

The Use of Requests and Politeness in service encounters: the case of Oran Town Halls

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Abstract:

On a daily basis, people use several expressions such as requests that are related to politeness. Hence, this study examines how Oran citizens construct their service encounters in terms of request strategies and politeness markers. However, in the context of service encounters any use or absence of polite expressions are not considered as face-threatening, they are used to show sympathy and friendliness and not to mitigate the imposition made from a request. (Danblon et al., 2005) Furthermore, Data was collected through the use of field-notes where data was taken manually and analyzed based on the CCSARP table proposed by Blum-kulka (1983). Results revealed that direct requests like mood derivable, want statements and need statements were more common in contrast to the conventionally indirect requests.

Keywords: request strategies; request realizations; face-threatening acts; head act; internal modifications.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is believed that language can do more than passing over information. More precisely, it has a ‘dual function’. Requests, for instance, can be expressed in several linguistic ways e.g. whether it is direct, indirect, with or without linguistic mitigation along with their related outcomes on the hearer (J.L. Austin 1987). This reflects on the fact that language users can do more than transmitting information to shape their social relationships. The latter is related to the field of pragmatics which covers how language can do more than serving as a means of communication on the one hand. On the other hand, pragmatics, known as a subfield of linguistics, also covers several concepts including, speech act theory and politeness theory, and as it is crucial that language is central to the study of pragmatics which in turn depicts the importance of pragmatic language skills for maintaining and developing a good relationship with others in a great number of contexts. Therefore, this study outlines how the theory of politeness proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987) and requests are interrelated, it reveals the way people at town halls make use of requests together with politeness markers which vary from one expression to another based on the taxonomy of request strategies introduced by Blum-kulka (1983). However, in service encounters requests are not regarded as face-threatening acts due to the fact that “ requests are mainly for information and fall within the employee’s duties/tasks as provider of information, the degree of imposition is low” . (Patricia Salazar & Sara Orts, 2018. p, 44) Furthermore, this study was realized without reaching citizens for any further information. Collecting data manually was employed in several sociolinguistic and pragmatic studies when dealing with certain linguistic strategies and features and it would allow for obtaining naturally occurring data which are viewed as a basic rock in order to come up with “a clear idea of the makings of language.” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005, p.29). Studies of politeness and requests have been investigated in a variety of contexts before, for instance (Abdullah Samarah 2015), (Israa Qari 2017) (Maan Muhammed Aubed 2012) and (Alzahrani, 2021) investigating on levels of directness and

the impact of perceived cultures in commercial service encounters. However, levels of directness in requests have not been covered in the context of service encounters, specifically non-commercial ones in the Arab world. Hence, this study focuses on filling this research gap. Moreover, this study is realized by means of a mixed method in which people were observed and their expressions were taken manually according to the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization (CCSARP) table proposed by Blum-kulka (1983) (see table 1) and then the frequency of each request realization was showcased in figure.1 . On this account, in an effort to throw light on non-commercial service encounters which is by no means hardly looked through. The following research question along with the hypothesis has been constructed in order to guide the present paper:

RQ: What are the request realizations that are widely used when asking for documents/ services in town halls?

Hypothesis: Following the nature of service encounter interactions which is built upon the use of explicit and direct requests, the latter will be employed contrary to conventionally indirect realizations. (Antonopoulou, 2001; Yates, 201)

Moreover, service encounters (SEs) are a significant part of this present study for the reason that they are a part of our daily interactions where service and information or even goods are exchanged between the service provider and the customer. The interaction between them is referred to as a goal-oriented speech event; these goals are represented by a set of social and discursive practices in service encounters. It should be noted that the procedures of collecting data were designed after the model of Patricia Salazar & Sara Orts (2018) where requests were collected from a tourist information office in which the findings revealed a good number of clients used direct requests.

