

Indonesian Learners' Requests in English: A Speech-Act Based Study

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1. Introduction

This paper investigates requests by Indonesian learners based on speech act theories. It attempts to find the characteristics of the requests, and discuss the findings from the view points of forms and politeness strategy. This essay consists of five main parts. They are the introduction, brief theoretical aspects of making requests, methodology, result and discussion, and conclusion. Language is a means of communication, and people use language for various reasons. Finegan, et al. (1992: 3) state that language has been viewed as a vehicle of thought, a system of expression that mediates the transfer of thought from one person to another. They also claim (p.305) that "language is principally a tool for doing things" and describe that through language people do things such as: propose marriage, impose a life sentence, swear to tell the truth, fire an employee and so on.

Learning how language is used is commonly associated with the study of speech acts. Speech acts are "actions that are carried out through language" (Finegan, et al., 1992:307). Various tasks are accomplished by means of language, and linguists have different ways of explaining about speech acts. Searle (1976) groups speech acts into five basic types based on speaker intentions, i.e. *representatives*, *directives*, *commissives*, *expressives*, and *declarations*. Finegan, et al. (1992:307) divide speech acts into six types, five of which are similar to the ones proposed by Searle (1976), plus *Verdictives*. Holmes (1992: 286) lists six categories of speech functions, using different terminologies. The fact that speech acts vary from culture to culture has been widely acknowledged

(Brown, 1980:122), (Harding and Riley, 1986:42), (Beal, 1990), (Bardovi-Harlig, 1991), (Chen, 1993) and (Manes, 1983:96).

Finegan et al. (pp. 307-308) define each type of speech acts as follows: *Representatives* are speech acts that represent a state of affairs, e.g. assertions, claims, hypotheses, descriptions and suggestions. *Representatives* can generally be characterised as being true or false. *Commissives* are speech acts that commit a speaker to a course of actions, e.g. promises, pledges, threats and vows. *Directives* are speech acts intended to get the addressee to carry out an action, e.g. commands, requests, challenges, invitations, entreaties and dares. *Declarations* are speech acts that bring about the state of affairs, e.g. blessings, firings, baptism, arrests, marrying, dismissing a case. *Expressives* are speech acts that indicate the speaker's psychological state or attitude, e.g. greetings, apologies, congratulations, condolences and thanks-givings. *Verdictives* are speech acts that make assessments or judgements, e.g. ranking, assessing, appraising and condoning.

2. Brief theoretical aspects of making requests

Searle (1979:13) defines directives as "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something." Requests which fall into the group of directives (Sifianou, 1992:98) are widely reviewed. Labov and Fanshel (1977:63) define request as "requests for an action of some kind from other person". Bach and Harnish (1982: 47) distinguish requests for information and requests for action. Directives, however, cannot all be considered into requests, as an act 'which in the speaker's

view cannot be refused is not really a request' (Sifianou, 1992: 124).

Forms of requests. As far as the form and functions of requests are concerned, requests may take the forms of imperatives (see also Davies, 1986:2; Hamblin, 1987:1-45), interrogatives (especially with modal auxiliary verbs) which Wierzbicka (1991:88) call 'whimperatives', negatives, declaratives and elliptical sentences (Sifianou, 1992:125-152). Holmes (1992:290) illustrates how directives may take the forms of imperative, *you* imperative, interrogative with modal verb, interrogative with tag, interrogative with negative modal, and declarative.

Choice of request perspective. Based on request perspective, Blum Kulka and Olshtain (1984) as quoted by Nguyen (1990) distinguish requests into hearer oriented, speaker oriented, speaker and hearer oriented, and impersonal. Sifianou (1992:102) examines the prominent devices to show the entity that will be placed in the prominent position in requests. There are four kinds of them, the speaker made prominent, as in "Can I open the window?", the addressee made prominent, as in "Could you open the window?", both the speaker and the addressee made prominent, as in "Could we open the window?", the action made prominent, which is achieved mainly through impersonalization or passivization.

