

COMMUNICATIVE AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF REQUEST UTTERANCES

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Abstract

This article explores the communicative and pragmatic characteristics of request utterances in language use. It examines how requests function as speech acts, the role of context in shaping their interpretation, and the strategies speakers employ to achieve politeness and effectiveness. The study highlights the importance of indirectness, cultural norms, and interpersonal relations in the formulation and understanding of requests.

Keywords: Communicative and pragmatic aspects, speech acts, politeness, effectiveness.

Request utterances are a fundamental component of everyday communication. They are used to ask others to perform actions, provide information, or grant permission. However, making a request is not merely a linguistic act; it is also a pragmatic and social action that involves managing relationships, expressing intentions, and maintaining politeness.

In this regard, the study of request utterances falls within the field of pragmatics, which focuses on language use in context. Understanding the communicative and pragmatic aspects of requests is essential for both linguistic theory and practical language use, especially in intercultural communication.

According to John Searle (John Searle; 2001), requests belong to the category of directive speech acts, as they are intended to make the hearer perform a certain action. Similarly, John Austin introduced the idea that utterances perform actions rather than merely convey information.

A request typically consists of three components:

- the speaker's intention
- the linguistic form of the utterance
- the expected response from the hearer

For example:

- "Open the window." (direct request)
- "Could you open the window?" (conventionally indirect request)

These variations demonstrate how the same communicative goal can be achieved through different pragmatic strategies.

One of the key pragmatic features of request utterances is the degree of directness. Direct requests are clear and explicit, while indirect requests rely on contextual interpretation. For instance:

- Direct: "Give me your notes."
- Indirect: "I was wondering if I could look at your notes."

Indirectness is often used to soften the request and make it more polite. As noted by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, indirect strategies help reduce the potential threat to the hearer's "face," or social self-image.

Requests inherently impose on the hearer, which makes politeness a central concern. The choice of request form depends on several social variables:



- Power relations (e.g., teacher vs. student)
- Social distance (e.g., strangers vs. friends)
- Degree of imposition (e.g., small favor vs. large request)

The production and interpretation of request utterances can be further explained through major pragmatic models that account for speaker intention and social interaction. Within speech act theory, developed by John Austin and later expanded by John Searle, requests are categorized as directives aimed at influencing the behavior of the hearer. However, this classification alone does not fully explain the variability of request forms in natural discourse.

A more nuanced explanation is provided by politeness theory, introduced by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. According to this framework, speakers design their requests based on the need to protect both their own and the hearer's "face." Requests are inherently face-threatening acts because they impose on the hearer's freedom of action. As a result, speakers employ various mitigation strategies to reduce this threat.

The choice of strategy depends on contextual factors such as social distance, relative power, and the degree of imposition.

Request utterances rarely occur in isolation; they are typically embedded within larger conversational structures. The sequential organization of requests plays a crucial role in their interpretation and effectiveness.

In many cases, requests are preceded by preparatory moves, such as greetings, small talk, or pre-requests (e.g., "Are you busy right now?"). These elements serve to establish rapport and prepare the hearer for the upcoming request (Andreas Jucker; 2024). Similarly, follow-up moves, such as expressions of gratitude or justification, contribute to maintaining social harmony.

From a discourse-pragmatic perspective, requests can be seen as part of an adjacency pair:

- Request → Response (acceptance or refusal)

The response itself is also pragmatically constrained. Acceptance is often straightforward, whereas refusal tends to be mitigated to avoid face-threatening effects (e.g., "I'd love to, but I'm afraid I can't").

This sequential view highlights that the communicative success of a request depends not only on its form but also on its placement within interaction.

The linguistic realization of requests varies widely across languages and contexts. Several grammatical and lexical devices are commonly used to encode requests:

- **Modal verbs:** can, could, would, may
- **Interrogative structures:** "Can you help me?"
- **Imperatives:** "Pass me the salt."
- **Conditional forms:** "I would appreciate it if you could..."

Among these, interrogatives and conditional forms are generally perceived as more polite due to their indirectness. Imperatives, while efficient, may sound abrupt unless softened by politeness markers.

Additionally, lexical modifiers such as "please," "just," and "a bit" can reduce the perceived imposition of a request. Prosodic features, including intonation and stress, also play an important role in signaling politeness and intention.

One of the most important issues in the study of request utterances is pragmatic failure, particularly in intercultural communication. Pragmatic failure occurs when a speaker's



intended meaning is misunderstood due to differences in cultural norms or pragmatic conventions.

For example, learners of English may produce grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate requests, such as overly direct forms in contexts that require politeness. Conversely, excessive indirectness may lead to ambiguity or misunderstanding.

Addressing these issues is essential for developing effective communicative competence in a second language.

Request utterances also exhibit specific features in institutional settings, such as academic, business, or medical communication. In these contexts, requests are often formalized and governed by institutional norms (Daniela Landert et al.; 2023).

For example:

- In academic discourse: “Could you clarify your argument?”
- In professional emails: “I would be grateful if you could send the report by Friday.”

Such requests tend to be more elaborate and indirect, reflecting the need for professionalism and respect. At the same time, clarity remains essential to avoid ambiguity.

In hierarchical settings, power relations significantly influence request strategies. Superiors may use more direct forms, while subordinates typically employ greater politeness and indirectness.

While much of the analysis of request utterances focuses on linguistic form, non-verbal and prosodic features also contribute significantly to their interpretation. Intonation, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact can reinforce or modify the meaning of a request.

For instance, a rising intonation may signal politeness or uncertainty, while a firm tone may indicate urgency or authority. Similarly, a smile or friendly gesture can mitigate the imposition of a request.

These multimodal aspects highlight the importance of viewing requests as part of a broader communicative system rather than purely linguistic phenomena.

The ability to produce and interpret request utterances appropriately is a key component of pragmatic competence. This competence involves not only knowledge of linguistic forms but also sensitivity to context, social norms, and cultural expectations (Stavros Assimakopoulos; 2025).

In recent years, research has emphasized the need to integrate pragmatic training into language education. This includes raising awareness of different request strategies, providing authentic input, and encouraging reflection on intercultural differences.

Ultimately, mastering request utterances requires a balance between clarity, politeness, and contextual appropriateness.

Context plays a crucial role in interpreting request utterances. The same sentence may function differently depending on the situation.

For example:

- “It’s cold here.”

As a statement (descriptive)

As a request (indirectly asking to close a window)

This illustrates that meaning is not solely determined by linguistic form but also by shared knowledge, situational factors, and communicative intentions.



This variation highlights the importance of pragmatic competence, especially for second language learners, who must learn not only grammar but also culturally appropriate ways of making requests.

Understanding the communicative and pragmatic aspects of requests has practical implications for language teaching. Learners often struggle with pragmatics, even when they have a good command of grammar.

Developing pragmatic competence helps learners communicate more effectively and avoid misunderstandings.

Request utterances represent a complex interaction between language, context, and social norms. Their communicative effectiveness depends not only on grammatical correctness but also on pragmatic appropriateness. By analyzing directness, politeness strategies, and contextual factors, we gain a deeper understanding of how requests function in real communication. This knowledge is essential for both linguistic research and practical language use, particularly in intercultural settings.

The list of used literature:

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