

REQUEST STRATEGIES IN NORWEGIAN AND ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses verbal realization of one request situation which has been used in the empirical part of my doctoral dissertation (Awedyk, 2001) which sets out to compare and contrast request strategies in the realization of the speech act of request in Norwegian and English. Due to the limitations of space, I will only be able to present a small fraction of the findings resulting from the project I carried out. Notwithstanding the above, some of the problems discussed below can be perceived as representative of the general pragmalinguistic phenomena present in the respective languages.

1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The questionnaire used in the study consists of two parts¹. In Part 1, three situations for the performance of the speech act of request have been provided. Their selection is based on the author's conviction that the respondents, being young adults, can easily relate to the contexts provided as they are most likely to have been in such situations themselves. The aim of Part 1 is to test the informants' sensitivity to a set of factors determining the relations between the interlocutors: the Speaker and the Hearer. In their characteristics, the context-internal factors, known also as "speech-act-specific" factors (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989: 131), and context-external factors, also referred to as "social and contextual factors" (ibid.:131) bear a certain similarity to those used in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (hereafter CCSARP)².

¹ For the full description of the situations used in the present study, see Appendix: Questionnaire in Awedyk, 2001.

² See Blum-Kulka, *et al.*, 1989: 14-15.

The situations used in my study were the following:

Request 1: You are on a crowded train. A young girl standing next to you keeps thumping you with her backpack.

Request 2: You get an unexpected visit from your parents on a Saturday evening. In 10 minutes, your place is to host a drinking party for at least 15 guests.

Request 3: The book you need to complete your term paper has been lent to your tutor. It's the only copy the library has, and theoretically your tutor does not need to return it for another two weeks.

However, the task the respondents are asked to perform here has been altered. The CCSARP discourse completion test (Blum-Kulka, *et al.*, 1989:13) has been abandoned in favour of experimentally uncontrolled dialogue production. As argued in the author's doctoral dissertation (Awedyk, 2001:49), elicitation of data related to speech act realization by means of a written questionnaire poses many problems (Chafe, 1984; Labov, 1972; Schiffrin, 1987; Tannen, 1984; Blum-Kulka, *et al.*, 1989). Since it was impossible to collect the data in natural conditions, which, as postulated by Labov (1972:209), should be the goal of all empirical studies, a questionnaire-based data elicitation was necessary. Regardless of its methodological disadvantages and limitations, "written elicitation techniques enables us to obtain more stereotyped responses" (Blum-Kulka, *et al.*, 1989:13), which in cross-cultural studies is indispensable. Since by means of a questionnaire, "the prototype of the variants occurring in individual's actual speech" (Hill, *et al.*, 1986:353) can be elicited, the method seemed optimal for the purpose of my study.

Both parts of the questionnaire focus on the verbal realization of the speech act of request, which in the author's view, is the central speech act of any speech community. While Part 2 examines the informants' acceptability of different speech events for six utterances falling into the category of request, Part 1 is meant to determine the patterns in the selection of request strategies for the realization of three requests, both in English and Norwegian. The aim of the study is to provide confirmatory evidence for the hypothesis (cf. Awedyk, 2001:7) about the divergent request strategy preference for the performance of requests in (British) English and Norwegian which is a result of different social organization of the two speech communities in question. Consequently, human interaction in Norwegian "can be characterized as person-oriented rather than status-oriented" (Faerch and Kasper, 1989:240), which is the case in the British English context.

Also, on the basis of the selected request perspective type, the level of coerciveness of this inherently imposing speech act (Brown and

Levinson, 1978, cf. Blum-Kulka, 1989:59) will be investigated. Unlike Part 2, where prerequisites (Merrit, 1976) understood as means to check the feasibility of compliance had been disregarded, Part 1 examined their effect on the realization of the request goal in two situations: Request 2 and Request 3. Additionally, any instances of *sociopragmatic failure* (Thomas, 1983:94) were be highlighted.