2. Requests and politeness

2.1 Politeness Strategy

politeness refers to the way a social behaviour is reflected through language i.e. how people behave socially using a particular linguistic feature which is related to the following notions “courtesy, rapport, deference and distance” Furthermore, Politeness theory introduces some notions that are considered to be universal such as the notions of face and face-threatening acts, the latter is suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987). According to Brown and Levinson, the notion of face is defined as “The public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself.” The face theory suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987), they claim the universality of their theory for the reason that they expanded it in an attempt to cover the universal social principles and their outcomes on modifying grammar. They planned to do that by recognizing the reasoning behind speakers' and hearers' choices in their everyday interaction.

Following Brown and Levinson, the face theory consists of three fundamental rules; the first rule is ‘face’ which is the speaker’s self-image and the second one is related to the ‘face threatening acts’ (FTAs). Additionally, politeness strategies are classified as another basic rule of the face theory. The public self-image claimed as ‘face’ comprises two face wants, namely negative face which is fundamentally related to the preserving of one’s face, particularly the freedom from impositions. Whereas, a positive face refers to the desire to be socially appreciated and approved by others. Basically, every act is threatening to the ‘face’, as well as to the negative face or the positive face. Moreover, Politeness strategies are divided into three parts; positive politeness which targets the addressee’s positive face, in other words, it mitigates the threat on the hearer’s positive face. To illustrate, it covers expressions of friendship or compliments. On the other hand, negative politeness strategies target the hearer’s negative face i.e. the hearer may lose his freedom of action, for instance, the hearer’s negative face is threatened when the speaker is being pessimistic or using generalized expressions, among

other examples. Furthermore, off-record politeness includes one of Grice's maxims (1975) on the basis that the addressee is able to conclude the intended meaning. It includes hints, being ironic or speaking vaguely. The theory of politeness covers the fact that face might be threatened, lost or damaged by various linguistic or paralinguistic behaviors that are designated as face threatening acts or FTA. According to Fraser (1990), the speaker must preserve his face as well as the listener's face. Brown & Levinson (1987) state four types of FTA, they are classified as follows:

2.2. Positive FTAs

When the feelings or wants of the speaker or the hearer are not being taken care of i.e. they are damaged. The latter is reflected on both the speaker i.e. through apologizing, accepting compliments, self-humiliating, unmanageability of emotions i.e. tears or laughter (Brown & Levinson, 1987.p, 68), and the hearer when "expressions of disapproval, criticism, accusations, insults". Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 66)

2.3. Negative FTAs

When the speaker expresses or accepts expressions of gratitude and apologies, accepts offers, or compulsorily makes promises and offers to the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987 pp. 67-68). At this stage, the damage is for both the hearer when the speaker directly or unintentionally restrains the hearer's freedom through acts such as orders, requests, threats, promises or compliments. Brown & Levinson (1987, pp. 65-66)

3. Requests

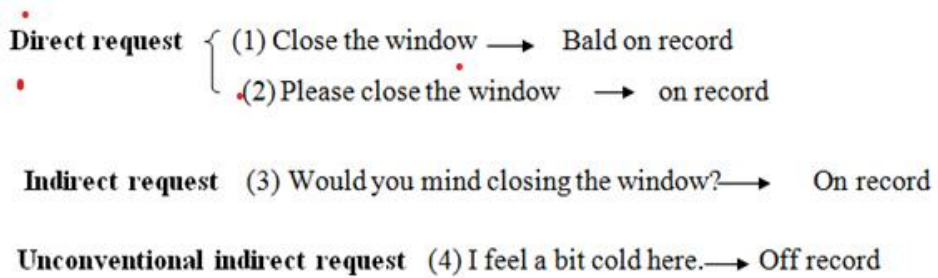
Requests are considered as speech acts where a requester passes on a certain message to a requestee for the purpose of performing an act by the requestee which is of benefit to the requester. (Trosborg, 1995, p. 187)According to Trosborg (1995) requests are perceived as face-threatening acts FTAs for the reason that a requester who attempts to make a request practices power over the requestee. Hence, they threaten the requestee's

negative face by indicating that h/she is restrained from their freedom of action. In addition, the requester also risks losing face for the reason that the requestee may either refuse the request or accept it. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 92) traced four general strategies of politeness namely positive politeness and negative politeness along with bald-on record; This strategy comes up with no effort made by the speaker to lessen the impact of the FTA, as in the situation where a person explicitly addresses the other to do something, such as asking for something using the term please or directing him/her with a command. The latter tends to happen only in urgent situations, and off-record politeness; it is directed to take off any pressure on the speaker; h/she doesn't practise any form of imposition. Simply put, off record is about doing an act implicitly. Moreover, each strategy conveys with the different types of requests i.e. direct and indirect requests.

