

MITIGATED REQUEST SPEECH ACTS IN LEARNER DISCOURSE

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with the usage of directive speech acts in the Czech Students' Spoken English (CSSE) corpus, particularly with requests produced by Czech EFL undergraduate learners in role-play tasks. It aims to investigate request modifications, focusing primarily on identifying syntactic and lexical devices within the request head act that mitigate the imposition of requests. The findings indicate that Czech learners prefer syntactic mitigating devices, whereas the range of lexical internal modifiers employed is limited. Finally, the paper briefly comments on the students' linguistic and pragmatic competence in producing requests for information.

Keywords: request, internal modifier, external modifier, downgrader, non-native speakers

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to investigate EFL students' request performance by examining request modifiers in their utterances as "the ability to use these elements appropriately is one aspect of pragmatic proficiency" (Soler et al. 2005: 4). If learners of English are to employ requests appropriately, they need, as Halupka-Rešetar (2014: 33) stresses, to acquire both sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge; the former including the relative degree of imposition of a request in the target language, the latter the degree of politeness to avoid being perceived as rude by native speakers. Therefore, when producing requests, students should be aware of modifications affecting the degree of politeness and imposition.

First, the paper describes requests as directive face-threatening speech acts and defines their structure. Then it introduces the corpus data and aims of the analysis. Its main section focuses on identifying and classifying request modifications, both external and internal, and attempts to explain their function. Finally, the paper briefly comments on the learners' interlanguage pragmatic competence in asking for information.

It should be noted that this paper does not deal with requests from the viewpoint of cross-cultural linguistics; the major question it addresses is related exclusively to types of modification devices Czech learners employ to affect the degree of imposition and politeness of their requests. Since it is concerned with mitigating the force of requests, *upgraders*, i.e. means increasing the force of speech acts (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984: 204), are beyond the scope of the paper.

2 REQUESTS

2.1 Requests as directive face-threatening speech acts

Requests, a subcategory of directive speech acts, are addressee-oriented speech acts, specifically "attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something" (Levinson 1983: 240). In Huang's (2014: 133) words, "the speaker intends to elicit some future course of action on the part of the addressee, thus making the world match the words via the addressee". In short, when a request is conveyed, the addressee is supposed to perform an action that is beneficial to the speaker.

Regarding Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), requests are perceived as inherently face-threatening speech acts which could damage the addressee's negative face, i.e. "the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 13). Therefore, to avoid or lessen the face threat, speakers often employ indirect speech acts, i.e. utterances in which there is no direct match between a sentence type and its illocutionary force (cf. Huang 2014: 137). Considering requests, imperatives can be replaced by interrogative or declarative structures; in such cases, it is the contextual setting that helps us understand the illocutionary force of indirect requests (Siemund 2018: 54). Levinson (2017: 214) adds that indirect speech acts can include surface elements that narrow down their illocutionary force, e.g. the adverb *please* marking requests. Lastly, Brown and Levinson (1987: 74) emphasise that the choice of indirect strategies varies in relation to three social variables: the social distance between interlocutors, the relative

power of speaker and hearer and the degree of imposition in a particular culture (cf. Reiter 2000: 55).

2.2 Structure of requests

Based on sequential and functional criteria, requests consist of a head act (core request) and adjuncts (peripheral elements) to the head act. Reiter (2000: 127) defines the head act as “the minimal unit which can realise a request”, meaning it is the core of the request that can stand on its own, as is shown in example (1), in which *tell me something about it* is an independent head act.

- (1) *I want to apply for ISIC and I don't know how to do it so can you please **tell me something about it?***

This example also demonstrates that requests do not consist of the head act only: they often contain peripheral elements, labelled request modifiers, which either precede or follow the head act. Thus, in (1), *can you, please, I don't know how to do it and I want to apply for ISIC* are peripheral elements accompanying the head act in bold. Soler et al. (2005: 3) claim that modifiers do not affect the propositional content of the head act but mitigate its force. Leech (2014: 160) calls these lexicogrammatical devices pragmatic modifiers, stating that they increase the complexity and optionality factor of requesting speech acts.

Request modifiers accompanying the head act are classified into two main categories, namely internal and external modifiers. Leech (ibid.) explains that internal modifiers “are syntactically included in the same utterance as the head act”, whereas external modifiers “occur in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act” (Soler et al. 2005: 3). In example (1) above, *can you* and *please* are internal modifiers because they are syntactically included in the utterance *can you please tell me something about it*, while *I want to apply for ISIC* and *I don't know how to do it* are external modifiers which precede the utterance with the head act (in bold).

