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Speech Act of Requesting by Postgraduate Students in the Context of Myanmar

by
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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the realization of the speech act of requesting by English specialization postgraduate students in Mandalay University. By the application of the coding scheme for speech acts proposed by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) in their Cross-cultural Speech Acts Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project, the data were collected through a discourse completion test (DCT) questionnaire with twelve created request situations. After identifying the utterances of requesting in their units, this research makes an analysis to discover what request perspective is the most common approach to requests for the English specialization postgraduate students in Myanmar and to explore what request strategies they use when they make a request in the target language. The main findings are that the H-oriented request perspective was the most popular among requests made by the postgraduate students and with regard to the request strategy conventionally indirect request strategies was the most frequently used.

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1. Introduction

With the increasing number of Myanmar students who are learning English as a foreign language for various purposes, it is important to know how to acquire successful communication during interactions. In order to avoid communication breakdowns in cross-cultural contexts, learners should know the appropriate ways of performing speech acts in a foreign language.

In this research, the data were collected through a discourse completion test (DCT) questionnaire which is the most popular research instrument for data collection in the field of pragmatic study. The request situations were chosen in accordance with the notion of request as a speech act proposed by Searle (1969). The DCT questionnaire for the main study comprised 12 request situations which were carefully classified in the relationship between the interlocutors and the rank of imposition of the request. A total of 57 English specialization postgraduate students were asked to respond to the questionnaire and their responses to the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of the Head Act and the Peripheral Elements (Blum-Kulka &Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

2. Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this research is to investigate the speech act of requesting by English specialization postgraduate students in the Mandalay University. To achieve the main aim, two objectives are identified. They are:
- to discover the request perspectives of postgraduate students of English in Myanmar when they make requests in the target language
- to find out the request strategies employed by the postgraduate students while making English requests

3. Literature Review

In this section, the theoretical frameworks related to the process of data collection and the analysis of the research data on the speech act of requesting are presented.

3.1 Request as a Speech Act

Searle (1969) claims that request is a polite way of getting the addressee to do something. Searle (1969) in *Speech Acts,* presents a classification of the conditions that must hold for a successful speech act. On the basis of those conditions, the Speech Act of Requesting can be defined in the following way:

Types of Rule	Request
1. Propositional content	Future A of H
2. Preparatory	1. H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A. 2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events on his own accord.
3. Sincerity	S wants H to do A
4. Essential	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.

(Source: Searle, 1969)

3.1.1 The Units for the Analysis of a Request

Before proceeding to a detailed examination of the realization of the requests in English made by postgraduate students in Myanmar, the units for the analysis will be presented as defined by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Lubecka (2000). The units of analysis may occur in the form of an utterance or a sequence of utterances and may include the following segments: namely (i) the **Head Act** and (ii) the **Peripheral Elements.**

(i) The **Head Act** is the main utterance which has the function of requesting and can stand by itself, thus it can be used on its own, without any peripheral elements in order to convey the request. Head Acts vary in terms of i) *strategy type* and ii) *perspective*.

According to the findings resulting from the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989), there are nine types of request strategy. They are-

(a) Mood Derivable

Imperatives do perform the function of requests (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), this form of expressing a request is called Mood Derivable (MD).

(b) Explicit Performatives

Blum-Kulka et al., (1989) point out that in requests which appear as Explicit Performatives the illocutionary intent is explicitly named by S by means of a relevant illocutionary verb.

(c) Hedged Performatives

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1987) claim that Hedged Performatives are utterances embedding the naming of the illocutionary force. According to Fraser (1975), Hedged Performatives have the general form of requests realized by means of explicit performatives. However, they differ from the corresponding performative sentences in that they contain some modal verbs (e.g. must, will, would, have to) or verbs expressing intention.

(d) Obligation Statements

When employing Obligation Statements, the S either exerts his/her own authority, or refers to some external authority (e.g. institution, law, etc.) in order to persuade the H to perform a desired action. Modal verbs used in this type of request are must, have to, should, and ought to (Lubecka, 2000).

(e) Want Statements

According to Blum-Kulka et al (1989), a Want Statement "**expresses the speaker's desire that the event denoted in the proposition come about."** The core of this type of request involves the use of the verbs *need*, *want* and *would like* (*sb*) *to*.

(f) Suggestory Formulae

Suggestory Formulae "enables the S to suggest very cautiously some actions but he/she either cannot or does not want to express the hearer to have it performed."

(Lubecka, 2000:203). Suggestory Formulae in English often begin with *Why not…, Why don't…, What about…, How about…* expressions.

(g) Query Preparatory

Query Preparatory strategies were categorized into *willingness*, *availability*, *ability* and *possibility* conditions and also, *courtesy*, *general*, *intention*, and *permission*.