4. Levels of Directness in Request Strategies

Following Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1989), there are three levels of directness in requests; the option for any particular request strategy is determined by situational and cultural functions (Blum-Kulka et al, 1989). Generally, situational variation is mostly present in several cultures. For instance, when making a request in a demanding way, people would tend to use a more indirect request contrary to asking a small favour. Another Example is that of friend's interactions where informal requests are mostly used opposed to requests employed by acquaintances. Contrastingly, direct requests which are suitable for a particular situation may differ from one culture to another (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1989; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). The aforementioned strategies are strongly related to the directness of requests which is defined as "the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution" (Blum Kulka et. al., 1989, as cited in Zhu Xiaoning, p. 3, 2017) In other words, The degree of directness is related to the implicitly or explicitly of the request. This is illustrated in the following figure:

Figure1. *Directness level in the head acts of requests*



Source: Zhu Xiaoning & Nanjing, 2017, 03.

The first example illustrates a request with no redress i.e it is realized in an explicit way. On the other hand, the second and the third examples show redress actions like the use of politeness markers such as “please” and consultative expressions like “would you mind”. This leads into the mitigation of the force of the request. However, the third example does not carry an illocutionary force literally, it was conventionalised in English so that it can be read by all participants (Brown & Levinson 1987 as cited in Zhu Xiaoning, p. 3, 2017). The fourth example covers off record strategies which are expressed in a form of hints.

6.2. The Use of Requests in service encounters

Service encounters (referred to as SEs, henceforth) are the daily interaction between “the customer and the service provider whereby some commodity (information or goods) will be exchanged.” (Ventola, 2005.p, 19: as cited in Patricia Salazar & Sara Orts, 2018. P, 35). It should be noted that service encounters can either be commercial where monetary exchange is present or non-commercial where only information, documents or services are provided. Additionally, service encounters are often related to interactions

between people who have never met or will never meet in the future. Following Marquez-Reiter & Bon- French, 2017: 66), it is a “one-time interaction” between the customer and the service provider.

Requests are widely examined in the literature arising from the well respected work of Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). Their fundamental work on the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) focused on collecting data in eight languages where requests were analyzed from an intra-lingual and cross-linguistic angle. It focused on the similarities and differences related to the realization patterns of speech acts in requests. The latter served in boosting a wide range of research in view of the fact that these requests may have a negative effect on the hearers’ negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) Hence, service encounters are a context where requests are widely used and this has brought a big focus on analyzing these utterances along with the degree of directness in those requests.

Furthermore, following Sifianou (2013) globalization plays a major role in informing people about camaraderie when interacting with one another taking into consideration the impact of the degree of intimacy and status of interactants, moreover, such situations bring about the need for face-preserving strategies.

However, when it comes to service encounters for the reason that language is becoming more friendly and informal. A good example of that is a study submitted to analyze requests in small shops by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006) where it was concluded that the regularity in contact between customers and service providers opened the way for small talks. Another study supported the same findings where interactions were directed towards camaraderie and friendly conversation. Hence, preserving a good personal relationship between interactants is a significant aspect in service encounters.