2. RELATIONSHIP CONSTELLATIONS

For the purpose of the empirical study, politeness strategies of solidarity and deference had been incorporated, as well as sociolinguistic parameters of distance and power (Blum-Kulka, *et al.*, 1989:15). The inclusion of the above-mentioned variables allowed diversification of the context in the situations used in the questionnaire. The three speech events used here for the realization of the request show different relationship constellations between the Speaker and the Hearer. The table below shows the characteristics of these relationships for each of the situations:

Table 1

REQUEST SITUATION	SOCIAL DISTANCE	DOMINANCE
REQUEST 1	+ SD	S=H
REQUEST 2	- SD	S<H
REQUEST 3	+ SD	S<H

The above relationship constellations present a very interesting problem pertinent to the verbal realization of the request. The fact that in two of the situations represented above the Speaker is subordinate to the Hearer will require the employment of request strategies which would unambiguously mark this relation. The analysis below will show the respondents' preference in their selection of verbal strategies typical of requests: internal modification strategies which serve to redress or preserve the Hearer's negative face wants (Brown and Levinson, 1987:129) and external modification strategies which aim at indirect modification of the request (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984:204) without changing the propositional content of the speech act in question³.

³ For the full theoretical description of request strategy categories used in the study see Awedyk, 2001:54-56.

3. INFORMANTS

3.1. TARGET AGE GROUP AND REQUIREMENTS

For my project, I chose to limit my informant group to one age group – university students. The youngest ones are 18, the oldest in their late twenties. The informants were recruited from the University of Oslo and two regional colleges in Norway – Halden and Harstad.

All subjects fulfil the following requirements:

1. They are native speakers of Norwegian.
2. They are currently, or have recently been university students of English.

In total, 97 questionnaire forms were submitted. From this number, however, only 56 questionnaires were selected for the analysis of request strategies in Norwegian and English. The remaining 31 failed to fulfil the requirements – they were either incomplete or the data they contained proved to be irrelevant to the purpose of the present study.

3.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TARGET INFORMANTS GROUP

At the beginning of data elicitation, I thought of limiting the informants even further to those who not only study, or have studied English at a university level, but also have visited an English speaking country on the assumption that their command of English would be most fluent. However, in the Scandinavian countries, access to living English language is commonplace. Norwegians are exposed to spoken English on a daily basis, through television and cinema. All films and TV series are shown in original versions with subtitles. Many English-language advertisements aimed at young people appear without any translation, whereas they would be dubbed for the Polish market. In the light of the situation described above, it is therefore perfectly plausible to assume that young Norwegians are fairly competent speakers of English. For example, their knowledge of English idioms is impressive, although they sometimes use them incorrectly (cf. Awedyk, 1993, 1996).

Another significant factor that contributed to my selecting this particular group is the fact that contemporary Norwegian students belong to the first generation of Norwegians brought up completely without the polite form of address *De*, still remembered, and most likely used in the past, by the generation of their parents. It will be interesting to see if and to what extent that fact influences the realization of speech acts and, in the case of this study, the choice of request strategies.

What also ought to be given more attention in contrastive socio-pragmatic studies is the mobility of young people in the world today. No

longer are they only summer holiday backpackers. Today many young people live abroad as exchange students, employees, or just vagabonds trying their luck in a foreign country. Not to be overlooked is also the current political situation, with EU citizens having equal possibilities in the job markets of all the member states⁴, all of which will undoubtedly contribute in the future to the approximation of linguistic behaviour patterns across cultures. How receptive to these phenomena modern spoken English will be, still remains to be seen.

All the above-mentioned arguments make this particular age group a fascinating object of research in many a field of studies. By focusing my attention on students, I also took into consideration all the phenomena I have briefly presented above, as well as the fact that, due to the character of the subjects' course of studies, one may anticipate that their command of English will be at a relatively high level. Furthermore, one may also expect them to be, even if only to a lesser degree, more conscious users of both Norwegian and English.

In data analysis of my study, gender and social background were disregarded. To justify this approach, the author is of the opinion that contemporary students in the cultures under research display traits of a somewhat homogenous community, at least as far as their linguistic behaviour is concerned. Consequently, the author does not think he will obscure the results of this project by regarding the informants as a separate and socially distinct speech community. This is in concord with community studies (Wolfram, 1969; Horvath, 1985) which define cohorts emically. "The emic approach groups speakers to some shared experience of time. This shared experience can be related to life stage or to history" (Eckert, 1997:155).

