

Experimental evidence on requests in English varieties from the perspective of local grammars

Mengkai Wang

Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

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Abstract

This study investigates the speech act of requesting in British, American, and Hong Kong English through the lens of local grammars. Using an experimental design with 150 speakers, the study analysed elicited requests to identify variety-specific patterns. The results reveal that while indirectness is a common feature, its linguistic implementation varies significantly. British English speakers favor politeness markers to achieve indirectness, American English speakers use more direct forms emphasizing modal verbs, and Hong Kong English speakers employ an integrated strategy of deference and indirectness. These findings demonstrate that request-making is deeply rooted in local socio-cultural norms, challenging universalist approaches and highlighting the value of the local grammar framework in understanding intercultural communication.

Keywords: speech acts, requests, English varieties, local grammars

Introduction

The ability to make requests effectively is fundamental to human interaction. As a universal speech act, requesting is realized through a variety of linguistic forms, which are shaped not only by the universal principles of language but also by the specific socio-cultural norms of a speech community. The study of these variations, often conceptualized through the framework of "local grammars" (Stirling, 2004), allows for a deeper understanding of how language is used in context and how speakers negotiate social relationships through their linguistic choices. This paper examines the speech act of requesting in three distinct English varieties: British English (BrE), American English (AmE), and Hong Kong English (HKE).

Previous research has established that the realization of speech acts, including requests, can vary significantly across different cultures and language varieties (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). These variations are often attributed to differing concepts of politeness, face-saving strategies, and the perceived social distance between interactants. While general patterns of indirectness and directness in requests have been identified, the specific linguistic mechanisms employed and their interplay with socio-cultural factors warrant detailed investigation within specific varieties. This study aims to fill this gap by employing an experimental approach to elicit and analyze requestive speech acts from native speakers of BrE, AmE, and HKE, viewed through the lens of their

respective local grammars. By uncovering the unique patterns and strategies employed by speakers of each variety, this research seeks to highlight the nuances of intercultural communication and inform pedagogical practices for teaching English as a second language.

Methodology

The study involved 150 participants, with 50 native speakers from each of the three target English varieties: British English, American English, and Hong Kong English. Participants were recruited through university networks and social media platforms. All participants were monolingual speakers of their respective English varieties and provided informed consent.

A controlled experiment was designed to elicit requestive speech acts. Participants were presented with a series of 20 scenarios, each depicting a different socio-pragmatic context. These scenarios were crafted to vary in terms of the relationship between the requester and the addressee (e.g., close friend, colleague, stranger), the imposition of the request, and the formality of the situation. This variation was intended to elicit a range of request strategies.

Participants were asked to write down how they would make a request in each of the 20 scenarios. The collected requests were then analyzed using the local grammar framework. This involved identifying and quantifying key linguistic features, including: Indirectness Rating: A rating from 1 (highly direct) to 7 (highly indirect) was assigned to each request based on its semantic and syntactic directness; Modal Verb Count: The frequency of modal verbs used in requests (e.g., could, would, can, will); Politeness/Hedging Marker Count: The frequency of explicit politeness markers (e.g., please, kindly) and hedging devices (e.g., a bit, perhaps, sorry to bother you). The collected data was then subjected to statistical analysis.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the mean scores for indirectness ratings, modal verb counts, and politeness marker counts across the three English varieties. Post-hoc Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) tests were conducted where significant differences were found to determine which specific variety pairs differed.

Results and discussion

The results reveal distinct, variety-specific patterns in how requests are formulated. As shown in Figure 1, British and Hong Kong English speakers employ significantly more indirectness than American English speakers, who favor more direct forms. Figure 2 explains the linguistic basis for this difference: British speakers achieve indirectness through a high frequency of politeness markers, whereas American speakers rely more heavily on modal verbs to soften their direct requests. Hong Kong English speakers use a blended strategy, showing a high use of politeness markers similar to the British but also

incorporating modal verbs. Furthermore, Figure 3 illustrates a strong positive correlation between the use of politeness markers and indirectness ratings for British English speakers, confirming this is their primary strategy.

These findings highlight the significant impact of local grammars on speech act realization. The variations observed suggest that “politeness” is not a monolithic concept but is enacted through contextually specific linguistic choices. The indirectness in BrE, achieved through a heavy reliance on politeness markers, contrasts with the directness in AmE, characterized by modal verbs. HKE speakers present a fascinating blend, utilizing both strategies, possibly reflecting a pragmatic negotiation between their linguistic background and the need to communicate effectively in a global English. This study challenges a universalist view of request-making, underscoring the importance of understanding localized linguistic practices.

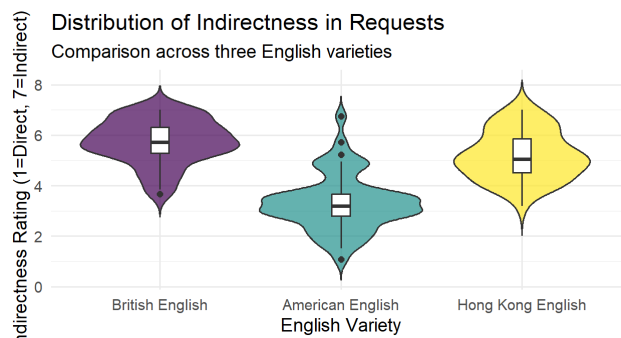


Figure 1. Distribution of Indirectness in Requests.

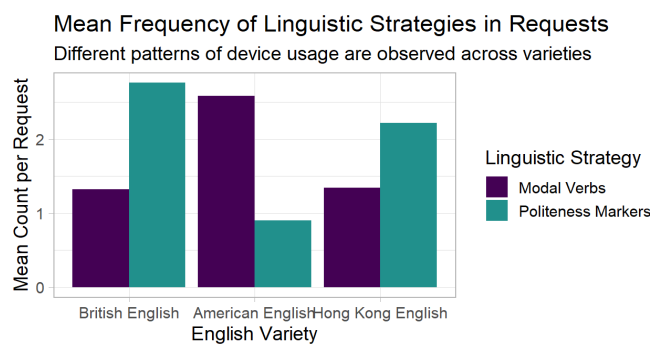


Figure 2. Mean Frequency of Linguistic Strategies in Requests.

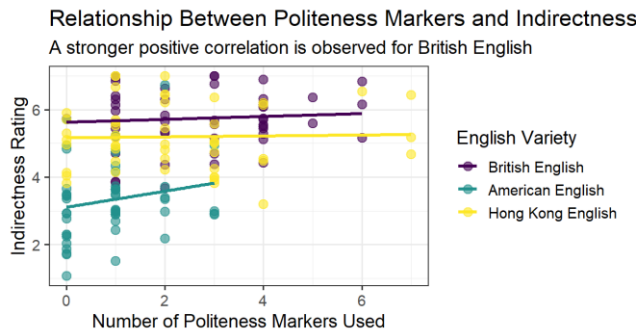


Figure 3. Relationship between Politeness Markers and Indirectness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that the speech act of requesting is realized through systematically different local grammars in British, American, and Hong Kong English. The variations in indirectness and the preferred linguistic strategies for achieving it underscore the deep influence of socio-cultural context on language use. These findings challenge a universalist view of request-making and demonstrate the value of the local grammar framework for analyzing nuanced linguistic behaviors. The insights are practically relevant for improving intercultural communication and for teaching English as a second language, as they emphasize the importance of understanding the subtle, context-dependent nature of pragmatic competence.

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