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis of requests in this paper has been inspired by Blum-Kulka et al.'s study from the 1980s titled *Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project* (CCSARP), which examined cross-cultural, sociopragmatic and interlanguage variation in requests and apologies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, Blum-Kulka 1987). The present analysis is based on a modified version of the CCSARP typology, focusing on lexical and syntactic considerations, but it also takes into account interactional and contextual factors, as proposed by more recent approaches, for example, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006).

As a source of data I used *the Czech Students' Spoken English (CSSE) corpus* compiled at the Department of English and American studies of the University of Pardubice. The CSSE corpus represents the language of Czech learners' spoken English (153,295 words) recorded in monologues and dialogues performed by 228 students at three Czech universities. The participants form a rather homogenous group: they are all first-year university students of a TEFL programme, aged 19 to 22 years, the majority had studied

English for from 10 to 12 years before commencing their studies at the university, and the average level of their English language communicative competence is B2 according to CEFR (Ježková 2015).

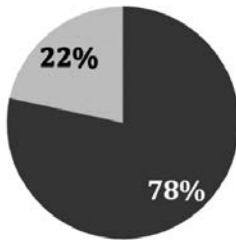
To collect requesting speech acts, 228 student-student dialogues (each 3–4 minutes long) have been analysed. The dialogues were designed as an information gap task: one student was given specific information related to a particular topic and the other student was supposed to elicit the required information, then they had a minute for preparation and after performing a dialogue they exchanged roles with a new task. The dialogues cover eleven scenarios, namely Cambridge Advanced Certificate, an English course abroad, what to do in the town, ISIC at our university, applying for an Erasmus study visit, summer camps in the USA, part-time jobs, sports events at the university, registering for a Reader's Pass at the British Library, looking for accommodation, and joining the Buddy System. The dialogues may be characterised as open role-plays because the participants engaged in the interaction actively and needed to negotiate, which allowed me to examine requests in their natural discourse context (in comparison to a discourse completion test, which was the main tool in a number of studies on requests, e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008, Halupka-Rešetar 2014).

All the request moves collected and analysed aim at eliciting a verbal response, i.e. giving information. Since the setting is informal and the participants know each other, the majority of their utterances seeking information are expected to be direct questions. Nevertheless, as has been stated, the analysis focuses on modified requests, specifically on devices employed to mitigate their illocutionary force. Such request production of Czech learners is assumed to show a noticeable prevalence of conventionalised structures and a limited variation with respect to the type of modifications and the frequency of their usage.

4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the previous paragraph, it has been suggested that the participating learners are expected to employ mainly direct questions when asking for information because the variables of social distance, power, and degree of imposition do not vary; the relationship between the students is symmetrical and close. Thus, as shown in Graph 1, the dominant means of asking for information in the CSSE corpus is naturally a direct question (1072 out of 1367 utterances), which is in line with Reiter's (2000: 103) conclusion "the more familiar the participants the more direct the strategy". Graph 1 demonstrates that modified request moves are not, as expected, that widespread (295 instances); however, they include 178 external and 356 internal modifiers which will be discussed in 4.1 and 4.2 respectively.

requests for information (asks)



■ direct questions ■ modified request moves

Graph 1: The frequency of occurrence of modified request moves

4.1 External modifiers

As has been illustrated in 2.2, external modifiers (also called supportive moves) are additional statements supporting the request proper. Leech (2014: 171) explains that speakers employ them to make a request more polite, friendly, or persuasive. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008: 115–116) adds that they do not affect the act itself “but rather the context in which it is embedded”. In other words, external modifiers help redress the imposition of requests by modifying their illocutionary force indirectly.

There are different taxonomies classifying external modifiers according to their functions. For example, Reiter (2000: 92–93) lists grounders, preparators, disarmers, getting precommitments and promises of reward as the most frequent categories found in her data. Halupka-Rešetar (2014: 34) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008: 116) recognise identical categories and add imposition minimisers and apologies. The categories identified in the CSSE corpus are listed and exemplified in Table 1; 178 external modifiers have been identified in 295 modified request moves.

Type of modifier	Example	No	%
grounder	<i>I want to prepare for it, could you recommend me some book?</i>	117	66
preparator (pre-commitment)	<i>I would like to ask you some questions about the camp. Could you tell me what type of camp is it?</i>	37	21
disarmer	<i>I know that that's not a good question but could you tell me some something about salary?</i>	14	8
appreciative opener	<i>It sounds very good and can I ask you about the price?</i>	4	2
imposition minimiser	<i>I would like to know what kind of jobs can I choose, if you know</i>	6	3
Total		178	100

Table 1: Classification and occurrence of external modification

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that grounders are the only prominent category employed regularly by Czech learners. Grounders, as defined by Leech (2014: 175), are “explanatory moves that can either precede or follow the head act.” in the CSSE corpus, the majority (82% instances) precede the request head, as in examples (1) or (2), in which the participants try to explain that they have a reason to impose before producing the request itself.