4. REQUEST 1

The speech event in Request 1 can be viewed as a standard verbal exchange which is likely to take place on any crowded means of public transport. The Hearer's negative face loss potential will correlate with the request strategy selected by the Speaker. Only in the case of an unmitigated imperative would the Hearer's negative face loss be noticeable, since the exchange takes place in a public place. The Speaker's positive face loss would be substantial should the Hearer choose to retort and/or refuse to comply with the request.

⁴ Although Norway is not a member of the European Union (but it belongs to EFTA and as of March 2001, Norway is also a signatory to the Schengen Agreement), Norwegians enjoy many rights and privileges of EU citizens.

4.1. INTERNAL MODIFICATION STRATEGIES - ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DATA

The respondents' realization of the request reveals the following distribution of internal modification strategies:

Table 2

Type of strategy	Frequency of occurrence
Imperatives (including elliptical constructions)	10.4%
Modal verbs <i>can</i> <i>could</i> <i>may</i> <i>would</i> <i>will</i>	6.25% 41.6% 4% 10.4% 4%
Modal adverbs <i>Possibly</i> <i>Maybe</i>	2% 2%
Modal particles <i>Then</i>	2%
Performative verbs (including hedged performatives)	2%
Hedges <i>Would you be so kind</i> <i>I was wondering</i>	4% 2%
Tag questions	2%
Consultative devices <i>Would / Do you mind</i>	16.6%
Minimizers <i>A little bit</i> <i>A little</i> <i>A bit</i> <i>Kind of</i> <i>Sort of</i> <i>Quite</i>	4% 4% 2% 2% 2% 6.25%
Upgraders <i>very</i>	2%
Intensifier <i>Jesus Christ</i>	2%
Requestive markers <i>Please</i>	35.4%
Nonconventional hints	10.4%

In the realization of Request 1 in English, the informants show a marked preference for the 'Query-preparatory' strategy *can/could + you + VP*. This preference for the conventionally indirect request realization results from the context-internal factors governing the speech event in Request 1. Obviously, the Speaker has the right to perform the request since the Hearer is engaged in an activity which is irritating for the Speaker. As far as the level of directness is concerned, the dominating strategy follows the patterns revealed in comparable studies (Weizman, 1989: 85; House, 1989:102) where 'Conventional indirectness' was the predominating strategy; the remaining two: 'Imperatives' and 'Nonconventional hints' have equally strong representation – 10.4%. An interesting tendency can be observed in the relatively high frequency of occurrence in the case of *please*.

4.2. EXTERNAL MODIFICATION STRATEGIES – ENGLISH-LANGUAGE DATA

In the verbal realization of Request 1 in English, the following external modification strategies have been employed:

Table 3

Type of strategy	Frequency of occurrence
Beg forgiveness <i>Sorry</i> <i>Pardon</i>	6.25% 2%
Give reason	54%
Address forms <i>Little girl</i> <i>Woman</i> <i>Young lady</i>	2% 2% 2%
Entreaties <i>Excuse me</i> <i>Hey</i> <i>You see</i>	64% 2% 2%

From the above set of external modification strategies, two of them: 'Give reason' and 'Entreaties' predominate (54% and 76.25%, respectively). In the 'Entreaties' category, the ritualized *excuse me* received the highest score – 64 %. This uniformity is in concord with the tendency to present this issue in various publications aimed at foreign speakers of English. While *pardon* is a clear case of sociopragmatic failure (since its use in English is limited to an old-fashioned equivalent of *I'm sorry* used when one accidentally touches somebody, pushes against them, or stands in the way (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 1992:444), *sorry* and *excuse me* present a more complex problem.

Excuse me is traditionally viewed as “a polite expression used when starting to speak to a stranger, when one wants to get past a person” (ibid.: 443), *sorry* as an interjection is “used for expressing polite refusal disagreement, excusing oneself, etc” (ibid.:1266). Therefore, the latter functions as a ritualized apology formula (Olshtain, 1989:157) and clearly has assumed the status of a pragmatic idiom to perform a ritual apology (Fraser, 1981:266). The pragmatic meaning of *sorry* and *excuse me* seems clearly defined by the above definitions, thus selecting *sorry* instead of *excuse me* can be interpreted as an attempt to minimize the Hearer’s face loss by asking for his/her forgiveness for performing an FTA, rather than considering the use of *sorry* as a case of sociopragmatic failure.

