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MODIFYING REQUESTS AS FACE-THREATENING SPEECH ACTS

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Abstract

Requests are face-threatening speech acts, so whenever speakers decide to make one, they need to be aware of its illocutionary force and the effect it has on the hearers. In order to lower the requests' imposing force, speakers tend to modify them. Thus, they hope that hearers will accept them without feeling threatened.

This paper aims to investigate the linguistic means used by speakers to modify their requests both in English and Macedonian, in order to make them more acceptable for the hearers. More precisely, it examines their internal modification with the use of syntactic downgraders and lexical and phrasal upgraders, as well as the external modification with the use of mitigating and aggravating supportive moves.

The corpus was collected by using a DCT (discourse-completion test). Three groups of respondents were asked to make requests given some specific situations – Macedonian native speakers (in Macedonian), English native speakers (in English) and learners of English (in English). The research showed that all respondents use both types of modification, but the internal modification seems to be more frequently used than the external. The use of the external modification is optional and depends mostly on the speaker's judgment of the imposing force of the request based on social and cultural factors.

Key words: *requests, internal modification, external modification, downgraders, upgraders*

1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING REQUESTS

Requests are speech acts which speakers use to ask people to do something for them. They are face-threatening speech acts and belong to the group of directives (Searle 1969). Whenever a person decides to make a request, the interlocutor's face is being threatened (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), so the speaker must employ certain strategies in order to be more polite, more indirect and more acceptable for the interlocutor. Here are some examples which show the levels of politeness, from less polite and more direct to more polite and indirect:

- *Answer the phone.* **Direct/ less polite**
- *I want you to answer the phone.*
- *Will you answer the phone?*
- *Would you mind answering the phone?*
- *Could you answer the phone, please?* **Indirect/ polite**

According to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) there are 3 types of requests:

1. **Direct requests** (mostly imperatives; e.g. *Finish that file for next week.*),
2. **Conventionally indirect requests** (clear linguistic indicators can be detected which link the form of the utterance with its requestive force. It is associated with ambiguity at the utterance level: e.g. *Could you possibly have that file done for next week?* (Blum-Kulka, 1989: 40)).
3. **Unconventionally indirect requests** (associated with ambiguity at a speaker's meaning level; display a multiplicity of meanings and tend to be nonspecific (pragmatic vagueness): e.g. *You know, the manager will probably ask for the file next week.*)

1.1 MODIFIERS

Each request consists of a Head act. However, in order to make the request more acceptable for the hearer, the speaker can modify the Head act internally and externally. The request can be internally modified with lexical and syntactic downgraders and upgraders, which can mitigate or intensify the illocutionary force of the request. External modification, on the other hand is done with so called supportive moves, which can be used either before or after the Head act and have mitigating and intensifying function as well.

Let us analyse the example below:

E.g. *Mike, I am sorry I couldn't come to the meeting yesterday. Do you think you could update me on the things you discussed? I promise to stand in for you next meeting.*

The utterance consists of the following parts: a) an alerter: *Mike (attracting attention)*, then b) External modification- supportive move: *I am sorry I couldn't come to the meeting yesterday*, then c) Internal modification – syntactic downgrader: *Do you think*, then follows d) the Head act: *Could you update me on the things you discussed?*, and finally e) External modification - Supportive moves which follow the Head act: *I promise to stand in for you next meeting.*

2. CORPUS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the use of modifiers of the speech act of request in speech, both in Macedonian and English, a DCT (discourse completion test)¹ was created. It consisted of 12 situations given as open-ended questions, created depending on the social distance and dominance between the interlocutors. Three groups of respondents took part in the research:

1. English native speakers (42 students, University of Virginia, USA);
2. Macedonian native speakers (42 students, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje);
3. Macedonian learners of English (42 students, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje).

So, the first two groups of respondents filled in the questionnaire in their native language (English and Macedonian correspondingly), while the third group of respondents filled in the questionnaire in English, the language they learn as their foreign language. The aim of the research was to see:

- a) which modifiers are used most frequently by the three groups of respondents;
- b) how contextual factors, such as the rights and obligations of the interlocutors, influence the choice of internal and external modification;
- c) if there is some systematic relationship between the use of the two types of modification (internal and external).

