

Polite Requests As Speech Acts: A comparative Study of Gender Variation of Native Speakers Students At The University Level

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Abstract

Sociolinguistic research suggests that women use more politeness strategies in their requests than men do. Holmes (1995) characterizes women's speech as being more polite than men's. Researchers report that women use more positive politeness markers such as compliments, joking and claiming reciprocity than men do. Women use a large number of positive-politeness strategies in talking with same-sexpeers while men do not in similar situations. Women are more likely to apologize to soften criticism and to thank others than men. However, most studies of gender variations in politeness have missed the relationship between language use and a situation a woman or man is in. In this research paper, the results of the data collected from women and men students who have taken the test indicate almost different results. The results show that women students use more positive politeness markers such as "compliments" than men do. The results show that men and women are almost similar in joking and claiming reciprocity. As for the other claim that women use more negative politeness markers than men in their requests, the results also show that men and women are completely similar in using negative politeness markers such as "asking for an excuse" and are completely similar but partially different in saying "thank you" and in "apologizing".

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يطلب مهذبة والكلام أعمال: دراسة مقارنة لاختلاف الجنس من مكبرات الصوت
الطلاب الأصلية على مستوى الجامعة

سحاب صالح

ملخص

وتشير البحوث اللغوي التي تستخدمها النساء أكثر استراتيجيات التأدب في طلباتها من الرجال. هولمز (1995) يميز خطاب المرأة بأنها أكثر مهذبا من الرجال. أفاد باحثون أن النساء يستخدمن علامات المداراة أكثر إيجابية مثل المنيح ويتبادلون النكات ويدعي المعاملة بالمثل من الرجال. تستخدم النساء عدد كبير من الاستراتيجيات الإيجابية-التأدب في الحديث مع نفسه sexpeers-في حين أن الرجال لا في حالات مماثلة. هم أكثر عرضة للاعتذار لتخفيف الانتقادات وأن أشكر الآخرين من الرجال والنساء. ومع ذلك، فقد غاب عن معظم الدراسات من الاختلافات بين الجنسين في المداراة العلاقة بين استخدام اللغة ووضع امرأة أو رجل هو في. في هذه الورقة البحثية، ونتائج البيانات التي تم جمعها من النساء والرجال الطلبة الذين دخلوا الاختبار تشير مختلفة تقريبا أظهرت النتائج النتائج. وأن الطالبات استخدام علامات المداراة أكثر إيجابية مثل "مجاملات" من الرجال. وأظهرت النتائج أن الرجال والنساء متشابهة تقريبا في المزاح ويدعون المعاملة بالمثل. أما بالنسبة للدعاء الأخرى التي تستخدم النساء علامات المداراة أكثر سلبية من الرجال في طلباتها، وتظهر النتائج أيضا أن الرجال والنساء متشابهة تماما في استخدام علامات المداراة السلبية مثل "يسأل عن ذريعة"، وتشبه تماما ولكن يختلف جزئيا في قائلا "شكرا" و في "الاعتذار".

Introduction

Grundy (2000: 111) pointed out that the aim behind politeness in requests is to make a speaker and a listener relaxed and comfortable with each other. These culturally defined standards, if not followed appropriately at times, may result in causing suffering to a recipient or other party.

Do women differ completely from men in using polite requests in the same language? What are the areas of these differences? Gender differences of all kinds attract people and draw their attention. Hence I am curious to know if there are gender differences between women and Men in using markers to indicate politeness in their requests.

This paper concentrates on the strategies women and men use to show polite requests verbally.

Mills, S. (2002:98) defines politeness as “the practical application of good manners or etiquette.” Brown and Levinson (1987:77) showed in their analysis of politeness that it is a very common characteristic across cultures that speakers respect each other’s expectations regarding self-image, personal feelings and avoid face threatening.

Cutting(2002:44) pointed out that , in pragmatics, politeness does not refer to the social rules of behavior such as : “letting people go first through the door.” It is the use of linguistic expressions that give people space and show a friendly attitude to them if one wants to be appreciated in return.

Brown and Levinson (1987) have developed politeness theory which is based on the concept that everyone has a social self-image which s/he projects and protects. This sense of self-image, Goffman, Erving,(1967) referred to as “face”. According to the politeness theory, a person uses different strategies in the form of markers to protect one’s face and the face of the requested . Under politeness theory, there are positive and negative face. Positive face reflects the desire to get one’s self-image approved of by others. Negative face does not require a person to be imposed upon by others. Politeness strategies differ depending on whether a person is dealing with another’s positive or negative face. Accordingly different markers are used in negative and positive politeness.