Along the lines of Félix-Bradesfer (2015) studies were conducted on service encounters, however most of them tackled commercial contexts in which there is presence of monetary exchange. It covered contexts such as

markets (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015) small shops (Traverso, 2007) and cafés (Placencia & Mancera Rueda, 2011; Tayfor, 2015) On the other hand; studies on non-commercial service encounters were scarcely tackled. Some examples of that cover studies in banks and information desks (Shively, 2013), student exchange offices (Torres & Gafaranga, 2002), post offices (Ventola, 1983. 2005) and reference desks in college libraries. Furthermore, according to Shively (2013) the degree of (in)directness in requests is affected by the cultural variation. A study submitted by Placencia (2005) in Peninsular Spanish corner shops revealed that direct imperatives, questions and elliptical forms were widely used in contrast to indirect strategies. The same request formulae were found in Shively's (2011) study on American learners of Spanish in Toledo, Spain who made use of direct requests to blend in more with society. Moreover, Alzahrani (2021) investigation in three different cafés, each one has a different ethnic and cultural background from the other to compare clients pragmatic strategies in these different settings, results showed solidarity and closeness by using direct requests with their interlocutors coming from the same cultural and ethnic background whereas indirect strategies were employed when interacting with interlocutors with a different background.

7. The study

7.1. Participants and setting

The requests were collected by a total of 80 Oran-spoken Arabic citizens; the participants were of different ages (30- 60 years old), gender, place of residence and academic levels. The targeted citizens were not approached for any further information, and were not provided any details regarding the research objectives by way of obtaining natural occurring data. In addition, data was collected from three different town halls in order to have a wide range of requests, in which 20 requests were collected from a town hall situated in El-kerma; a small village in Oran. Moreover, 30 requests were gathered from Canastel town hall, a small village lying on the Mediterranean. Additionally, 30 requests were collected from Oran town hall which is

located in Oran Centre which receives inhabitants from all over the city.

7.2. Data collection procedure

Data for the current paper were collected between the periods of June 2023 and March 2024. Despite the fact that some inhabitants only used French language especially in Oran and Canastel town halls, only Oran-spoken Arabic requests or both i.e. code-switching were gathered. Hence, French requests were not explored. Broadly, the exchange of talk took the following order; firstly, the citizens entered the town hall and approached the service counter, greeted the service provider who in turn greeted back, then the request was uttered. After that, they were given the information/document needed, thanked the service provider and left without filling out any information survey. Moreover, only requests along with politeness markers were collected among, any additional expressions fall out of the scope of our research. Hence, notes were promptly taken right after the request was uttered. Accordingly, the ‘field notes’ method was employed (Beebe, 1995), regardless of the fact that audio recording would have contributed to collecting more detailed and specific data, we were not given permission to record. Nevertheless, data was collected at the end of the day; this is when the town hall employees receive very few inhabitants to avoid any destruction and noise. Therefore, the targeted utterances were more accurate and easy to be noted down.

7.3. Data analysis

This paper focuses only on the head act, that is, the “request” and the politeness markers, these linguistic softeners are affected by religion i.e. religious expressions are often employed when asking for documents (Dali Youcef. L, 2022) . Thus, any other outlying expressions that may have an impact on the degree of politeness of the requests analyzed in this study get out of line of the current paper. The requests were analyzed according to the

CCSARP taxonomies proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1983). Nevertheless, the taxonomies mentioned in the following table cover only the request realization present in the study.

The table below represents request realizations in (column1), the second column (2) showcases the form variants in requests, (column 3) represents English examples and (column 4) is set out for the transcribed Oran-spoken Arabic examples. As it is shown in the following table, the use of direct strategy (imperatives) or (mood derivable) is employed to ask for documents or information. They are considered as unmitigated formulae (Antonopoulou, 2015, Kerbrat- Orecchioni, 2005) Hence, this classification was followed in the current investigation.

The modal ‘can’ falls under the scope of conventionally indirect requests along with other expressions, namely “Is it possible to?”, usually uttered in French. On the flipside, ‘want statements’ and ‘need statements’ include variants like (want) / ra:nib a:Gi/ and (need) / xasni:/ or in the past / bGi:t/ or would like which is often expressed in French (Je voudrais). Additionally, ‘want statements’ are usually used in two forms i.e. the past or the present form. Moreover, the request realization in the imperative form only includes the following variants / xarejli/ , /xarji:li/ or /txarji:i/ .

