Resemblance of Indirectness in Politeness:
A Case in EFL Learners’ Request Realizations

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SUMMARY

This paper focuses on delineating requests realized by Indonesian learners of English in elicited situations. It attempts to respond to the question “How do Indonesian learners of English (ILE) apply politeness principles in their request realization?” More specifically it shows how the Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are applied, and how indirectness resembles in politeness. Accordingly, the subjects recruited for the study were undergraduate students of an English Study Program who had TOEFL-like scores of at least 450. The subjects were considered as “proficient” learners, assumed to have relatively sufficient linguistic knowledge for realizing English request realizations. They were the students of Sriwijaya University (a state university located in Indralaya, South Sumatra Province, Indonesia). There were 68 students selected as the subjects of the study: 17 third-semester students, 26 fifth-semester students, and 25 seventh-semester students in the academic year of 2006/2007.

The subjects were elicited to respond the Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT) questionnaires and demonstrate Role-plays. The situational variables dealing with social distance (familiarity) and social power (dominance) embedded in both instruments. The former elicited the subjects to write requests, as the responses to the situations written in each questionnaire item. Out of 68 subjects, 36 (26 fifth-semester and 10 seventh-semester students) were selected as the participants of the role-plays. They were asked to produce dialogues based on the scenarios written in the role-plays.

The results show that the subjects utilized certain strategies which contained politeness values. (1) The indirectness in realizing requests done by the subjects had something to do with the attempts to avoid face-threatening acts. (2) The negative politeness occurred dominantly was apparently transferred from the subjects’ native culture. (3) The pragmatic transfers which were politeness motivated were the ways they initiated the request realizations. (3) The transfers also evidently occurred in the form of combining positive with negative politeness strategies. (5) The subjects dominantly modified their requests externally and most of the external modifications in their indirectness were made in inductive patterns. They embedded most of the supportive moves before the head acts and some even insert the moves in both before and after the head acts. It, further, indicated that they applied cyclical patterns of thinking. They realized requests in English, but
with Indonesian ways of grounding, getting pre-commitment, checking availability on Hs, disarming, and sweetening.

In addition, many of the subjects started the dialogues using ‘Excuse me’ as a polite attention getter or as an alerter, continued with supportive moves, and came to the head acts of the requests like in the following example.

A: Excuse me // I have some problems / to choose shoe.
B: Okay / eh / what’s your problem?
A: eh / I’m confused to choose / good shoes / good shoes for my feet.
B: Okay / let me see // I think / these shoes / eh / more / more / more / available in your feet.
A: Is it?
B: Yes // because / look at the color / I think / it’s very / very comfortable / in your feet / more than / more than these shoes.
A: Okay / let me try.
     Okay / I think / it’s my / my choice to / buy // and then / how much these shoes?
B: These shoes is / one hundred rupiahs.
A: Okay / thank you.
B: You’re welcome.

They evidently formed different patterns from those of native speakers. They applied the patterns of attention getters (excuse me, address terms, etc.) – supportive moves – head acts. The native speakers, conversely, applied attention getters – head act – supportive moves (Blum-Kulka & Olstain, 1984:204). The difference is due to the subjects’ culture-specific L1 backgrounds. The speakers of Asian languages, Indonesian included, used the inductive pattern of reasoning, i.e. to delay the point to the end (Yuxin & Cheng, 2002). This pattern resembles the ways they realize English requests. They may realize the requests with correct English in term of grammar use, but inappropriate in terms of pragmatics.

In conclusion, the request strategies chosen by the ILE were politeness-motivated. They utilize indirect strategies because they want to be polite in realizing their requests to hearers. They do FTAs in realizing their requests. They made use of bald-on, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. They commonly used the query preparatory which is grouped in the conventionally indirect strategy to save the Hearers’ negative face, i.e. the right not to be imposed. Besides, they also combined the positive with negative politeness in some of their requests. The typical indirectness and politeness strategies apparently applied by the ILE were due to the native-norm transfers. Their native language and culture influenced their manners when realizing requests in English.
Selected references