Modifications of requests. Sifianou (1992:157) states that the main function of modification is 'to soften or intensify the impact of the request'. It is also explained that requests can be internally and externally modified (pp. 157-184). Internal modification is achieved by means of linguistic elements within the same speech act which can either mitigate or intensify its force, e.g. by using *openers*, *hedges*, and *fillers*. External modification is achieved by mitigating or intensifying devices which occur in the immediate linguistic context rather than in the speech act (Faerch and Kasper, 1984), and is realized by using commitment seeking devices and reinforcing devices.

Internal modification. As mentioned above openers, hedges and fillers are used to modify requests internally. Sifianou

(1992:158) defines *openers* as the opening words or expressions which seek or assume the addressee's cooperation, which express the speaker's gratitude or indebtedness, and which modify the request as a whole. The examples of openers are: "would you mind...", "I don't suppose", "I would be grateful....", "would you....", "do you think....". *Hedges* (p. 158) include diminutives, tag questions and other linguistic devices. They may function as softeners to mitigate the force of requests and intensifiers to aggravate the impact of requests. Haas (1978:82) suggests that the "primary function of diminutives, as the term suggests, is to express the idea of little or small. However they may also be employed to indicate affection, tenderness, and positive emotions or, conversely, negative feelings or contempt". The examples of diminutives are "info" for "information", "veg" for "vegetables", "memo" for "memorandum", (Sifianou, 1992:166). Besides diminutives, various syntactic modifications can be used to show diminution such as "just", "possibly", "rather", "perhaps", "sort of", "a little", "a moment", "a bit". A third form of internal modification are *fillers*, which Sifianou (1992:179) considers only 'optional lexical items or simply 'noises' produced by speakers to fill in the gaps occurring in discourse'. They are highly formulaic and mostly semantically void in that although they have a certain literal meaning, they do not retain it when used as fillers, such as "perhaps, perhaps..", "Do we happen .. do we happen ..."

External modification. Sifianou (1992:183) describes that external modification in requests uses among others optional clauses or words to soften or emphasize the force of the whole request in some way or other. Most external modifiers are means by which the speaker tries to elicit the addressee's cooperation to support the actual request. Some of those clauses are *commitment seeking devices*, e.g. "Will you do me a favour?", "Could I ask you something?", "I wondered if you could do me a favour", and *reinforcing devices* which Edmondson (1981) calls "supportive moves", such as

grounders, expanders, and disarmers. Reinforcing devices can mitigate and/or intensify requests. *Grounders* (p.185) are usually clauses which can either precede or follow a request and give reasons or justifications for the act requested. *Grounders* contribute to a harmonious encounter in that the speaker, by giving reasons for a request, expect the addressee to be more understanding and willing to co-operate, e.g. "bring my keys, I want to undo my cases because we do find ourselves a little difficulty and we wondered if you could .." *Disarmers* (Sifianou,1992:187) can be complementing phrases, entreaties, or formulaic promises, and in general, phrases which express the speakers' awareness and concern that the requests might be an imposition on the addressees, e.g. "I don't want to bother you, but is there somewhere we can go?", "If you've got the time, could you manage to pop in for me please?".

Politeness in requests. There are different ideas about politeness. Lakoff (1989) distinguishes three kinds of politeness. They are: polite behaviour which is manifest when interlocutors adhere to politeness rules, whether expected or not; non-polite behaviour, amounting to non-conforming with politeness rules where conformity is not expected; and rude behaviour, where politeness is not conveyed even though it is expected. Brown and Levinson (1987:10) introduce two types of politeness: positive and negative politeness, and as quoted by Cook and Kasper (forthcoming) politeness only operates "when face interests are at risk, and actors therefore required to make strategic choices how to handle imminent face threat". Positive and negative politeness derive from the concept face, which Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) define as "the public image that every member wants to claim for himself". This "face" concept consists of two aspects: negative face, i.e. the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, and positive face the positive consistent self image or 'personality' claimed by interactants. Acts which may threaten

face are called Face Threatening Acts (FTA) (Brown and Levinson,1987:60).

