Investigating Pragmatic Competence: The Case of Requests in Interchange Series

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the use of request forms presented in Richard's Interchange Series, Books I, II, and III, widely used in Iranian foreign language teaching Institutes. For this purpose, Alcon et al.'s (2005) taxonomy of peripheral modification devices used in requests was used to locate the instance of request forms in such texts. Results showed that the series fail to include materials which are needed for meaningful and, at the same time, face saving communication when resort to different kinds of requests is required. A large number of peripheral modification devices are not presented in the texts studied and those which have received some attention are different in terms of frequency of exposure. Also, there is no balance between the presentation of internal and external modifications in the different books studied. The findings of this study have implications for textbook writers, materials developers, language teachers and learners.

Keywords: Request, Internal modification devices, External modification devices, Interchange series, Mitigation

1. Introduction

A number of studies conducted to investigate foreign language knowledge among learners have mostly emphasized the acquisition of phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic forms instead of investigating the development of the ability to use these forms in actual communication referred to in the literature as pragmatic competence (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996). As a result, one can come across many situations in which learners who are otherwise competent in terms of grammar and vocabulary are incapable of using this knowledge to produce the speech acts that reflect their intentions or their understanding of what is being communicated. One such case which has not thus far received its due attention is the speech act of requesting. For instance, the foreign language learner may not know that a request on his part such as "*Open the door!*" can be interpreted by a native speaker as a command and, therefore, cause breakdown in communication in spite of the fact that the non-native speaker has had no intention of ordering or commanding the hearer to perform the act in that particular way. To clarify the issue still further, one illuminating case is the transfer from Farsi in these conditions where the word "*lotfan!*", an equivalent of "please", does not usually accompany such speech acts, especially in informal contexts. In Farsi, commonly such speech acts are expressed by using a different intonation pattern, whereas this may not be the case in English.

It is obvious therefore that these differences have to be explicitly taught to the learners so that by mastering the different ways of requesting they can communicate effectively with their interlocutors. This paper is an attempt to move the relevant investigations in this area one step forward.

2. Background of the study

2.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is defined by Levinson (1983) as "the study of the ability of the language users to pair sentences with the context in which it would be appropriate" (p.24). In its broad sense, the term "pragmatics" has been applied

to very wide range of phenomena, including" conversational analysis", " Linguistic Etiquette", and acquisition of " Communicative Competence".

The analysis of pragmatics has aroused interest in two prominent areas: The "pragmalinguistics" and "sociopragmatics". Leech (1983:11) defines the former as "the particular resources which a given language provides for particular illocutions". Sociopragmatics is described by Leech as "The sociological interface of pragmatics" (1983:10). Thus, as far as sociopragmatics is concerned, more weight is given to the study of forms and functions of a language in a given social setting (Yarmohammadi, 1995).

2.2 Speech act

Speech act theory maintains that a distinction must be made between form and function. A sentence with an interrogative form may have many different functions other than the question asked. For instance, addressing one of the students in the classroom by "Can you open the door?" the teacher certainly does not want to test the ability of the student in opening the door. He may want to give the idea that the room is very hot and that he's making a request and wants the student to take action and open the door. Thus, communication in the sense given here can be regarded as an entity containing quit a number of acts, a series of elements with purpose and intend. To support this view, Austin (1962) defines speech acts as all the things we do with words. Austin (1962:75) assumes each speech act to have three major categories:

1- Locutionary: The function performed by uttering a well-formed, meaningful sentence,

2- Illocutionary: The communicative force which accompanies the utterance, e.g. promising, warning, denying, *requesting*, etc.

3- Perlocutionary: The extent to which the receiver's state of mind/knowledge and attitude is altered by the utterance in question.

According to Austin (1962) speech act is defined as all that we do with words. Based on this definition, a distinction is made between form and function of an utterance or sentence.

2.3 Request

In Trosborg's (1995:187) words "a request is an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker". To achieve this aim, the speaker, may have different options available to him in his language or culture. The form he chooses among the sources available to him decides whether or not he obtains the desired results. This means the requests have to be modified based on the context, including who is talking to whom and for what purpose.

Requests, following Trosborg (1995) and Sifianou (1999), are made up of two main components. They are what are termed as the core request or head act and the peripheral elements. The head act, as they define, is the main utterance with the function of requesting and can stand by itself. Yet, core requests may come before or after peripheral elements, which soften or aggravate the propositional content.