(2) ***I want to prepare for it***, could you recommend me some book?

Reiter (2000: 129) perceives the use of grounders as a co-operative strategy, meaning that by justifying the request the speaker expects the addressee to be more willing to cooperate, as shown in (2) above. Therefore, grounders could be labelled ‘supportive reasons’ (Martínez-Flor 2003).

Another quite common external modifier in the data is a preparator, exemplified in the following utterance:

(3) ***I would like to ask you some questions about the camp***. Could you tell me what type of camp is it?

This example illustrates that the preparator (in bold) functions as a signal that the head act follows, and thus, as Leech (2014: 175) states, informs the addressee about the intention to make a request.

The remaining categories of external modification are infrequent due to the relatively low degree of imposition and informal context of the exchanges analysed. The learners do not often employ disarmers which “aim at disarming the addressee from the possibility of a refusal” (Soler et al. 2005: 25), do not express their appreciation, nor indicate their awareness of imposition, which is in line with Leech (2014: 163–164), who claims that these devices are viewed as formal and occur mainly in formal settings.

4.2 Internal modifiers

Internal modification is the prevalent type of modification in the data, specifically 356 internal modifiers have been identified in 295 modified request moves. Internal modifications consist of syntactic as well as lexical devices. The former include interrogative and declarative structures, *if*-clauses, negated structures or past and progressive verb forms; the latter softeners, the politeness marker *please* or fillers. Syntactic and lexical downgraders, their categories and uses are discussed thoroughly in 4.2.1 and 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Syntactic downgraders

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 203) introduce four categories of syntactic downgraders, namely interrogative, negation, past tense and embedded *if*-clause, claiming that they are used to convey hesitation about making the request or pessimism regarding the outcome of the request, or as distancing and hedging devices. Halupka-Rešetar (2014: 36) and Leech (2014: 165, 170–171) add conditional forms of modals, the use of progressive aspect, hedged performative openings or tag questions after imperatives. The taxonomy of syntactic downgraders identified in the CSSE corpus, based

on adapting the categories mentioned above (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984, Halupka-Rešetar 2014, Leech 2014), is presented in Table 2.

Category of downgrader	Example	No	%
interrogative structure	<i>Can you/could you tell me...?</i>	185	72
declarative “want” statement	<i>I would like to ask you er what I have to do to obtain this card.</i>	54	21
<i>if</i> -clause indicating request	<i>And now if you could give me some advices where to go for sports activities</i>	11	4.3
past tense	<i>I wanted to ask you about some sports events, something about sport</i>	5	2
progressive aspect	<i>I was wondering if there's any interesting ... sports event in...</i>	2	0.7
Total		257	100

Table 2: Classification and occurrence of syntactic downgraders

4.2.1.1 Interrogative structure

As was explained at the beginning of section 4, the prevalent structure to ask for information is a direct question (cf. Hassall 1999: 595). Nevertheless, Table 2 indicates that Czech learners also ask for information indirectly, mainly by employing an interrogative structure including a modal verb, typically *can* (92 instances) or *could* (79 instances), as shown in examples (2), (3) or (4).

(4) **Can you tell me** where I can sign in?

Example (4) illustrates that the interrogative structure consists of a question about unknown information (*where I can sign in*) and a request to be told that information (*can you tell me*). Since the modal verbs *can* and *could* can be interpreted as asking about the hearer's ability, there might be potential pragmatic ambiguity between ability (literal) and requestive (non-literal) meaning. Blum-Kulka (1987: 141), however, argues that normally the ability meaning is disregarded and the utterance is interpreted as a request. Similarly, Siemund (2018: 165) concludes that “the degree of conventionalisation between interrogative structure and request force appears to be relatively strong” and consequently labels such structures “polar interrogatives with non-question force”, which is in line with Levinson (1983: 268), who perceives these interrogatives as idioms equivalent to the explicit structure *I (hereby) request you to*

Considering the difference between the modal verbs *can* and *could*, *could* is generally viewed as less certain and more tentative (Coates 1983), which implies that it might be expected in contexts with more remoteness in social relationship. The number of requests with *can* and *could* in the CSSE corpus is comparable and the two verbs seem to be used interchangeably (there are 48 requests beginning with *Can you tell me* and 55 with *Could*

you tell me). Nevertheless, the learners may perceive *could* as more polite in that it occurs more often with the marker *please*.