¹ DCT was used as an instrument because it offers the easiest way to gather information which is closest to spoken language.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis, showed that the most frequently used strategy for making requests was the conventionally indirect one. The examples below feature three situations where this strategy was used most frequently. The situations were the following:

S2: *You are a University professor. You cooperate closely with a colleague in London. You find out that a student of yours travels to London tomorrow to do an internship. You need to send your colleague a very important book. To save time, instead of posting it, you decide to ask your student to take the book to him. You say: ...*

(In this situation, there is no social distance between the interlocutors and the speaker is more dominant than the hearer, $x > y$)

S8: *You are in a café. You feel like having a cigarette but you do not have a lighter. There is someone smoking at the next table. You turn to him and say: ...*

(In this situation, there is social distance between the interlocutors and the speaker is equally dominant with the hearer, $x = y$)

S11: *You are a university student. You were absent from class last week. The lecturer distributed some very useful handouts which you would like to have. After the class today, you approach him and say: ...*

(In this situation, there is no social distance between the interlocutors and the speaker is less dominant than the hearer, $x < y$)

Table 1 below presents the distribution of conventionally indirect requests in the three situations.

Table1. Distribution of conventionally indirect requests in three situations

	S2 (book)		S8 (lighter)		S11 (copies)	
	N	%	n	%	N	%
Maced. language	31	74	36	86	40	95
English language	38	90	31	74	40	95
English as a FL	37	88	40	95	38	90

As it can be seen from the table above, this strategy was used in more than 70% of the requests made in all the three situations by all the three groups of respondents. In the sections that follow, the linguistic means used to modify the conventionally indirect requests, both internally and externally, are analysed.

3.1 INTERNAL MODIFICATION

The internal modification is optional. It is not essential and one can decide to drop any of the modifiers. The modifiers used can be multifunctional in two distinct ways: a) *indicating devices*, which signal the pragmatic force, and b) *sociopragmatic devices*, meant to affect the social impact the utterance is likely to have (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). They can be: *downgraders*, devices which mitigate the act, and *upgraders*, devices which emphasize the degree of coerciveness. In the corpora, the use of upgraders was minimal so only the use of downgraders is presented.

There are two types of downgraders that were investigated in the corpora: syntactic and lexical (phrasal) downgraders.

3.1.1 SYNTACTIC DOWNGRADERS

In table 2, the most frequently used syntactic downgraders are presented.

Table 2. Syntactic downgraders

Interrogative form	<i>Can you/ Could you...;</i> with the conventionally indirect strategy (preparatory strategy)
Negation of a preparatory condition	There are two most frequent conditions that need to be fulfilled so that someone responds to the request are their ability and willingness to help; E.g. <i>Can't you</i> go there instead of me?! <i>You couldn't</i> give me a lift, could you?! <i>Shouldn't</i> you perhaps tidy up the kitchen?
Conditional phrase	Reduced conditional clause (conditional marker + verb) – refers to the ability and willingness of the hearer to respond to the request; E.g. Would you like to take this book to London, <i>if it's not difficult for you</i> , of course.
Aspect	English: imperfective verbs have a mitigating function; E.g. <i>I'm wondering</i> if I could ...? (only if <i>I'm wondering...</i> can be replaced with <i>I wonder...</i>) / Macedonian: 'da'-construction has a mitigating function E.g. Да ми донесеш една чаша вода?
Tense	Past tense forms have a mitigating function only if they refer to the present i.e. can be replaced with a present tense form; E.g. <i>I wanted</i> to ask you...(I want to ask you....) / Сакам да те замолам.... (Сакам да те замолам...)
Conditional clause	Conditional (depending) clause can have a mitigating function; E.g. <i>It would be great if you could take this book to him.</i> / Би било одлично ако можеш да му ја однесеш книгава
Combinations	Interrogative form + negation or other combinations; E.g. <i>I was wondering if you couldn't get this book to him.</i>

The analysis showed that the most frequently used syntactic downgrader was the interrogative form, then the conditional clause and phrase, and then some combinations as well. It can also be seen from table 3 below that the learners used a little bit more conditional clauses and less interrogative forms compared to the other two groups of respondents. English speakers did not use conditional phrases as downgraders, except in S2 (book). On the contrary, both Macedonian native speakers and learners used the conditional phrase as a syntactic downgrader.

