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The relationship between economic status, level of education, formality of context and the use of requests in young Iranian couples

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on investigating the relationship between making requests on one hand, and economic status, level of education and formality of context on the other. It examined the differences in the realization of requests in one area of Iran, i.e. Shahrekord, to account for pragmatic variations based on these three variables. To this end, sixty young couples based on their education and economic status were selected and surveyed in six different situations: 1) indoors, alone; 2) indoors, close family gatherings; 3) indoors, formal gatherings; 4) outdoors, with their relatives; 5) outdoors, being with a stranger; 6) outdoors, formal situations. A discourse completion test (DCT) was used as an elicitation device and a Chi-square was run to analyze the data. The results showed the preference order for the type of request used as direct, conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect. It was also found that as the degree of formality of context increases, the use of mitigation devices tends to increase as well.

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Introduction

The relevance of the findings of pragmatic studies to applied linguistics has gained considerable attention in recent years. Despite the fact that pragmatic studies are wide in scope, most seem to share a basic concern: the need to account for the rules that dictate the use of language in context (Levinson, 1983). Applied linguists now generally agree that pragmatic studies can provide insights into the roles of different variables and can present accounts for the interrelationships that exist between and among them. This study was an attempt to delve into the relationship between the use of requests and three independent factors, namely, economic status, level of education and formality of context.

A request is, by definition, a direct speech act. Requests are always face-threatening in that they threat the addressee's negative face which is defined as freedom from imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987). According to Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983), direct requests are impolite and face-threatening because they intrude on the addressee's territory. A way that can lead to minimizing the imposition of requests in all languages (Blum-Kulka, 1984) is to use an indirect strategy instead of a direct one. Searl (1975, p. 60) defines indirect speech acts as those in which "the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on the mutually shared background information, both linguistically and non-linguistically, together with the powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer". Leech (1983) also went so far as to argue that politeness can be defined in terms of the use of indirect illocution rather than direct speech acts.

The type of request that participants in a conversation use may depend on a number of factors. It is possible that as the formality of the context increases, more indirect requests with more mitigation devices are used (Lin, 2008; Cesar Felix-Brasdefer, 2010). It may also be the case that the type of request used has something to do with the level of education on the part

of the participants in the conversation and also the economic status that they possess. It must be noted that the studies which have investigated the relationship between and among these variables are few and far in between. This study is, therefore, aimed at filling this research lacuna. It focuses on the types of requests used in six different settings between couples: 1) indoors, alone; 2) indoors, close family gatherings; 3) indoors, informal gatherings; 4) outdoors, gatherings of relatives; 5) outdoors, being with strangers; 6) outdoors, formal gatherings.

Review of Literature

One of the issues which has captured the attention of many sociolinguists is language in use. The development of pragmatic rules as to how to produce and perceive the language that is appropriate in a given situation appears to be very important for language users to the extent that failure to do so may label language users as insensitive, rude or inept. There is a pile of research on the cross-cultural differences in the realization of speech acts. A brief review of these studies has been provided below:

In a preliminary study, Shigeta (1974) compared responses by Japanese and American participants in six DCT (Discourse Completion Test) situations: 2 apologies, 2 requests, and 2 refusals. The study found that whereas the Japanese participants were more concerned about the relative status of the interlocutor, Americans prioritize their relationships with their interlocutor.

Cesar Felix-Brasdefer (2005) examined the notions of indirectness and politeness in the speech act of requests, among Mexican university students in formal and informal role-play situations. The results of this paper also lent support to Blum-Kulka's (1989) observation that unlike non-conventional indirectness (e.g., hints), there seems to be a relationship between conventional indirectness and politeness. Their findings suggest that conventional indirect requests increased levels of

deferential politeness and were used to express respect or distance between interlocutors.

With regard to the relationship between socioeconomic status and the use of language, there are also a number of studies in the literature. Labov (1994) investigated the relationship between socio-economic status and linguistic variations. He looked at pronunciation differences of a single linguistic variable (r) among salespeople in the New York City department, and found a regular pattern in their speech. The higher the socio-economic status of the store, the more frequently the (r) sound was produced and the lower the status, the fewer the occurrence of (r) as used by those who worked there. Also, Trudgill (1974) did an investigation on reading and found that middle-class speakers pronounced fewer (r) sounds than working-class speakers. He concluded that upper-middle-class speakers did not seem to produce the postvocalic (r) at all.