Hartley,(2010:32) points out that positive politeness or face

involves positive relationship, respect and understanding between the speakers. This type of politeness involves direct speech acts and does not follow Grice's maxims(1975). Speakers have mutual awareness and relationship to cope with what is normally regarded as impolite. According to Brown and Levinson, (1987:101) positive politeness is a kind of intimacy which functions as "a kind of social accelerator".

Positive politeness strategies include showing closeness, firmness and agreement to what is being said. This involves making the hearer feel good to indicate that both speaker and hearer have a common target.

Brown and Levinson(1987:80) say that the main type of positive strategy is pretending shared ground. Users of positive politeness use markers such as compliments, joking and claiming reciprocity.

Users of negative politeness or face, on the other hand, respect other person's right to do what s/he likes without obligation. Negative politeness does not mean to be impolite. This type of politeness involves heavy use of indirect speech acts such as "If you do not mind....." or "If it is not too much trouble.....". Users of negative politeness use markers such as : "excuse me", "sorry" and "thank you"

Cutting (2002:46-48) indicates that negative politeness strategies involve paying attention to negative face without interruptions. Speakers use them to avoid imposing or presuming and to give hearer options. Speakers keep off imposing their own ideas and respect hearers by using apology and hesitations opening the hearer's door for saying: "No".

The preference of one type of politeness over the other depends on one's personality, education and cultural background.

Politeness Theory

Politeness was presented as a formal theoretical construct by Brown and Levinson (1987:94), based on earlier work on 'face' by sociologist Erving Goffman (1967:88). According to Holtgraves (2002:240), it is an extensive and complex theory of the interpersonal underpinnings of language production seeking to answer why people do not always speak in the clearest, most direct, and most efficient way possible. For that reason, Brown and Levinson (1987), suggest that we are all motivated by two desires: (1) the need to be approved of by or connected to others (positive

face), and (2) the need to remain autonomous or independent (negative face). Examples of the desire for positive face include the wish to be respected by colleagues, evaluated as competent and fair by subordinates, and strongly valued as a member of a community (Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998:89). Examples of the desire to maintain negative face include the wish to be left alone, to be self-directed and independent of others, and not to be restricted or otherwise impeded upon.

Requests

The speech act of requesting has been widely examined both in interlanguage: The type of language or linguistic system used by second or foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a target language. It has also been examined cross-cultural pragmatics fields. Sifianou (1999 :160) points out that a request consists of an

illocutionary act in which a speaker asks a hearer to perform an action which is for the benefit of the speaker. Trosborg (1995:66) indicates that this speech act has been regarded as one of the most threatening speech acts, since it intrinsically threatens the hearer's face .

Given the face-threatening nature involved in making this speech act, the speaker may want to modify the impact of it by employing particular modification devices that have been classified into two types: internal and external. According to Sifianou (1999: 158), internal modification devices refer to those linguistic elements that appear within the same request act in order to intensify its force, for example, (Could you probably open the door for me?), whereas external modification devices appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request act, for example,(Could you open the door for me? I'm carrying so many bags that I cannot do it).

1. Literature Review

Many studies have been carried out on polite requests. A study was carried out by Kirk W.Duthler in (2006).This study analyzes requests via email and voicemail to check politeness properties via emails and voicemails. Usually voicemail requests lack planning, composing and editing. It is predicted that voicemail users create

less polite speech than those of email users. The researcher collected the e-mails and voice mails analyzed them to show the findings.

Another study on language and gender was carried by Talbot in 1998. The study concentrated on identifying, and trying to explain, differences in the speech styles of men and women. One of the main differences has been found in the area of linguistic politeness.

A third study was done by Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Patricia Bou-Franch (2003) on gender and politeness. The population of the test was undergraduate students in British and Spanish Universities. The aim behind the test was to check the candidates' understanding of appropriate requests.

2. Objectives of the Study

Research questions are:

- 2.1 In this test, are women students' polite requests completely different from men students in their polite requests?
- 2.2 In this test, are women students' polite requests completely different but partially similar to men students in their polite requests?
- 2.3 In this test, are women students' polite requests completely similar to those of men students in their polite requests?
- 2.4 In this test, are women students' polite requests completely similar but partially different from men students in their polite requests?

All women and men students will be given a test; the results of this test will provide answers to the above four questions.

Hypothesis of the Study

There are no significant differences between women and men students as far as their polite requests are concerned.

3. The Test

3.1. Subjects of the Test

A written test was given to a population of twenty women and men students. Ten of them were women and ten were men. They were third year English Language Department, University students.

The students are native speakers of English as they are the sons and daughters of native speakers of English coming from Britain, living and working at the University and at other places in the United Arab Emirates . The students had completed their secondary education in Secondary schools following the British curriculum in teaching. The students share many similar environmental, social and academic backgrounds.