Table 3. Syntactic downgraders used in the corpora (percentages %)

Syntactic downgraders	S2 (book)			S8 (lighter)			S11 (copies)		
	M	E	MLE	M	E	MLE	M	E	MLE
	n=31	n=38	n=37	n=36	n=31	n=40	n=40	n=40	n=38
Interrogative form	87	97	76	100	100	97.5	97.5	85	84
Conditional clause	13	3	24	0	0	2.5	2.5	15	16
Conditional phrase	13	8	3	0	0	0	7.5	0	8
Combinations	6	3	0	0	0	2.5	2.5	17.5	8

Faerch & Kasper (1989) consider the conditional phrase an internal downgrader. However, what is important to note down is that in the corpus analysed, the conditional phrase was used as an internal downgrader only by the native English speakers, while both Macedonian native speakers and Macedonian learners of English used it as an external downgrader. For instance, Macedonians used: (S1) Тато, *aj ако сакаш*, ќе ми почне филмот, пушти на A1./ Daddy, *if you are willing to*, please turn on the TV on A1, my favourite film is about to begin. (Macedonian language), and Macedonian learners of English use the exact same form of the phrase, in an exact same position in the sentence: (S11) I was absent last week and I missed classes. I would like, *if you are willing*, to give me the handout from last week and explain some things to me (MLE).

3.1.2 LEXICAL AND PHRASAL DOWNGRADERS

Besides syntactic downgraders, the respondents used lexical and phrasal downgraders as well to modify the Head act of the request. Table 4 below presents a list of the most frequently used downgraders:

Table 4. Lexical and phrasal downgraders

Politeness marker	Optional element: signals cooperative behaviour e.g. Open your luggage, <i>please</i> .
Consultative device	Phrases used to consult with the hearer: <i>Do you mind/think...; Is it all right....</i> e.g. <i>Do you think</i> you can help me?
Understater	Adverbial modifiers: a bit, a little e.g. Could you turn down the music <i>a bit</i> .
Hedge	Adverbs, adverbial phrases: Express tentativeness and avoid precision e.g. I'd <i>kind of</i> like to change the pants for a pair in another colour.
Subjectivizer	The speaker expresses his/ her subjective opinion e.g. <i>I think/suppose</i> it won't be difficult for you to give this book to him.
Downtoner	Sentence or propositional modifiers: e.g. Could I <i>possibly/perhaps</i> not dance tonight?
Cajoler	Establishing and keeping the harmony between the interlocutors e.g. <i>You know</i> , I would love to but I really cannot dance tonight.
Appealer	Appealing for kindness e.g. You will change the channel, <i>okay/won't you?</i>
Combinations	Combinations of the above

The analysis of the use of lexical and phrasal downgraders in the corpora (see Table 5 below), showed that their usage varied depending on the situation.

Table 5. Use of lexical and phrasal downgraders in the corpora (percentages %)

Lexical downgraders	S2 (book)			S8 (lighter)			S11 (copies)		
	M	E	MLE	M	E	MLE	M	E	MLE
	n =31	n =38	n =37	n =36	n =31	n =40	n =40	n =40	n =38
Not used at all	69	76	64	75	75	44	90	65	89
Politeness marker	6	16	30	6	19	43	5	15	11
Consultative device	19	5	3	0	6	3	0	20	0
Combinations	6	3	3	19	0	10	5	0	0

As it can be seen from the table above, about 64-76% of the respondents decided not to use mitigators in S2 (book). Similar was the case with 44-75% of the respondents in S8 (lighter), and 65-90% of the respondents in S11(copies). The analysis also shows that the politeness marker was used most frequently by all the three groups of respondents. It can also be seen that it was mostly used by the learners and the least by the Macedonian native speakers. It is assumed that this is the case because the politeness marker is the least marked lexical marker and therefore, the easiest to use. The frequent use of the marker by the learners could also be as a result of their need to sound polite, based on the perception they probably have of the speech of the native English speakers as ‘very polite’. As for the use of consultative devices, native English speakers used them the most, while Macedonian native speakers, and especially the learners did not use them often. Since the politeness marker *please* was the most frequently used one, we decided to conduct further analysis concerning its usage and function.