(h) Strong Hints Strong Hints contain "partial reference to objects or elements needed for the implementation of the act (directly pragmatically implying the act)" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain,1984)

(i) Mild Hints

Mild Hints are "utterances that make no reference to the request proper (or any elements) but are interpretable through the context as requests (indirectly pragmatically implying the act)" Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984).

Table (1) shows the strategy types which are grouped into three according to their level of directness.

Table (1): Request Strategy Types According to the Level of Directness

Level of Directness	Strategy Type	Examples
Direct	1. Mood Derivable: where the grammatical mood of the verb determines its illocutionary force as a request e.g. imperative 2. Explicit Performatives: where the illocutionary intent of the utterance is explicitly named. 3. Hedged Perforrnatives: where the naming of the illocutionary force is modified by hedging expressions. 4. Obligation Statements: where the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution. 5. Want Statements: where the utterance expresses S's desire, intention that H carries out the act.	*-Open the door.* *-I'm asking you to open the door.* *-I'd like to ask you to open the door.* *-You should open the door.*
Conventionally Indirect	6. Suggestory Formulae: where the utterance contains a suggestion to do the action. 7. Query Preparatory: where the utterance contains reference to a preparatory condition as conventionalized in any specific language.	*-Why don't you open the door?* *-Would you mind opening the door, please?*

Non-conventionally Indirect	8. Strong Hints: where the utterances contain partial reference to object or elements needed to implement the act. 9. Mild Hints: where no reference is made to the request proper, but interpretation is possible from the context.	*-The door is closed.* *-It's hot in here.*

<center>(Source: Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984)</center>

(ii) The **Peripheral Elements** include *alerters*, *external modifiers* and *internal modifiers*.

The functions of **alerters** are to alert H's attention to the upcoming speech act (i.e. address forms such as title/role, surname, first name, nickname, endearment, and offensive term, pronoun, and attention getters).

External modifiers are devices added to the syntactic unit realizing the Head Act.

Internal modifiers are devices which operate within the Head Act. Their function is to soften or increase the impact a request strategy is likely to have on H.

3.1.2 Request Perspectives

The categories of request perspective which have been distinguished by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) are as follows:

(a) Hearer-oriented (e.g. *Could you tell me what time it is?*)
(b) Speaker-oriented (e.g. *Can I use your computer for a while?*)
(c) Speaker and Hearer oriented (inclusive) (e.g. *Shall we start cleaning up?*)
(d) Impersonal i.e. the use of people/ they/ one/ as neural agents or passivization (*e.g. Is there any way to solve this problem?*)

In the present study, the responses to the requests are first analyzed according to their request perceptive mentioned above.

3.2 Related Researches

Due to the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variation features of requests, there are a considerable amount of studies on requests regarding their generalization patterns in different sociocultural settings. There were altogether 14 researches related to the present research in one way or another. The researches were arranged in the chronological order (1984-2009) and they can be classified into three groups such as the researches which focus on the study of request and apology at the same time, the ones which study the request only and the ones which seek to investigate the request strategies in their respective contexts. In many of these related researches data were collected through a discourse completion test (DCT) questionnaire, which is said to be the most appropriate research tool in pragmatic research, while the research data were collected through oral role-play in a few of the researches.

As far as the present research is concerned, similar to the previous studies on request, it tends to find out the request strategies employed by the postgraduate students while making requests in the target language. Furthermore, other aspects of the speech act of requesting such as the request perspective employed in relation to the Head Act are to be identified in the context of Myanmar.

4.   Research Methodology

The current research tries to find out the request perspectives, the request strategies and the peripheral elements employed by Myanmar postgraduate students of English when they make requests in the target language. The analysis focuses on the head acts strategies by English specialization postgraduate students in Myanmar.

4.1   Data Collection

The data collection activity took place in Mandalay University. The main study was carried out in the classrooms where the subjects were available. After the data were collected, the responses to the questionnaire were coded. All requests were analysed by means of request perspective and request strategy.

4.1.1   Participants

Data for this research was collected during the academic years 2012/2013. A total of 57 participants who are doing their master degree in English at Mandalay University took part in the main research investigating the sequence of utterances in requesting in English.

4.1.2   Instrument

The instrument used for collecting data in this research is a questionnaire, a modified discourse completion test (DCT). And the descriptions of the situations characterize the setting, the social distance, the social power between the interlocutors and the size of imposition.