3.2. Data Collection

The data was collected by giving a written test(1) to a population of students already mentioned in 3.1 .The test is as follows:

The Test

Q.No.	TOPIC	The questions take the form of situations and the students who take them have to form the appropriate requests.
1.	LIBRARY	You are in a library. You want to ask the library assistant to show you where the Mathematics books section is.
2.	GROCERY SHOP	In a grocery shop you usually go to, you want to ask a seller you know very well for a bottle of water.
3.	BORROWING A PEN	You are at Immigration office you want to renew your residence in the UAE, you are queuing to hand in your set of forms. You've forgotten to sign one of the forms and haven't got a pen with you. You want to ask the passport officer to lend you a pen.
4.	BORROWING LECTURE NOTES	You want to ask your friend to let you borrow the lecture notes from a class that you have missed.
5.	MOTHER'S MOBILE PHONE	You want to ask your mother for permission to use her mobile phone.
6.	LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION	You go to your English University Professor to ask him to write a letter of recommendation for your application for a course in a British University.

Note: The test was taken and adapted to suit my research paper .It was taken from Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Patricia Bou-Franch,2003. Gender and Politeness: Spanish and British Undergraduates' Perceptions of Appropriate Requests.

3.3. Test Procedure

Each student was tested individually and his/her responses were recorded to be evaluated later. The rater reads a question from the list and each student's responses were recorded to be rated later on

by a committee of three raters.

3.4. 3.4 Analysis

The answers of the students were transcribed, reviewed and analyzed by a committee of three raters to point out the politeness strategies by using markers.

4. Results and Discussion

Table (1) Positive Politeness

Positive Politeness	
Women	Men
70%	40%

The data in Table(1) shows the percentage of positive politeness in the requests of women compared to that of men. It indicates that women rather men have higher percentage of positive politeness . This means that men are completely different from women as far as the first objective of the study. Therefore, the first objective of the study,(2.1) is verified.

Table(2) Positive Politeness Markers

Positive Politeness/ Women		Positive Politeness /Men	
Compliments	Joking and claiming reciprocity	Compliments	Joking and claiming reciprocity
75%	45%	30%	55%

1.The data in Table(2), which shows the percentages of the markers of positive politeness used in the requests, indicates that women rather than men have higher percentage in “Compliments”. This also means that men are completely different from women as far as the use of “compliments” is concerned . Thus, the first objective (2.1) of the study is also verified.

2. The data in Table(2) indicates that men rather than women have got almost the same percentage in “Joking and claiming reciprocity”. This means that men are completely similar but partially different from women as far as the use of “Joking and claiming reciprocity” is concerned. Thus, the first objective (2.4) of the study is verified as well.

Table (3) Negative Politeness

Negative Politeness	
Women	Men
40%	55%

The data in Table(3), which shows the percentage of negative politeness in the requests of women compared to that of men, indicates that men rather women have a little higher percentage of negative politeness. This means that men are completely similar but partially different from women as far as the first objective of the study is concerned. Therefore, the fourth objective of the study,(2.4) is verified.

Table(4) Negative Politeness Markers

Women/ Negative Politeness			Men/ Negative Politeness		
“Excuse me”	“Thank you”	“Sorry”	“Excuse me”	“Thank you”	“Sorry”
50%	45%	35%	50%	55%	65%

1. The data in Table(4), which shows the percentages of the markers used in negative politeness of the requests, indicates that men and women have the same percentage in using ““Excuse me””. This means that men and

women are completely similar as far as using “Excuse me”. Thus, the fourth objective (2.3) of the study is verified.

2. The data in Table(4) also indicates that men have a percentage of 55% and women have a percentage of 45% in saying ““Thank you””. This means that men and women are completely similar but partially different as far as saying “Thank you” is concerned. Thus, the third objective (2.4).of the study is verified.

3. The data in Table(4), indicates that men have a percentage of 65% and women have a percentage of 35% in saying ““sorry””. This means that men and women are completely different but partially similar as far as saying “Thank you ” is concerned. Thus, the second objective (2.2).of the study is verified.

Conclusion

Although men have been accused of being completely different from women in using all politeness markers in their requests, i.e. men do not use or poorly use politeness markers as politeness strategies in their requests. It is true that the results of the test have shown that women have got higher percentage in using the elements of positive politeness. Therefore, women are completely different from men only in using positive politeness marker especially in using “compliments”.

However, all other results have shown something different from this common belief especially in using the markers of negative politeness. The results have shown that both women and men are either completely similar or partially similar in using markers as strategies of negative politeness. This might be due to differences in character, education and health of the person who uses politeness in his/her requests. In addition to the kind of situation a man or woman is in is to be taken into consideration.

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