Speech acts can be expressed on a continuum of explicitness with the most direct ones at one end and the most indirect ones at the other. An attempt to classify speech acts in that fashion led to Blum-kulka's (1989) coding scheme according to which there are three major levels of directness which requesting strategies may display:

- i) The most direct, explicit level, such as imperatives and performatives. An example would be *open the door*.
- ii) The conventional indirect level. An example would be *Would you do it?* or *Could you do it?*
- iii) Non-conventional indirect level, such as hints. An example would be *Why is the window open?* or *It's cold in here*.

These three levels can be divided into nine sub-levels called 'strategy types' which are presented in Table 1.

As noted earlier, to minimize the imposition involved in requesting, speakers resort to a number of mitigation devices. Mitigating the speech act of request might be achieved by syntactic means (compare 'Do it' with 'Will you do it'), which are applied independently of strategy type. For example:

Could you do the cleaning up? Or I would appreciate it if you left me alone.

Other mitigation devices are:

- a) Consultative devices: by which the speaker seeks to involve the hearer and bids for his/her cooperation.

Do you think I could borrow your lecture notes from from yesterday?

- b) Understaters: by which the speaker minimizes parts of the proposition, such as the required action or object.

Could you tidy a bit before I start?

- c) Hedges: by which the speaker avoids specification in making a commitment to the illocutionary point of the utterance.

It would really help if you did something about the kitchen.

- d) Downtoner: by which the speaker modulates the impact his/her utterance is likely to have on the hearer by the use of devices signaling the possibility of noncompliance:

Will you be able perhaps to drive me home?

It is noticeable that all the modifications above are achieved internally, i.e., within the "Head act". In addition to or instead of internal modifications, the speaker might also choose to support or aggravate the speech act by external modifications. External modifications do not affect the utterance used for realizing the act, but rather the context in which it is embedded, and thus indirectly modify the illocutionary force. Therefore, external modifications are also viewed as "Adjuncts to the Head act".

Adjuncts to the head act are as follows:

- a) Checking on availability: by which the speaker intends to check if the precondition necessary for compliance holds true.

Are you going in the direction of the town? If so, is it possible for me to join you?

- b) Getting a pre-commitment:

Will you do me a favor? Could you perhaps lend me notes for a few days?

- c) Grounder: by which the speaker indicates the reasons for the request.

Judith, I missed the class yesterday, could I borrow your notes?

- d) Sweetener: by expressing exaggerated appreciation of the hearer's ability to comply with the request, the speaker lowers the imposition involved.

You have beautiful handwriting, would it be possible to borrow your notes for a few days?

- e) Disarmer: by which the speaker indicates his/her awareness of a potential offence, thereby attempting to anticipate possible refusal.

Excuse me, I hope you don't think I'm being forward, but is there any chance of a lift home?

- f) Cost minimizing: by which the speaker indicates consideration of the "cost" to the hearer, involved in compliance with the hearer.

Pardon me, but could you give me a lift, if you're going my way, as I just missed the bus and there isn't another one for an hour.

In general, the literature on requests indicates that specifically one's cultural orientation and interlocutor status seem to affect the type and frequency of strategies, and also the amount of directness a person uses in making a request. As it was shown, the effect of variables such as economic status and education have been investigated, but there have hardly been studies focusing on the relationship between these variables and the speech act of request. The present study investigated the types of request strategies used by native speakers of Persian. The focus was on the differences in the use of requests between young Iranian couples of high, middle and low education, those with low and middle economic statuses, and those in formal as opposed to informal contexts. Thus, we attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any relationship between the level of education of young Iranian couples and their manner of making requests?
2. Is there any relationship between the economic status of young Iranian couples and their manner of making requests?
3. Is there any relationship between the formality of context and young couples' manner of making requests?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were selected randomly from different districts of Shahrekord. The couples' ages ranged from 20 to 30, and they had been married for 1-3 years. The participants were divided into two main groups based on their economic status as middle-class and low-class groups. The income of the middle-class participants was more than one million tomans a month, whereas the income of low-class participants was reported to be less than 800000 tomans a month. Couples with more than 1,600,000 and lower than 400,000 were excluded from the study. The participants were, in turn, divided again into three groups based on their level of education and were labeled as high, middle, and low groups. The group of high education consisted of couples with B.A and M.A degrees. The participants in the

group of middle education had either diplomas or were B.A students (or undergraduates), and those with low education were identified as those who did not have a diploma degree.