There are different concepts of politeness in requests. Politeness in requests may be discussed from several angles. Holmes (1992:290) associates politeness with the use of interrogatives and declaratives. Wierzbicka (1991:90) quotes Blum Kulka et al. (1985:137) who present a connection between a relatively high level of directness of Israeli interactional style with "solidarity politeness oriented basis".

Clark and Schunk (1980) conducted experiments which confirmed that it is the literal meaning of a speech act which is crucial in conveying politeness with both requests and responses. They claim that (Clark and Schunk,1980:111) "the more the literal meaning of a request implies personal benefits for the listener, within reason, the more polite is the request". It is suggested that "May I ask you what time it is?" is more polite than "won't you tell me what time it is?" because the literal meaning of the former demands very little of the addressee and offers the option of giving permission, whereas the literal meaning of the latter demands a great deal of the addressee. Similarly, "Sure/Yes, it's six" is more polite than "It is six", because the former takes both the literal and non-literal meaning of the utterance into account. This is not always true, however, because as Holmes states (p.290) a gentler *sit down* may be more polite than a thundering *I want you all sitting down now*.

3. Methodology

Subjects and DCT. Twenty Indonesian students, male and female, are asked to complete open questionnaire (Appendix 1). An open questionnaire is different from the classic dialogue completion task in that it "asks participants to respond to a scenario", while the latter "gives at least one conversational turn and may also give a scenario." (Bardovi-Harlig, 1993:145-146). The reason for using open questionnaire is that the students are expected to complete the task more freely, without any possible help from

existing written conversation. They are expected to be natural and creative speakers making requests to hearers.

There are three situations. Situation 1 is the imaginary interaction between learner and professor, situation 2 between learner and a new member in the class, and situation 3 between learner with a child. The situational background is arranged in such a way that there is a social distance between learner and the addressee. As mentioned in section 2 above, social distance is one of the factors to be considered in the assessment of the seriousness of an FTA.

Tools for Analysis. Learners' responses are numbered and grouped according to situation. They will be manually coded and counted based on:

1. Forms of requests
2. Types of openers
3. Types of forms of address
4. Types of request perspectives
5. Type of hedges
6. Types of fillers
7. Types of external modifications

For clarity and space efficiency, abbreviations below will be used onward.

NoR = Number of Responses ; LTS = Learner-Teacher Situation (Situation 1)

LLS = Learner-Learner Situation (Situation 2) ; LCS = Learner-Child Situation (Situation 3)

% = Percentage; DCT = Dialogue Completion Task

4. Result and discussion

The collected data are presented in various tables. As can be seen in table 1 below, interrogatives are the preferred forms of requests. The interrogatives seem to be constructed slightly differently from situation to situation. When the intended requests are expressed in declaratives, it is not very clear what the addressee is expected to do. The declaratives contain reasons or grounders.

Table 1. Forms of Requests

Forms	L T S	%	L L S	%	L C S	%
Imperatives	-	-	-	-	-	-
Interrogatives	13	65	20	100	19	95
Negatives	-	-	-	-	-	-
Declaratives	7	35	-	-	1	5
Ellipsis	-	-	-	-	-	-

Learners use interrogatives to express requests. In LLS all requests use interrogatives, and 95% of requests in LCS use interrogatives. In learners' first language, it is common to use interrogatives to express request. Similarly, in English, requests are frequently expressed in various forms of interrogatives. This might be the background which influences learners to use interrogatives to express requests. An interesting phenomenon is that 35% of requests in LTS are in declaratives. In this case, power distance between learner and teacher may have played an important role. In learners' first language, it is extremely difficult to make a request as in LTS. Declaratives might have been considered more appropriate by learners.

Table 2 indicates that the openers chosen by learners tend to vary in accordance with the situation. "I wonder" is used only in LTS, but "can you" and "do you mind" are not used in this situation. They appear in LLS and LCS. On the contrary, "I wonder" is only used in LTS, and does not appear in either LLS and LCS. "Could you" occurs in all situations. All requests in LLS use openers. Table 3 indicates when making requests to an older and more superior person, learners tend to use forms of address. To a professor, six responses use title plus last name, and one response uses title only.