The use of peripheral modification devices with face-threatening acts such as requests can change the degree of politeness involved when performing this specific speech act. Therefore, the ability to use these devices adequately is one aspect of pragmatic proficiency, which according to Nikula (1996: 29) refers to "the ability to use language not only correctly as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned but also appropriately so that language use fits the social context in which it is being used." The implication of this statements is that in order to use language appropriately, speakers have to master both linguistic knowledge and socio-cultural and context knowledge including knowledge of the devices used for peripheral modification (Sifianou 1999).

As elaborated by Sifianou (1999), peripheral modification devices can be internal or external. Internal modification refers to linguistic elements within the same speech act, whereas external modification is achieved by devices which occur in the immediate linguistic context rather than in the speech act itself. One instance of each type of modification is provided as follows:

Example 1: External modification

May I ask you a favor? I need some money for my new computer.

Example 2: Internal modification

Would you mind closing the window?

As far as internal modification is concerned, it is divided into *openers*, *softeners, intensifiers* and *fillers*. Openers refer to opening words and expressions which search the addressee's co-operation (for example, *do you think…*). *They are conventionalised ways of introducing requests in* English and they soften the illocutionary force of the

sentence. The second type of internal modification is softeners which mitigate the force of the request by means of understatements (expressions such as *for a moment, a bit), downtoners (adverbs like just, possibly, perhaps)* and *hedges (for* example, *kind of, sort of).*

Labov and Fanshel (1977) point out that requests for action and information have mitigating and aggravating forms regarding the social relations between the speaker and the hearer. Requests for information, as they argue, are by definition aggravating or face threatening. According to these authorities, questions threaten negative face but they can also threaten positive face. Bublitz (1981) notes that "[i]t is a characteristic feature of questions often overlooked that the speaker by asking is not only able to cause the hearer to take the floor and react in a certain way, e.g. to answer…but that in addition he is also exerting his influence as to the CONTENT of the hearer's response" (p.852). Requests for information, based on this line of argumentation, are not neutral acts anymore than 'information' is neutral. The relationship between the speaker and the hearer is of special significance to the activity and is being constantly monitored, negotiated and adjusted in the course of conversation.

Extending Labov and Fanshel's analysis of requests for information, Macaulay (1996) has provided an analysis of indirect requests for information. Indirect requests for information can be formalized through reference to preconditions for general directives. Using Searle (1991), four principal felicity conditions for indirect directives can be recognized: The preparatory condition (ability), the sincerity condition (wish or desire), the propositional condition (performance of future act, willingness to perform future act), and essential condition (counts as an attempt to get hearer to perform act). In this sense, a speaker can use an indirect request for information by invoking the preparatory condition: 'Can you clarify this point?' the sincerity condition:' I wanna talk housing and mortgage because they are the issues of the things you've have coped with'; the propositional condition:' Will you tell me some more about your preferences?'; or the essential condition:' John, I'm interested in knowing where there are better opportunities for finding a job'.

Searle (1991) focuses on the essential condition in terms of efforts on the speaker's part to get a hearer to perform a given task. This category largely concerns the reasons given by the speaker for the performance of a speech act. Speakers can also ask about an addressee's belief or knowledge state to determine if he or she has the desired information. Forms like *Do you think, you think* invoke a precondition anterior to that of the preparatory condition. Invocation of the preparatory condition, while perhaps not threatening to negative face, can be threatening to positive face, if the hearer does not have the needed ability to explain. A precondition prior to the preparatory condition, which first seeks to make sure if the hearer is in possession of the information desired, avoids any possible threat to the hearer's positive face. Forms such as *Do you think* or *Do you know* are the most highly conventionalized forms of indirect requests for information. The following provides a clarifying example:

(1) But do you think this is in line with the law? This is a big loss after all this time.

Such an indirect request for information is positively conducive, the speaker expects that the hearer thinks what is proposed, but nonetheless neither positive nor negative face and as such is one of the most polite means of requesting information.