3.1.2.1 USE AND FUNCTION OF THE POLITENESS MARKER *PLEASE*

The adverbial *please* is the most frequently used mitigator, especially in explicit requests. It is used as a sentence adverbial and an independent item. It can take different positions in the sentence, initial, medial or final. It is most frequently used in imperative sentences: *Please bring the towel./ Bring the towel please* (Leech, 1983: 88-89). It cannot be used in pseudoimperatives: *One more step, please, and I will shoot. It is also used in questions: Could you, please, move the car? and in sentences which are not questions: One coke, please.*

As mentioned before, since the research showed that this marker was used very often, we decided to make an additional analysis of its use in 18 responses by female and 18 by male respondents in the three corpora. We selected an equal number of responses in order to get more precise results. Three hypotheses were set before the analysis.

Hypothesis 1: Females will use *please* more frequently than males.

Since women are generally considered to be the more polite gender, we set the first hypothesis to see whether this would be true for both societies. The results of the analysis showed that female respondents used *please* more frequently than male respondents in the Macedonian corpus (native speakers and learners). In the English corpus, on the other hand, male respondents used *please* more frequently in most of the situations. What could be the reason for such results cannot be known for sure but it might be connected to some cultural differences based on gender differences.

Hypothesis 2: Native Macedonian speakers will use *please* less frequently than English native speakers.

We posed this hypothesis based on the general opinion in Macedonia concerning English speakers. It is believed that they are very polite (using *please* and *thank you* very often). The results of the analysis showed that Macedonian respondents used *please* more frequently than English speakers in only 2 situations. In all the other situations, (10), English speakers used *please* more frequently. This confirms our hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: The learners of English will use *please* less frequently than the native English speakers.

This hypothesis stems from the previous one. However, the results showed that in 4 situations, native English speakers used *please* more frequently than the learners. In all the other situations (8), the learners used *please* more frequently 2.5-33%. These results proved the third hypothesis wrong. The reasons for such results might lie in the perception that Macedonian learners have of the English speakers, considering them very polite. So, they probably believe that in order to sound “more English” they need to use this marker more frequently. In addition, as it was previously mentioned, *please* is the least marked marker and it is the easiest to use. This might be another reason for such results.

3.2 EXTERNAL MODIFICATION OF REQUESTS: MITIGATING AND AGGRAVATING SUPPORTIVE MOVES

The Head act, as already mentioned, can be modified externally with so called mitigating and aggravating supportive moves. In addition, both these types of external modification will be analysed.

3.2.1 MITIGATING SUPPORTIVE MOVES

In table 6 below, the most frequently used mitigating supportive moves are presented (Blum Kulka et al., 1989). They prepare the hearer for the request that follows. For instance, with the preparatory, this is what exactly the speaker states “I am going to ask you something”. With the grounder, for instance, the speaker gives an explanation before making the request. With the disarmer, the speaker states that they are aware they are imposing on the hearer but they would still ask them for a favour etc.

Table 6. Mitigating supportive moves

Preparator	E.g. <i>I'd like to ask you something.../ May I ask you something?</i>
Getting a precommitment	E.g. <i>Could you do me a favour?</i>
Grounder	E.g. <i>Professor, I missed class last week. Could I get a hand-out?</i>
Disarmer	E.g. <i>I know you have already planned your day, but this is an exceptionally important meeting.</i>
Promise of reward	E.g. <i>Could you sit in for me at the meeting today? You can take a day off tomorrow.</i>
Imposition minimizer	E.g. <i>Would you take my place on this meeting, but only if you haven't got any urgent plans.</i>

Table 7 presents the results from the analysis.