Table 2. Types of Openers

Situation	Openers	NoR	%
LTS	Would you	1	5
	Would you mind	2	10
	Would you please	1	5
	Do you think	1	5
	Could you	3	15
	Can I	3	15

	I wonder	1	5
	When can	1	5
	Without openers	7	35
LLS	Would you	4	20
	Can you	6	30
	Could you	9	45
	Do you mind	1	5
	Without openers	0	0
LCS	Can you	7	35
	Would you mind	1	5
	Would you please	1	5
	Could you	8	40
	Do you mind	1	5
	May we	1	5
	Without openers	1	5

As table 2 shows, learners use both primary auxiliary verbs (do..) and modal auxiliaries verbs (would, can, may...) to form interrogatives. It seems the chosen forms of auxiliaries do not strikingly differ from one situation to another. Could you, however, seems to be the favourite choice. Specific pronouns, i.e. you, is used after the auxiliaries. Only in LTS, however, do learners use can I instead of can you, and also I wonder. This is interesting. In learners' first language, making requests to older or more superior persons use interrogatives exactly like that, that is, using can I or Could I or would it be possible for me to.....But, if this is the case, these forms should have higher occurrence in LTS, perhaps much higher than 15%.

Table 3 a. Forms of address in situation 1 (LTS)

Forms of address	Type	NoR	%
First Name	-	-	-
Last Name	-	-	-
Title	Prof.	1	5
Title + Last Name	Prof. Buckland	6	30
Others	-	-	-
Without form of address	-	13	65

In LLS, learners call the addressee by his first name, that is, Rudy. Table 3b shows only five responses do not use this.

Table 3 b. Forms of address in situation 2 (Learner-learner situation)

Forms of address	NoR	%
First Name	15	75
Last Name	-	-
Title	-	-
Title + Last Name	-	-
Others	-	-
Without form of address	5	25

Table 3 c. Forms of address in situation 3 (Learner-child situation)

Forms of address	Type	NoR	%
First Name	-	-	-
Last Name	-	-	-
Title	-	-	-
Title + Last Name	-	-	-
Others	Boy	2	10
	Guy	1	5
	Mack	1	5
	Young boy	1	5
Without form of address	-	15	75

As we saw above, Indonesian learners seem to find it difficult to converse with other people without mentioning their names. It may be slightly different from the customs in western society, where it might not always be compulsory to do so. The habit of addressing can be seen Table 3c, where Indonesian learners use other words such as "boy", "guy", "Mack", "Young boy" as forms of addresses.

In learners' first language, it is essential to use certain forms of address, for example in greeting, thanking, inviting, and requesting. Learners use title plus last name, title only in situation 1. In situation 2 first name is used. In situation three, where the addressee's name is not supplied in the DCT, learners create their own way of addressing, such as Mack, boy, young boy, guy. This may have educational background, i.e. they want to teach the children to learn to be polite in speaking. In Java (Smith-Hefner, 1988: 543-544) the people also wish to express their closeness by using forms of address, normally by calling their first

names. These patterns are carried over in the English requests the Indonesian learners make. This seems to indicate their first language has really strong influence on learners, i.e. there seems to exist a sense of obligation to use certain forms of address in making requests to someone. Asking children to do something by asking his mother or father who will later ask their children to perform the intended request is common among Javanese people.

Table 4. Requests according to prominence devices

Prominence devices	L T S	%	L L S	%	L C S	%
The speaker made prominent	13	65	-	-	-	-
The addressee made prominent	7	35	20	100	20	100
Both the speaker and addressee prominent	-	-	-	-	-	-
The action made prominent	7	35	-	-	1	5

Table 4 illustrates request perspectives. Learners use "the-addressee-made prominent" in LLS and LCS. In LTS, seven responses use the "addressee-made-prominent types" and seven responses use the "speaker-made-prominent" request types.

Table 5 shows that diminutives "a little bit, bit, some (in 'some extra time') are used in LTS. Repeated imperatives, such as "Just press this button, just press this right" may function as intensifiers in situation LCS.