As for the perspective of requests (cf. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984: 203), the examples above illustrate that requests are predominantly hearer-oriented (156 requests out of 185), stressing the role of and delegating the task to the addressee (cf. Martínéz-Flor 2003: 173). Only 29 requests in the data are speaker-oriented, emphasising the role of the speaker:

(5) *And **can I ask** you where could I go if I get to Erasmus?*

Although the utterance in (5) formally asks for permission (*am I allowed to ask*), the speaker in fact announces that the act of asking is about to be performed.

In summary, an interrogative structure with a modal verb, mainly *can* and *could*, is viewed as a conventional request asking for an activity that is beneficial to the speaker. In Blum-Kulka's opinion (1987: 143), conventional indirect structures are the most polite way to make a request. Hassall (1999: 594) argues that although these structures most often occur in face-threatening situations, they can be perceived as unmarked formulaic requests that can be employed in almost every situation, which has been confirmed by the outcomes presented above. Additionally, Hassall (*ibid.*: 600) and Reiter (2000: 104) conclude that conventional interrogative requests are the most common type of request across cultures.

4.2.1.2 Declarative structure

Another common conventional form of requests in the CSSE corpus, as shown in Table 2, is a declarative statement usually consisting of *I would like to ask* (76% declarative structures):

(6) ***I would like to ask you** er what I have to do to obtain this card.*

(7) ***I would like to ask you** if there is some part-time job in Oxxx.*

The directive illocutionary force of (6) and (7) is inferred due to *would like*. In addition, the use of *would* makes the request “semantically distanced from reality” (Leech 2014: 150) and consequently it is seen as non-imposing or less impositive (Reiter 2000: 85). Such structures are labelled declarative “want statements” (Blum-Kulka 1987) or “hedged performatives” (Halupka-Rešetar 2014) including the naming of the illocutionary force, i.e. *ask* in (6) and (7).

The structure *I would like to ask you* is not, however, always used as an internal downgrader, illustrated in (6) or (7). It has been demonstrated in 4.1 that it is also employed as an external modifier, particularly a preparator, if it functions as a pre-sequence of the actual request, which is shown in (3) or (8).

(8) ***I would like to ask you about possibilities of doing sports at our university...** Could you tell me what sports I can do here?*

4.2.1.3 Other categories of syntactic downgraders

Table 2 (above) shows that the remaining categories of syntactic downgraders are infrequent in that the situational context does not require the use of devices

signalling distancing or pessimism, for example, the use of negation, which implies that the requested action is not expected to be performed (Leech 2014: 166). The participants only occasionally employ the past tense “as a device of distancing” (ibid.: 169) or progressive aspect with mental verbs (see sample utterances in Table 2). Similarly, the occurrence of *if*-clauses indicating requests (cf. Levinson 1983: 266) is negligible because this category does not comprise embedded questions; these have been analysed as part of interrogative indirect requests or declarative want statements, see example (7).

4.2.2 Lexical downgraders

With regard to the data analysed, the taxonomy of internal modifiers presented in Table 3 is based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1987), Economidou-Kogetsidis (2008) and Soler et al. (2005).

Category of internal lexical modifier		Example	No
marker please		<i>Once again, please.</i> <i>Could you tell me conditions please?</i>	40
softener	downtoner	<i>Okay, so maybe can you tell me something about the expensive one?</i>	7
	understatement	<i>Can you give me just the basic info to start with?</i>	3
	hedge		-
filler (hesitator)		<i>And can, er, could you some, tell me something. . . .</i>	42
subjectiviser		<i>I guess can you give me some information?</i>	3
Total			99

Table 3: Classification and occurrence of lexical downgraders

The outcomes in Table 3 indicate that lexical downgraders are in comparison with syntactic downgraders a minor type of internal modification in the CSSE corpus. Although there is a wide range of possibilities for modifying a request, only two types of lexical internal modifiers are employed regularly in the exchanges analysed. One of the most frequently used lexical modifiers is the marker *please*, which can be found mainly in conventional interrogative requests (26 instances), particularly those including *could* (16 cases):

(9) *Ok and **could you tell me please**, how can I do a registration?*

Leech (2014: 162) argues that *please* may be seen as an illocutionary marker rather than a politeness marker, mainly in non-sentence directives where it marks an utterance as a request:

(10) *Once again, **please**.*

Similarly, Soler et al. (2005: 27) claim that “It is the only modifying device, either internal or external, which can substitute a whole utterance.” in summary, when we use this marker, we perform the act of a request, expressing “polite request force” (Siemund 2018: 32).