In contrast to polite forms, which function essentially as prompts to encourage the hearer to say more, speakers also have available to them indirect requests which are provocative, that is, forms which provoke the hearer into revealing information. Rather than being hearer-oriented, such forms are speaker-oriented and privilege the speaker's rights or concerns over those of the hearer. For example, when a child utters an indirect directive such as *I wanna ice cream cone* rather than *bye me an ice cream cone*, there is little difference in terms of politeness, although one is direct and the other indirect. The child`s invocation of sincerity puts his own needs before those of others. This case is not the case of politeness as the needs of the speaker are given priority. In indirect requests for information, too, the speaker who invokes the sincerity condition reinforces his/her right to ask a question and increases the force of his/her power.

In the same way that indirect requests for action can be made through assertion 'It is hot in here', indirect request for information, can be made through what Labov and Fanshel (1977) call assertions of A-, B-, A-B- or D-Events. They define A- Events as events or information only known to the speaker. B- Events are those which are known only to the hearer, while A-B- Events are known to both sides. D-Events are those which are disputable between the two interlocutors. Using direct or indirect requests is based on felicity conditions. That is, instead of requesting to know the other side's state of belief or opinion, the speaker can assert his own as a means of making a request for information indirectly. However, the hearer's "answer", is more accurately regarded as "response" since what is required is a response to the assertion which is made by the speaker. Based on the social constraints placed on the hearer by the request for information, the hearer is obliged to respond to

the substance of an assertion which he/ she might otherwise avoid if questioned directly or through convenient indirect requests for information.

Obviously, in order to achieve pragmatic mastery over the subtle intricacies surrounding speech acts, as a non-native speaker, the learner has to be exposed to a wide variety of speech acts used in different contexts and in different situations. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to investigate the extent to which speech act of requests in the Interchange Series widely used in many countries, and also in many English language institutes in Iran, are selected, presented and practiced.

3. Methodology

This research is concerned with the use of peripheral modification devices accompanying head acts in requests. As it was mentioned before, these modification devices are of two types: internal and external, which are both considered in this study.

3.1 Materials

For the purpose of this study, the three Interchange books (I, II and III) written by Jack C. Richards (2005), which are quite popular and used in many countries for teaching English as a second/foreign language, were selected. All conversations and listening sections in these three books were analyzed according to the taxonomy presented by Alcon et al.'s (2005). The rationale for the selection of conversations and listening sections was that they are usually more representative of natural use of language.

Each of these books consists of 16 units. Interchange one consists of thirty two conversations and nineteen listening sections. Interchange Two consists of fifteen conversations and nineteen listening sections and finally Interchange Three consists of sixteen conversations and twenty one listening sections. In addition, after every two units there is a Progress Check section, which includes one listening part. These are also included in this study.

3.2 Procedures

In order to investigate the use of peripheral modifications based on the model proposed by Alcon et al (2005), the cases of the use of each mitigator was studied carefully in all the conversation parts, listening parts and Check sections in all the three books of Interchange series.

4. Results and discussion

After considering the use of peripheral modifications in the conversations and listening sections of the three books of Interchange series, the following results were obtained. Tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix) below show the total number of mitigators and their distribution used in each book.

<Insert Tables 1 and 2 Here>

It can be seen that the variety and frequency of mitigators in the materials studied in this research are widely different. But it should be mentioned that the occurrence of combinations are not reflected in table 2 above. By combination we refer to those cases in which there is more than one mitigation device in a request. These cases have not been categorized independently. To gain a better understanding, examples of these combinations of mitigators will be presented following the descriptions of patterns of occurrence in each book.

Interchange One offers one hesitator, one appealer, five attention-getters, a single preparator, two expanders and twenty occurrences of please.

Interchange Two presents five examples of internal modification (attention-getters) and eight examples of external modification (please). One instance of combination was employed in this book, which was a combination of attention-getter and please

Example3:

Jason, turn down the T.V. **please**.

(attention getter+ please)

Interchange Three offers ten openers, two hesitators, one appealer, six attention getters and three preparators, eight grounders and two occurrences of please. That is 19 instances of internal modifications and thirteen examples of external modifications. Some instances of combination in this book are provided in the following examples:

Example 4:

I was wondering if you'd mind lending me your camera for a few days. **I want to take some photos of my new apartment to send to my folks.**

(opener+ grounder)

Example 5:

Listen, I have a big favor to ask

(attention-getter+ preparator)

Example 6:

I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor

(opener+ preparator)

Example 7:

Excuse me, I wonder if you could take a look at these shoes I bought here.

(attention getter+ opener)

Example 8:

Uh, excuse me, **Mr. Smith**?

