger talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation 4 (Give a lecture)**Informant A:**

You are a professor in a university. Because you have to attend an important conference, you ask your student to give his lecture earlier than scheduled. What do you say to him/her?

Informant B:

You are a university student. One of your professors comes to you and talks to you. Respond to him/ her.