Table1. Request realizations in the present study

Request Realizations	Form Variants	English examples	Arabic Transliteration
Direct Request	I want ... I need Imperative (M.D)	I want to have a birth certificate. I need to have a birth certificate. Give me a copy of my birth certificate.	/baGi: nxaraZ extrait de naissance/ /xasni extrait de naissance/ /xarji:li extrait de naissance/
Conventionally indirect	Can ?	Can you give me a copy of my birth certificate? Is it possible to have a copy of my birth certificate?	/tneZmi txarzi:li l'extrait de naissance ta :?i/ /possible tZarji :li extrait de naissance ta :?i/

The requests stated above were listed using the taxonomy presented in figure 1 to showcase the different levels of directness and request realizations present in our investigation.

8. Results and Discussion

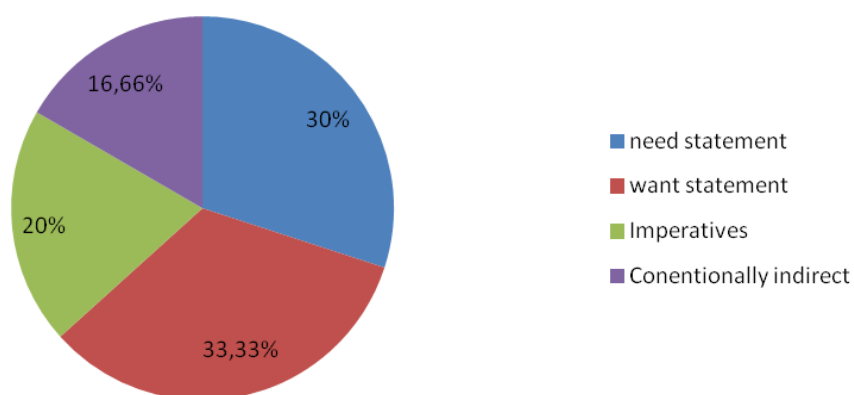
Notably, when selecting the data, only the first request was analyzed i.e. when the participants, in the current study, uttered more than one request when asking for information or documents, the first request was selected to be put under investigation. Furthermore, the participants were the first to greet, the service providers greeted back and then the requests were formed by the participants To answer our research question, a total of 80 requests were gathered from the citizens who came to the three targeted town halls in Oran to retrieve documents or to ask for information. The requests were listed in relation to the taxonomy introduced in table.1 above and, thus, are represented in the following figure.

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As it is displayed in the figure above (30 %) of the requests were made through the use of ‘need statements’ which makes it wider in use compared to other request realizations. Moreover, the want statement follows to a much lesser extent with an average of (33, 33 %). Similarly, on the same line, imperatives are used by roughly the same number of participants who employed linguistic softeners along with this request realization. On the other hand, conventionally indirect requests are used to a very limited extent (16, 66%) and this was done by means of French expressions such as (Je voudrais) and (Est-ce que c’est possible....?).

Furthermore, this research covered the use of different request variables whether uttered with or without linguistic mitigation, this particular context does not grant for a fixed pattern of request productions since a good number of participants used need statements and want statements along with imperatives and conventionally indirect requests. Following (Patricia Slazar & Sara Orts, 2018), a statistical analysis was set up to establish the differences in signification between request realizations; however they were found to be non-

Figure 2. Request realisations in Oran town halls



significant.