(hesitator+ attention-getter)

Example 9:

Uh, I was wondering if you could do something about my next-door neighbor's dog?

(hesitator+ opener)

Example 10:

I'm stuck between the second and third floors! **Please** help me get out!

(grounder+ please)

This research showed that in the Interchange Series (books I, II and III) most of the mitigators fall under the category of external modification. Also it can be seen that within each category the presentation of such mitigator is not equally divided, that is, in the case of internal modification devices most of the cases belong to *openers*. Concerning the external modification devices most of the examples are related to the subcategory *please*.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the use of mitigation devices in the Interchange Series in the speech act of requests. The findings show that in spite of the fact that familiarity with the different ways of using requests in the English language is of crucial importance for the second or foreign language learners of this language, a large number of mitigators were completely ignored, emphasizing just a bare minimum.

Regarding the importance of developing learners' pragmatic competence, the input offered to the EFL learners, as many scholars in the field have consistently and persistently emphasized, must be rich both in terms of form and content. But unfortunately, according to the findings of this study, the three books of the Interchange Series do not provide the required rich input conducive to the engagement in a meaningful communication between the interlocutors. The findings of this study are in line with Alcon (2001) research and his claim about the impoverishment of learning environment of EFL classroom for developing pragmatic competence. Other authors (e.g. Kasper and Rose, 1999) also argue that pragmalinguistic awareness is not achieved in EFL classes because of lack of sufficient relevant input conducive to effective communication. The scarcity of these mitigation devices, which are instances of features of everyday life, in EFL materials may be due to the fact that although these materials tend to reflect real life situations for the learner they are not taken from spontaneous speech. In this vein, we should agree with Boxer and Pickering (1995) on the fact that only spontaneous speech shows the real use of language. The study conducted by Kasper (1997) also pointed the mismatch between textbook dialogue and authentic discourse.

It should be noted, however, that the current research was concerned with the use of mitigators in conversation and listening sections. Other parts of the texts which may contribute to the development of learners' pragmatic competence regarding the use of these devices were not investigated. This is definitely a limitation of this study, since, for instance, the performance of role plays in which the status and age of participants may vary can

positively contribute to the emergence and mastery of the use of new devices. Therefore, conducting more research on conversational analysis and interlanguage pragmatics is needed to contribute to the development of textbooks which can better meet the needs of EFL learners.

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Appendix

Alcon et al.'s taxonomy of peripheral modification devices used in requests

Table 11.2 Typology of peripheral modification devices in requests (Alcón et al. 2005)

Type	Sub-type		Example
Internal Modification			
	Openers		- *Do you think* you could open the window? - *Would you mind* opening the window?
	Softeners	Understatement	- Could you open the window *for a moment*?
		Downtoner	- Could you *possibly* open the window?
		Hedge	- Could you *kind of* open the window?
	Intensifiers		- You *really* must open the window. - *I'm sure* you wouldn't mind opening the window.
	Fillers	Hesitators	- I *er, erm, er – I wonder* if you could open the window
		Cajolers	- *You know, you see, I mean*
		Appealers	- *OK?, Right?, yeah*
		Attention-getters	- *Excuse me ...; Hello ...; Look ...; Tom, ...; Mr. Edwards ...; father ...*
External Modification			
	Preparators		- *May I ask you a favour? ...* Could you open the window?
	Grounders		- *It seems it is quite hot here.* Could you open the window?
	Disarmers		- *I hate bothering you but* could you open the window?
	Expanders		- Would you mind opening the window? *... Once again, could you open the window?*
	Promise of a reward		- Could you open the window? *If you open it, I promise to bring you to the cinema.*
	Please		- Would you mind opening the window, *please*?

Table 1. Number of mitigators per book

	Interchange 1	Interchange 2	Interchange 3
Total number of mitigators	25	13	32

Table 2. Distribution of mitigation devices in Interchange series

	Interchage1	Interchange2	Interchange3	TOTAL
Internal modification				
Opener			10	10
Understatement				
Downtoner				
Hedge				
Intensifier				
Hesitator	1		2	3
Cajoler				
Appealer	1		1	2
Attention-getter		5	6	11
External modification				
Preparator	1		3	4
Grounder		2	8	10
Disarmer				
Expander	2			2
Promise of a reward				
Please	20	6	2	28
TOTAL	25	13	32	70