The situations were as follows:

S_1 -A student borrowing a pen from a friend

S_2 -A student borrowing an expensive camera from a roommate

S_3 -A student asking a passer-by about the time

S_4 -A student asking a passer-by to help him/her move the benches

S_5 -A student borrowing a book from the supervisor

S_6 -A student asking the supervisor to give him/her some time for consultation

S_7 -A student asking the librarian to help him/her find a book

S_8 -A student asking the professor to write a recommendation letter

S_9 -A student asking the office cleaner to bring a glass of water

S_{10} -A student asking the cook in his/her hostel to do the laundry for him/her

S_{11} -A student asking a waiter to bring a roll of tissue

S_{12} -A student asking the gate-keeper at the university to tell his/her friend to wait for him/her at the gate for some time

The following table shows the classification of DCT situations according to contextual and social variables.

Table (3): Classification of DCT Situations

Situation	Social Power (P)	Social Distance(D)	Rank of Imposition(R)
S_1	S=H	-SD	Low
S_2	S=H	-SD	High
S_3	S=H	+SD	Low
S_4	S=H	+SD	High
S_5	S<H	-SD	Low
S_6	S<H	-SD	High
S_7	S<H	+SD	Low
S_8	S<H	+SD	High
S_9	S>H	-SD	Low
S_{10}	S>H	-SD	High
S_{11}	S>H	+SD	Low
S_{12}	S>H	+SD	High

4.2 Data Interpretation

This section deals with the overall description of the use of request perspective and request strategy across twelve request situations.

Request Perspectives across Twelve Situations

Total of 57 participants were asked to respond to 12 request situations. When the responses were analyzed in terms of the request perspective, there were four request perspectives such as H-oriented request perspective, S-oriented request perspective, S and H-oriented request perspective and Impersonal request perspective. The following table shows request perspective used by the participants across the twelve request situations.

Table (4): Request perspectives across twelve situations

Situations	H-oriented	S-oriented	S & H-oriented	Impersonal
S_1	44	13	0	0
S_2	31	26	0	0
S_3	25	10	0	22
S_4	54	3	0	0
S_5	31	24	0	2
S_6	22	33	0	2
S_7	53	4	0	0
S_8	42	13	0	2

S₉	50	5	0	2
S₁₀	51	6	0	0
S₁₁	43	11	0	3
S₁₂	50	7	0	0
Total	496	155	0	33
%	72.5%	22.7%	0%	4.8%

The figures in Table (16) shows the participants' preference for H-oriented request perspective since 72.5% of the requests appeared in the form of H-oriented request perspective. 22.7% performed by means of S-oriented request perspective and 4.8% in Impersonal request perspective. It is also interesting that none of the participants employed the S and H-oriented request perspective when they made requests in English.

Request Strategies across Twelve Situations

When the requests yielded by the participants in response to the questionnaire were analyzed with respect to the strategy types, they were classified into three groups namely direct level request strategies, conventionally indirect level request strategies and non-conventionally indirect level request strategies. Table (5) indicates the overall data for request strategies employed by the postgraduate students across six request situations.

Table (5): Request strategies across twelve situations

Situations	Direct Level	Conventionally Indirect Level	Non-conventionally Indirect Level
S₁	4	51	2
S₂	9	48	0
S₃	31	26	0
S₄	6	51	0
S₅	7	49	1
S₆	14	43	0
S₇	4	52	1
S₈	6	50	1
S₉	9	48	0
S₁₀	5	50	2
S₁₁	28	26	3
S₁₂	12	45	0
Total	135	539	10
%	19.7%	78.8%	1.5%

Conventionally indirect requests constituted 78.8% of all the responses. The use of direct request strategies amounted to 19.7% while that of non-conventionally indirect request strategies was only 1.5% of the total responses. Direct level requests were highly used in Situation-3 and Situation-6 while conventionally indirect requests were dominant figures in the remaining situations. Another request strategy type which is non-conventionally indirect request strategy was the least frequently used strategy by the participants in the present research.

5. Findings and Discussion

When the responses were first analyzed in terms of their request perspectives, the highest use of H-oriented request perspective can be observed in Situation-4 (a student asking a passer-by to help him/her move the benches). In this situation, 54 participants employed the H-oriented request perspective. With the use of this perspective, the S shows the H his/her desire to perform the requested action. In Situation-6 (a student asking the supervisor to give some time for consultation), the highest use of the S-oriented can be identified, exceeding the use of H-oriented perspective. The reason for using this perspective may be due to the power difference (S<H) between the interlocutors and the risk of imposition (high). However, it cannot be concluded that P and R always affect the choice of the request perspective since the H-oriented perspective is more frequent than the S-oriented perspective in Situation-8, where the relationship constellation between the interlocutors is S<H, +SD and the risk of imposition being high. The remarkable use of Impersonal request perspective can be observed in Situation-3 (a student asking a passer-by about the time). In this situation, many of the participants used direct questions and they made no reference to themselves as well as the hearers. This situation involves an action by the hearer as in other situations in the questionnaire. It should be pointed that the H and S-oriented request perspective did not appear in any of the twelve situations.