Data Collection Instrument

The data for the present study were collected by a DCT, a method frequently employed in pragmatic studies, especially requests. Beebe (1990) argued that DCTs are very effective in gathering a large amount of data quickly, and that it creates an initial classification of semantic formulas and strategies that will occur in natural speech. This kind of test allows the researcher to control for specific variables of the situation, and it gives coherence to the findings which otherwise would be very difficult to achieve.

The DCT employed consisted of two parts (see the DCT in appendix). The first part elicited personal information from the participants such as the couples' income, occupation, and education. The second part included items which asked the couples to produce proper requests they usually used in their interactions with each other. The items in the DCT were designed to ask questions about the six different situations which were divided into two main categories: indoors and outdoors, each of them consisting of three situations pertaining to everyday life: 1) indoors, alone: when the couples are alone in their house, 2) indoors, close family gatherings: when they are with their close family members in their house, 3) indoors, formal gatherings: when the couples are with their co-workers. (It must be noted that situation 3 is more formal to them than the two previous ones), 4) outdoors, with their relatives: when they are in some parties with their relatives, 5) outdoors: when the couples are out of their house in places such as parks or cinemas in which the other people are considered strangers, 6) outdoors, formal situations :when the couples are in places such as a bank or an insurance company.

Before the administration of the DTC, the participants were assured that their personal information in the first part of the questionnaire would not be revealed. The participants were also assured that they would remain anonymous. The data were collected and coded for statistical analysis, and were then analyzed according to the classification of request strategies originally devised by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989).

IV) Results

This section provides the results for the research questions with regard to the differences in frequency when Iranian young Iranian couples make requests in six different situations (females' requests from men). The requests are classified as direct, conventional indirect, non- conventional indirect based on Blum-Kulka's (1989) classification system. Each request was examined based on this formula: Terms of address + Head act + Mitigation devices.

Table 2 shows the Chi-square results for the first research question. This question is intended to examine the relationship between the level of education and the manner of making requests. The Chi-square indicates a significant relationship between the two variables. It shows that couples with low education, as compared with those with middle and high education, use more direct and non-conventional indirect requests.

With respect to the second question, Table 3 shows the relationship between the economic status of young Iranian couples and their manner of making requests. As shown, the relationship is significant ($P=.003<0.05$). As already pointed out, the couples were divided into two groups based on their

economic status, high and low. The results show that couples of low economic status are very much interested in using direct requests, but couples of high economic status, in contrast, are likely to use non-conventional indirect requests.

The third research question was posed to see if there is any relationship between requests and the formality of situations. The results in Table 4 show a significant relationship between the formality of context and making requests. It shows as the formality of the context increases, the use of indirect requests also increases. It also indicates that couples use more mitigation devices and try not to use terms of address, especially in more formal settings.

V) Discussion and conclusion

This study was aimed at examining the differences between young Persian couples in the use of the speech act of request, and sought to investigate to what extent making requests is influenced by level of education, economic status, and formality of context. The overall group comparisons showed substantial differences in the use of the three main strategies. As can be noted, for all the Iranian couples here, the preference order is direct- conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect, which is in contrast with some of the findings of previous studies on requests (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Yu, 1999; Lin, 2008).

In the light of these findings, making requests by young Iranian couples seems to exhibit a relationship with their level of education and economic status. The formality of the setting is the third and the main factor which influences the kinds of requests they produce. The findings for the first research question showed that the level of education correlates with the manner of making requests which is in line with what Yule (2006) indicated. Yule (2006) showed that those people who spent more time in the education system tend to have more academic features in their spoken language.

We focused on three groups with different levels of education, and found that low-educated couples in contrast with middle and high educated groups, used mostly direct requests and non-conventional indirect requests. Middle educated couples and high-educated couples used more non-conventional indirect requests. This may be attributable to the fact that they spent a lot of time with the written language. The observation that some teachers "talk like a book" is possibly a reflection of an extreme form of this influence from the written language after years in the educational system.