4.3. INTERNAL MODIFICATION STRATEGIES – NORWEGIAN-LANGUAGE DATA

The Norwegian-language data provide the following internal modification strategies used by the informants for the realization of the request goal in Request 1:

Table 4

Type of strategy	Frequency of occurrence
Imperatives (including elliptical constructions)	7.7%
Modal verbs	
<i>Kan</i> ('can')	28.2%
<i>Kunne</i> ('could')	23%
<i>kan + ikke</i> ('negative + can')	2.5%
<i>vil</i> ('will')	5%
Modal adverbs	
<i>Kanskje</i> ('maybe')	2.5%
Performative verbs (including hedged performatives)	0%
Hedges	
<i>Vil / Kan / Kunne du være så snill</i> (‘Will/can/could you be so kind’)	12.8%
Tag questions	0%
Consultative devices	
<i>Tror du</i> (‘Do you think’)	7.5%
Minimizers	
<i>Litt</i> (‘a little’)	25.6%
<i>Ganske</i> (‘rather’)	2.5%
Intensifier	
<i>Så</i> (‘so’)	2.5%
Requestive markers	
<i>Vær så snill</i> (‘Be so kind’/‘please’)	7.5%
Nonconventional hints	12.8%

As in the case of the English-language data, the same three strategies dominate: modal verbs *kan/kunne* ('can/could'), 'Nonconventional hints' and 'Imperatives' (53.7%, 12.8%, 7.7%, respectively). A striking difference can be observed in the frequency of occurrence for the request marker *please*, which lacks a direct equivalent in Norwegian⁵. As argued by White (1979:30), Norwegian realization of a request very often lacks the verbal realization equivalent of the English *please*. Consequently, the limited use of the closest verbal equivalent (*vær så snill*) is a result which has been anticipated.

4.4. EXTERNAL MODIFICATION STRATEGIES – NORWEGIAN-LANGUAGE DATA

Table 5

Type of strategy	Frequency of occurrence
Beg forgiveness (<i>Jeg beklager</i> . 'I'm sorry')	5%
Give reason	69.2%
Address forms	0%
Entreaties <i>Unnskyld</i> 'Excuse me')	74.3%

The selection of external modification strategies in the realization of the request in Norwegian is similar to the request strategies used by the informants in the request in English. As in the English data, 'Give reason' and 'Entreaties' outnumber the remaining strategies. In the Norwegian data, the ritualized *unnskyld* ('excuse me') is used exclusively in the 'Entreaties' category, while the alternative (*jeg beklager* ('I'm sorry')), which belongs to the 'Beg forgiveness' category, is even more peripheral than in the English data. This may be indicative of the different status *jeg beklager* has in contrast to its English equivalent (*I'm sorry*). As it seems, the Norwegian form has retained more of its semantic meaning as opposed to the English one which, as argued above (cf. 5.2.) has already gained the status of a pragmatic idiom.

⁵ For the discussion on Norwegian realization of *please*, see White (1979:30), Alvsaker (1999:2), and Awedyk (2001:155).

4.5. VERBAL PATTERNS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL MODIFICATION IN THE REALIZATION OF REQUEST 1 IN ENGLISH AND NORWEGIAN – CONCLUSIONS

From the figures and verbal patterns described above, a number of general tendencies can be observed.

In the table below, the frequency of occurrence of different directness levels in the English- and Norwegian-language data has been presented:

Table 6

Type of strategy	English-language data	Norwegian-language data
Imperatives	10.4%	7.7%
Conventional indirectness	47.85%	53.7%
Nonconventional indirectness	10.4%	12.8%

In both cases, 'Conventional indirectness' is the predominating strategy. This tendency was already present in comparable studies conducted on the two languages in question (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989; Weizman, 1989, 1993; Svanes, 1989).