Table 5 Type of Hedges

LTS	LLS	LCS		
Softeners Diminutives	A little bit/ some time	Bit/ extra	-	-
Miscellaneous	-	-	-	-
Tags Questions	-	-	-	-
Intensifiers	-	-	-	Just

				press this button. Just press this right.
--	--	--	--	---

Table 6. Types of Fillers

Fillers	LTS/ Type/ NoR/%	LLS/ Type/ NoR/%	LCS/ Type/ NoR/%
Hesitators	-	-	-
Cajolers	Please/ 5/20	Please/ 11/55	Please/ 9/45
Appealers	-	-	-
Attention	Excuse me/2/10	Excuse me/5/25	Excuse me/5/25

It is interesting to note that "please" as cajolers and "excuse me" as attention getters are more frequently used in LLS and LCS rather than in LTS. The possible reason is when requests are expressed in speaker made prominent, there is a tendency to omit please. When requests are addressee made prominent, please are more frequently used.

The use of "please" in all situations may indicate learners' sense of politeness to all addressees regardless of age and power. If this is the case, learners seem to apply first language culture in interaction. One of the rules is not to give bad examples in language use to children. It is obligatory to respect the older people and new acquaintances.

It may be essential to investigate what politeness strategy learners employ in constructing the requests. On the basis of the theories, it can be assumed that learners mostly seem to use negative politeness strategy. This can partly be identified on the use of titles, titles plus first name, first names. The use of interrogatives may also be used to identify negative politeness strategy adopted by learners. "Please", "excuse me", "may" can also be considered supporting negative politeness strategy. However, there are occasions where learners seem to want the addressees to really understand what to do, and use additional expressions to make requests clearer to the

addressees to perform. This can be seen in requests as follows: "Just press this button". "Just press this right."

Table 7 External Modifications

LTS/NoR/%	LLS/ NoR/ %		LCS/ NoR/ %
Commitment	-	-	-
Seeking Devices			
Reinforcing Devices			
Grounders	8/40	10	-
Disarmers	-	-	-
Expanders	-	-	-

Typical devices to modify requests externally is by attaching grounders. There seems to be a sense of obligation for learners to explicitly present the reasons why a certain request is made. Request perspectives present interesting phenomena. Learners seem reluctant to use addressee-made-prominent request types in LTS. In LLS and LCS, learners do not seem to show this reluctance. It is likely that power distance has become the key factor preventing learners from using addressee-made-prominent request type in LTS. Another possibility is learners wish to show respect. They think of how to achieve the goal of requesting without necessarily causing esteem reduction on the part of the addressee. This use of diminutives and grounders are perhaps connected to this effort. Learners seem to try to reduce the importance or burden of the requests to provide less burden on to the addressee by providing grounders and expressing phrases of diminutives.

6. Conclusion

The study of Indonesian learners' requests gives some interesting phenomena. The result indicates learners' preference in using certain request forms, terms of addressing, request perspectives, and linguistic devices for internal and external request modifications. The result also seems to indicate learners' preference for adopting negative politeness strategy in making their requests.

This study is, however, very limited in its scope, size, and data. The interpretation of the result can be done more reliably if the data is not too limited. This study is intended to be a pilot project for broader scale related study. Future studies on this area may consider enlarging the subjects, improving situational backgrounds, attempting subjects originating from one ethnic group, e.g. Javanese, requesting subjects to fill in the reason for making a certain request and what may be the equivalent expression in the first language, arranging in such a way that subjects consist of male and female of equal numbers, obtaining data from native speakers of English for comparison. Findings of the study covering wider scope, size and data may be more useful and reliable.

Appendix 1

Read the text carefully. Imagine the situation, then complete the space as naturally as possible. Please do not take too long a time to complete.

Part A

1. Prof. Buckland is a one of your lecturers. You plan to go to see him and ask for a one week extension for your essay. What will you say to him?

2. It is hot in your classroom. You notice that the window is not open. You want to ask your classmate, Rudy, who is a new member of the class and sitting close to the window, to open it. What will you say to Rudy?

3. You are at a party in one of your lecturers' house. Many students have come with their families. You ask the son of one of your friends, a fourteen year-old boy, to take your photo with some other friends. What will you say to him?

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