Another widespread category identified was that of fillers, i.e. “optional lexical items used by the speaker to fill in the gaps that occur during an interaction” (Soler et al. 2005: 21). Although Soler et al. (2005) categorise fillers in four subgroups, namely hesitators, appealers, cajolers and attention-getters, only hesitators are included in the taxonomy of lexical downgraders. The other categories did not appear in the dialogues analysed, which seems to be in line with findings of other studies; for example, Reiter (2000: 138) talks about a very low incidence of cajolers, whereas Martínez-Flor and Úso-Juan’s study (2006: 32) reports hesitators as the most frequent type of modifier. Obviously, hesitators represent a natural part of spontaneous face-to-face interaction in that they “elicit the speakers’ request use” (Soler et al. 2005: 21). They have been identified mainly in more elaborate request moves, including two or more request modifiers:

(11) *May I start? Well er I would like to ask what and er where er can I er get it?*

Example (11) illustrates that, when producing more elaborate requests, Czech learners also seem to employ hesitators as a signal that it is difficult for them to create a complex structure; particularly embedded questions appear to be problematic because 39 per cent (44 out of 113) embedded questions are not well-formed and would be considered incorrect, as is shown in examples (9) or (11).

Table 3 demonstrates that Czech learners tend to underuse softeners, i.e. lexical devices that serve to soften the requestive illocutionary force and thus make the request more tentative. The outcomes indicate that the learners favour downtoners which signal possibility and make the request more uncertain (cf. Leech 2014: 160), but, although downtoners include various modal adverbs related to possibility, only *maybe* (exemplified in Table 3) has been recorded. Similarly, the occurrence of understaters minimising parts of a proposition (e.g. *a bit, a little, just*) and subjectivisers explicitly expressing the speaker’s subjective opinion (e.g. *I think, I suppose*) is negligible. As for hedges, viewed as means of avoiding “a precise propositional content” (Reiter 2000: 94) (e.g. *kind of, sort of*), they have not been identified in the request moves analysed even though they represent commonly used markers that make utterances appear vague in spoken interaction (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987: 146).

5 CONCLUSION

The analysis of request moves in 228 dialogues from the Czech Students’ Spoken English (CSSE) corpus indicates that, when modifying their requests for information, Czech learners favour syntactic downgraders, particularly conventional indirect requests in the form of an interrogative structure. The preference of the structure *Can/could you (tell me)* might be, as Halupka-Rešetar (2014) and Martínéz-Flor (2003) suggest, the result of instruction; conventionalised requests are used by teachers as well as in textbooks,

meaning that students are exposed to them extensively and consequently tend to rely on familiar structures in their own production.

On the other hand, the repertoire of lexical internal modifying devices is, as expected, rather limited. The learners use just a few expressions (*please, maybe, just*) although there is a wide range of lexical items mitigating the force of requests available. The underuse of softeners may stem from the nature of the role-plays analysed, particularly the informal context and relatively low degree of imposition, which implies that politeness and informality play a role when choosing an appropriate strategy. The rare occurrence of softeners may also be the result of the fact that their appropriate use requires more pragmatic competence than, for example, the politeness marker *please*, which was employed frequently. Another widespread category of internal modification is that of hesitators, which represent an indispensable part of spontaneous interaction but often signal a struggle with forming more advanced structures properly. It is embedded indirect questions that seem to be most problematic in elaborate request moves.

As for external modification, grounders are the category most frequently employed by Czech learners. The preference for grounders may be due to the fact that they are explicit when expressing politeness (cf. Martínéz-Flor & Usó-Juan 2006) and thus reduce the threat to the addressee's face. On the other hand, this outcome could be influenced by the procedure of data elicitation, which the participating students may have perceived as similar to an exam situation and as a result they focused on elaborating their structures by explaining their reasons to convey requests.

In conclusion, the analysis showed a lack of variety in Czech undergraduate learners' request production, which might indicate their limited interlanguage competence with respect to the range of request modifiers. Non-native learners of English at B2 level might struggle when selecting appropriate request modification devices and thus their performance may show pragmlinguistic deviations from that of native speakers (cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis 2008). Nevertheless, the outcomes of the analysis indicate that the functional competence of first-year university Czech learners of English seems to be satisfactory in that their requests for verbal response seem to be well managed and are not misinterpreted even if there are a number of mistakes in the form.

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