As for the use of 'Imperatives' in Request 1, the following patterns can be observed:

English	Norwegian
1a) <i>Watch out!</i>	1b) <i>Se deg for!</i> (‘Watch out’)
2a) <i>Use your eyes!</i>	2b) <i>Bruk øynene dine!</i> (‘Use your eyes’)
3a) <i>Be careful with your backpack!</i>	3b) <i>Prøv og sett den på gulvet!</i> (‘Try and put it on the floor’)

The use of modal verbs *can/could* and *kan/kunne* in the realization of Request 1 displays a high degree of uniformity. It has to be noted, however, that the Norwegian data offer one pattern absent in the English-language data: *kan + ikke + VP* (‘Can you not + VP?’). As pointed out by Svanes (1989:100), the use of negation with the modal verb *kan/kunne* (‘can/could’) in the performance of a request in Norwegian is a strategy aimed at mitigating the request’s imposition. In Norwegian the negative adverb *ikke* (‘not’) can have two positions in the Norwegian sentence: before the personal pronoun (*kan + ikke + du*), or directly after it (*kan + du + ikke*). In her project, the informants show a marked preference for the employment of the former one in situations where there is no social distance between the Speaker and the Hearer.

Furthermore, the results of Svanes' (1989) CSSARP-inspired study indicate that Norwegians perceive the above construction as more polite than the standard 'Query-Preparatory' *kan + du + VP* ('can + you + VP') (ibid.). The data elicited in Request 1, however, do not confirm this argument as the strategy has been used by only one informant. Below, the patterns for conventional indirectness in Request 1 are presented:

English	Norwegian
4a) <i>Can / Could you + VP?</i>	4b) <i>Kan / Kunne du + VP?</i> (<i>'Can/Could you + VP?'</i>)
5a) <i>no data available</i>	5b) <i>Kan ikke du + VP?</i> (<i>'Can + not + you +VP?'</i>)

'Nonconventional hints' have been proved not to correlate with politeness (Weizman, 1989:92) and are perceived as less polite than hedged and not hedged performatives, which consequently results in their limited use (ibid.). This argument seems to hold in the case of Request 1, where 'Nonconventional hints' have been used by 10.4% of the informant sample in English and 12.8% in Norwegian. Below, the lexical realizations of this strategy for the performance of Request 1 are presented:

6a) <i>You're thumping me with your backpack.</i>	6b) <i>Du dulter borti meg med ryggsekken din.</i> (<i>'You catch me with your backpack'</i>) <i>Du dytter ryggsekken din i ryggen.</i> (<i>'You shove your backpack in the back'</i>)
7a) <i>Your backpack.</i>	7b) <i>Ryggsekken din.</i> (<i>'Your backpack'</i>)
8a) <i>Your backpack keeps thumping me.</i>	8b) <i>Ryggsekken din dulter til meg hele tiden.</i> (<i>'Your backpack thumps me all the time'</i>)
9a) <i>Your backpack is bothering me.</i>	9b) <i>Ryggsekken din er litt plagsom.</i> (<i>'Your backpack is annoying'</i>)
10a) <i>It's crowded here, isn't it?</i>	10b) <i>no data available</i>
11a) <i>no data available</i>	11b) <i>Unnskyld.</i> (<i>'sorry'</i>)

With the exception of 10a) and 11b), the lexical realization of 'Non-conventional hints' follows one pattern – the Speaker either specifies the irritating activity s/he wants to the Hearer to refrain from doing or names the object (the backpack) with which it is performed.

Table 7 shows the figures related to the request perspective in Request 1:

Table 7

Request perspective type	English-language data	Norwegian-language data
Impersonal	0%	0%
Speaker dominance	2%	2.5%
Hearer dominance	91.75%	90%
Speaker and Hearer dominance	0%	0%

In Request 1, the strategy of 'Agent avoidance' has been employed marginally in both languages :

English	–	6.25%
Norwegian	–	7.5%

The results for both languages are nearly identical. Nearly all informants have used 'Hearer dominance', the fact which can be ascribed to the rather ritualized character of the request goal where no scope for negotiation, typical of 'Agent avoidance' strategy (House, 1989:113) to keep the request more "off-record" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:63) is required. Another interesting tendency has been observed in the case of *please*. Although it does not have a direct equivalent in Norwegian (cf. 5.3.), the informants seem to be aware of its pragmatic function in English, since its frequency in the English-language data amounts to 35.4% in contrast to only 7.5% in the Norwegian-language data. This is also indicative of the fact that verbal politeness in Norwegian does not follow the same verbal patterns typical of English conversation.

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