With regard to the request strategy, an interesting trend in using the direct request strategies can be observed in Situation-3 (a student asking a passer-by about the time) and Situation-11 (a student asking a waiter to bring a roll of tissue). In these two situations, the participants showed a significant preference for the direct strategy types over the conventionally indirect ones, though the latter were the most frequently used ones in most of the request situations in the present research. In Situation-3, 31 participants out of 57 employed the direct request strategies meanwhile in Situation-11, 28 participants opted for the direct request strategies. The figures in each of these two situations revealed that of all the direct strategies, *Mood Derivable* is a more frequently used strategy than the other direct strategies such as *Explicit Performatives, Hedged Performatives, Obligation Statements* and *Want Statements*.

With the application of conventionally indirect request strategies, the data reveal that such request strategies are dominant in almost all the situations, except in S_3 and S_{11}. The portion of conventionally indirect request strategies employed varies from situation to situation. Results show that only one type of conventionally indirect request strategy was employed by the participants, namely *Query Preparatory*. None of the participants used the other strategy type-*Suggestory Formulae* in the present research. The results of the previous studies on request also confirmed the rare use of *Suggestory Formulae* by both native and non-native speakers of English (Belza, 2008; Dong, 2009).

The remaining request strategy type, non-conventionally indirect request strategies, constitutes the least frequently used types in the present study. The participants

employed only one of the non-conventionally indirect request strategies namely- Strong Hints- in half of the twelve situations but with a very low incidence. The highest use of Strong Hints was observed in Situation-11 (a student asking a waiter to bring a roll of tissue) where three participants used this strategy. In Situation-1 and Situation-10, it was used by two participants and in Situation-5, Situation-7 and Situation-8, only one of the participants opted for this strategy type. In the remaining six situations organized in the present research questionnaire, non-conventionally indirect request strategies did not occur at all.

To sum up the main findings, the Head Act of a request is constituted with the request perspective and the request strategy. In the present research, the H-oriented request perspective was the most commonly used perspective among the four request perspectives. With this extensive use of request perspective, the S expressed his/her desire by addressing the H. This is also the most popular approach to requests in Australian English, Hebrew, Canadian French, and Argentinean Spanish (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984), Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)). For the request strategy type, the findings indicate that conventionally indirect request strategies were the most frequently used among the request strategies. This seems to substantiate the CCSARP findings, where conventionally indirect requests were the most frequent in all languages studied (Australian English, American English, British English, Canadian French, Danish, German, Hebrew, and Russian), and would also support the notion that conventional indirectness is a universal category for requests.

On the basis of the above findings, it can be concluded that English Specialization postgraduate students in Myanmar avoided from directness in making requests in the target language. The chief reason for this avoidance is politeness (Searle, 1979; Brown & Levinson, 1989). Therefore it can be said that postgraduate students in Myanmar have a universal perception of politeness, employing it in most situations in Myanmar.

6.   Conclusion

With regard to the main aim of the present research which is to investigate the speech act of requesting in English made by English specialization postgraduate students in Myanmar, the findings show that the H-oriented request perspective was the most preferable type of request perspective in making a request. It is interesting that none of the participants employed the S & H- oriented request perspective though other request perspectives were perceived as appropriate in some situations In terms of request strategy, conventionally indirect request strategies were the most frequently opted request strategies among the request strategies occurring in the present research. Thus, it can be assumed that Myanmar learners prefer to employ the conventionally indirect request strategies when they make a request in English. This result is consistent with the results in studies by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), Hassall (2003), Felia-Brasdefer (2005), Chen (2006), Ueda (2006), Lin (2008), Yan (2009) and Dong (2009). The findings of the present research also show that Myanmar learners may use direct strategies but along with the use of *PM 'please'*, with which the request sounds rather polite and the illocutionary force of the requested action seems less threatening, in situations where there is no power distance or the easiness of the task is obvious (e.g. Situation-3 and Situation-11). It should be pointed out that non-conventionally indirect request strategies had a very limited distribution in the data collected for this study. This very low incidence of *Hints* in the present analysis might indicate that they are only used in particular situations, which were not included in this research.

However, the present analysis of English requests made by Myanmar English specialization postgraduate students focuses on the request realizations of 12 everyday tasks encountered in a student's life. It can be asserted that the findings of the current study add to the research on the realization of speech act of requesting and politeness in the EFL community in Myanmar.

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