Table 7. Distribution of the mitigating supportive moves in the corpora (percentages %)

Supportive Moves	S2 (book)			S8 (lighter)			S11 (copies)		
	M	E	EFL	M	E	EFL	M	E	EFL
	n=31	n =38	n=37	n =36	n =31	n =40	n =40	n =40	n =38
Overall use	87	66	70	14	3	13	88	76	84
Grounder	3	21	24	11	3	10	80	73	84
Combinations	39	13	19	0	0	0	5	2	0
Others	45	21	27	3	0	3	0	0	0

As it can be seen from the table, the grounder was the most frequently used supportive move. It surely helps the speaker to explain their motives for making the request and thus helps the hearer to better understand the speaker. It can be seen that the grounder was rarely used by the Macedonian speakers in S2. They probably did not feel the need to explain themselves as much, given that the speaker was more dominant than the hearer, so they used other combinations there to pose the request like getting a precommitment or a preparatory. In S8, all the three groups of respondents used supportive moves very rarely because the situation itself does not really require any preparation or justification by the speaker. In the last situation, S11, all the three groups of respondents used the grounder very often. Native English speakers use justifications a little bit less frequently, probably as a result of cultural and social differences. It might be that they don't really feel they need to explain themselves that much before they ask someone to help them or respond to their request. The learners, on the other hand, used generally much longer explanations (see the use of grounders) before making the request. The reason for this might be their insecurity as non-native speakers of the English language so they probably feel the need to explain themselves well before they ask the hearer to do something for them. They also might feel the need to show their linguistic competence. Anyway, these results are in accordance with Olshtain & Weinbach's (1993) statement that it is expected that learners should use more words and longer explanations than native speakers.

3.2.2 AGGRAVATING SUPPORTIVE MOVES

As for the aggravating supportive moves, we investigated the use of three most frequently used ones according to Blum Kulka et al. (1989).

Table 8. Aggravating supportive moves

Insults	E.g. <i>You dirty pig, shut up!</i>
Threat	E.g. <i>Turn down the music if you don't want me to indict you for this!</i>
Moralizing	E.g. <i>You know, when a man has got children he sacrifices everything for them, so could you please go to that meeting instead of me.</i>

The analysis showed that this type of external modification was not used frequently in the three situation we focused on in this analysis but mostly in situations where the interlocutors were in a very close relationship ((S6) roommates: one of the roommates was very loud, and the other requests for some peace), or when the speaker has some authority over the hearer ((S7) when an authority (policeman) used a threat to make people lower the loud music).

3.3 THE LINK BETWEEN THE USE OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MODIFICATION

If a closer look is given at the connection between the internal and external modification in the three situations which were the focus of analysis in this paper, it can be concluded that the requests made for S8 (lighter) were not externally and internally very much modified. The requests here were just modified with the politeness marker and some understaters like: for a while, a bit, etc.

In contrast, in S2 (book) and S11 (copies), all the three groups used both external and internal modification, but no systematic connection could be deduced between the two. The requests made in these two situations were frequently internally modified, even when there was no external modification used. In other words, the external modification was used independently of the internal contextual characteristics of the Head act. So, its usage obviously depended on the judgment that the requester made of the imposing force of the request based on the social and cultural factors.

The internal modifiers are easier to use because they are shorter and more economical and their usage is in accordance with the conversational principles of Grice (1969) and his maxim of manner: Be brief and avoid obscurity of expression!

Compared to the internal modifiers, the external ones are longer and more explicit, because they have their own propositional content and illocution (justification, imposition minimisation etc.). The politeness is not expressed implicitly and subtly, but explicitly and transparently.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the use of internal and external modification of the speech act of request, its dependence on the contextual factors and the connection between the two types of modification (internal and external). Three groups of respondents were used for that purpose: EL learners, Macedonian and English native speakers. The results showed that the internal modification is used independently from the external and is much more frequent because it is shorter and more economical, which is in accordance with the conversational principles of Grice (1969) and the maxim: Be short and concise! The external modification, on the other hand, is used independently from the contextual characteristics of the Head act. Its use depends on the assessment of the speaker of the imposing force of the request. It is longer and more explicit with its own propositional content and illocution.

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