Consequently, it is marked that in such non-commercial settings, it is clear-cut that the requests were realized either to ask for a service or ask for information and thus, uttering any form of requests in this context whether they are used with or without mitigation devices or peripheral modification is not viewed as a face-threatening act to the service provider. The following request realizations are examples taken from our data to reflect on our findings:

Example.1 (Need statement) I need a birth certificate. / xas'ni extrait de naissance/

Example.2 (Want statement) I want to have a copy of my birth certificate. / rani ba:Gi nxaraZ résidence/

Example. 3 (Mood derivable) Give a copy of my birth certificate. / xareZli extrait de naissance./

Example.4 (Conventionally indirect) Can I have a birth certificate? /t'naZmi txarZi:li acte de mariage ?/

Similarly, in a recent study conducted in Saudi Arabia in a café when interacting with service providers of the same ethnic/cultural background, Saudi customers made use of direct requests to show solidarity and camaraderie whereas along with some internal modifications. On the other hand, direct requests were employed with a little less of internal modifications; the choice of request variants is affected by the cultural distance between the customers and service providers. Along the lines of Kerbrat-Orecchioni, (2005) requests in service encounters are perceived as utterances that bring no threat on the requestee's face in view of the fact that "the receiver has more to gain than the person making the request." (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005, p.36) As a consequence, adding linguistic softeners and internal modifications are considered as a tool to show sympathy and not to mitigate the imposition made from requests. (Danblon et al., 2005) Some linguistic softeners from our

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findings are distributed in the following table:

Table.2 Distribution of religious internal modifications.

Internal modifications			
Religious expressions	English examples	Number	Frequency
/allah jxali:k/	May God protect you.	21	26,25%
/allah jusutrak/	May God protect you	13	16,25%
/allah jahafD'ak/	May God protect you	18	22,25%
Total of religious expressions		52	65%

The above mentioned examples are related to religious expressions which are considered as a politeness markers (Bouchara, A. (2015), hence they are related to internal modifications.

Table.3 Distribution of French internal modifications

Internal modifications			
French expressions	English examples	Number	Frequency

S'il te plaît	Please	18	22,25
S'il vous plaît	Please	10	12,5
Total of French expressions		28	35

As it is showcased in table (3) and (4) the internal modifications were divided into two main parts, namely religious expressions which were used frequently with an average of (65 %) out of 80 polite expressions. On the contrary side, French expressions weren't found to be widely used in such a context with an average of only (35%) The following are examples of these internal modifications along with some request realizations:

Example.1 May God keep you, can you give me my birth certificat

/allah jxali:k t'naZmi txarZi:li extrait de naissance ?/

Example.2 May God cover you. I need a birth certificate.

/allah jusutrak xas'ni extrait de naissance/

Example. 3 May God protect you.I need a marriage certificate.

/ allah jahafD'ak xti: xas'ni acte de mariage/

Example. 4 / s'il te plaît rani ba:Gi nxaraZ résidence/

Please, I want to have a certificate of residence.

Example. 5 / s'il vous plaît possible nxaraZ acte de décès ?/

Please, is it possible to have a death certificate?

In this context, the use of direct requests is not considered as a face-

threatening act. Relatedly, the use of need statements, want statements or imperatives is not perceived to be impolite in such a context i.e. service encounters, on the contrary an excessive use of polite markers can be seen as “overly polite at best, or odd at worst.” (Myers Scotton & Bernstein, 1988. p, 382 as cited in Patricia Salazar & Sara Orts, 2018.P, 48). Consequently, the findings to our research question put forward a preference for employing direct requests through need, want and imperative statements leaving unconventionally indirect requests ranking at the end of the list. In the same vein, the present research paper confirms previous research (e.g, Alzahrani.A, 2021, Patricia Salazar & Sara Orts, 2018 and Félix-Brasdefer, 2015)

8.1. Conclusion

This paper examined naturally-occurring service encounters at three different town halls in Oran. The aim of this research was to examine the different request realizations along with the internal modifications. The

findings revealed that direct requests are, indeed, the most frequently used realizations in the three town halls where need statements tops the list being widely used by citizens in the targeted town halls, moreover want statements come next and mood derivable i.e follow with a less average. On the other hand, indirect requests were not very common where few citizens employed conventionally indirect requests, furthermore the aforementioned expressions were recurrently realized by means of French expressions like “Est-ce que c’est possible...?”, in Oran dialect often shortened into “possible....” . Another variant used within the conventionally indirect request realization is the expression “Je voudrais.....” Hence, instances of code switching were also found in the current paper where some expressions were employed within the head act.

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