The results related to the second research question showed a significant relationship between economic status and the manner of making requests. It indicated that couples with high economic status used direct requests but couples with low economic status are likely to use non-conventional indirect requests.

These findings are in line with the findings of some researchers like Labov (1966). He focused on the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ among salespeople in three New York City department stores, and found that the higher the socio-economic status, the more /r/ sounds were produced and the lower the status, the fewer /r/ sounds were produced by those who worked there. The reason for producing /r/ sound by people with high economic status or the other findings like [h] dropping which was mostly used by lower classes is that having these features in the spoken language frequently marks the speaker as a member of particular social groups, whether the speaker realizes it or not.

The focus of the third research question was on the formality of situations and the results indicated that a significant

relationship exists between the formality of context and the manner of making requests.

These findings suggest that as the formality of context increases, the use of indirect requests also increases and that couples use more mitigation devices, which is in line with the findings of Lin (2008) and Cesar Felix-Brasdefer (2010). Since request is a face threatening act which threatens the freedom of action and freedom from imposition, the participants seem to be more careful about each others' faces. As Leech (1983) showed, the degree of politeness is related to the manner of making requests.

A possible limitation in the study that we were well aware of was that the data were collected through a DTC. The drawback of DCTs is that the participants may attempt at ideal answers and provide the best form of request they would in the situations described to them.

Using other methods of data collection such as observation plus DTC in future research would make the data more reliable. Also, since gender is a factor that could conceivably affect the manner of making requests, as has been observed in the production of requests in Uruguayan and Cuban Spanish (Marquez Reiter, 2000; Ruzickova, 2007), future studies could examine the differences in the manner of making requests by males and females and delve into possible differences between them.

Appendix

- 1) Suppose that you are alone at home with your partner. You are thirsty. How would you ask your partner to bring a glass of water for you?
- 2) Suppose that you are alone at home with your partner. You are tired. How would you ask your partner to park the car in the garage?
- 3) Your close family members are in your house. How would you ask your partner to bring some tea for you and your family?
- 4) Your close family members are in your house. You leave your bag in the car. How would you ask your partner to fetch your bag?
- 5) Suppose that your colleagues and their family have come over to your house. How would you ask your partner to turn on the TV for children?
- 6) Suppose that your colleagues and their family are invited for dinner in your house. How would you ask your partner to park the car in the garage?
- 7) Suppose that you and your family are at a party. Some of your friends and relatives are there. Ask your partner to hang your dress.
- 8) Suppose that you and your family go out on a picnic. Some of your friends and relatives with their families are with you. How would you ask your partner to make the fire instead of you?
- 9) Suppose that you and your partner are on the bus. There are other people that you do not know. What would you like to say to your partner when you want to ask him/her to get your bag?
- 10) Suppose that you and your partner are in the park. You do not know the people that are around you. Your partner is farther than you. How would you ask him/her to take the child to play?
- 11) Suppose that you and your partner are at the bank. How would you ask your partner to get your coat for you so that you can get to the task at hand?
- 12) Suppose that you and your partner are at the post office. You need your credit cards to send a letter. How would you ask your partner to bring it from your car?

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Table 2. Chi-Square Tests: The Relationship Between Type of Requests and Level of Education

	Value	df	Asymp.	
		Sig. (2-sided)		
Pearson Chi-Square	93.366 ^a	50	.000	
Likelihood Ratio	106.771	50	.000	
Linear-by-Linear	12.839	1	.000	
Association				
N of Valid Cases		360		
a. 57 cells (73.1%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .33.				

Table 3. Chi-Square Tests: The Relationship Between Type of Requests and Economic Status.

	Value	df	Asymp.	
			Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	47.735 ^a	24	.003	
Likelihood Ratio	55.447	24	.000	
Linear-by-Linear	3.352	1	.067	
Association				
N of Valid Cases	357			
a. 35 cells (70.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.				

Table 4. The Relationship Between Type of Requests and Formality of Context.

	Value	Df	Asymp.	
			Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	214.009 ^a	125	.000	
Likelihood Ratio	217.248	125	.000	
Linear-by-Linear	1.131	1	.287	
Association				
N of Valid Cases	360			
a. 138 cells (88.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .17.				