Chinese Requests in Academic Settings

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Requests can be made direct or indirect depending on the situations. A questionnaire was created to test how Chinese students make requests in academic settings. Several strategies are available to make core requests in Chinese and as well various external and internal modifications are utilized. It has been concluded from the results of the questionnaire data that possibility strategy, inquiry strategy and command strategy are the most preferred strategies used in issuing requests. It provides a clue for Chinese instructors to reflect how to teach students to make appropriate requests in Chinese.

0. Introduction

Pragmatics has been defined as the study of how utterances have meanings in speech situations with speakers and hearers involved (Leech 1983). Utterance meaning is the main research object in pragmatics, whereas sometimes focuses on sentence meaning. For instance, from a pragmatic point of view, a statement like 'It is hot today' can be an assertion about the weather, a request to turn on the air conditioner, or some other speech acts, depending on the intention of the speaker in specific situations. By contrast, from a semantic point of view, it has only a single meaning.

Requests can be direct (Pass me that newspaper.) or indirect (Are you finished with that newspaper?). In English in most situations, people are making indirect requests. "People are often indirect in conveying what they mean (Leech 1983: 80)."

Searle (1979) considers speech acts indirect when one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another. For instance: "It is hot today."

The secondary illocutionary act of the utterance is a statement of weather conditions. However, depending on specific contexts, the primary illocutionary act might be making a request to the addressee to turn on the air conditioner. An indirect speech act is made when the primary illocutionary act is performed by means of issuing a secondary illocutionary act.

Leech (1983) relates indirectness to sense and force. The degree of indirectness varies in terms of the length of the inferential path by which the force is derived from the sense.

However, indirect requests seem to contradict what Grice (1983) deems as effective ways of communicating. Grice (1983) proposes a Cooperative Principle (CP), which is constituted by 4 maxims:

A: Quantity:
    1: make your contribution as informative as required
    2: do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

B: Quality: Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
    1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
    2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

C. Relation:
    1. Be relevant.

D. Manner: Supermaxim: Be perspicuous.
    1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
    2. Avoid ambiguity
    3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
    4. Be orderly.

In indirect requests, especially in hints the maxims of quantity and manner: are flouted. The explanation of how the speakers can mean more than they actually say lies, according to Grice, in conversational implicatures. The hearer has to "search for the specific point that was intended by the speaker but not explicitly stately" (Sifianou 1992: 16).

1. Politeness and Requests

Because requests ask people to do something, they inherently constitute face-threatening acts (FTA) (Brown and Levinson 1978). The chief reason for avoiding using direct requests is politeness (Searle 1979; Brown and Levinson 1989). Therefore, studies on requests have traditionally been connected with the research on politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978; Blum-Kulka 1989).

Brown and Levinson (1978) propose five graded hierarchical strategies of polite-ness, ranging from bald on record (the most direct), through positive politeness aiming at enhancing the addressee's positive face and negative politeness caring for the addressee's negative face (conventional politeness), to off-record (non-conventional indirectness, hints) and not performing the FTA altogether.

Depending on the situation, different strategies will be used in performing requests. "Orders and requests are those acts that primarily threaten the addressee's negative-face want" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65), because, by performing this speech act, the speaker indicates that he wants the addressee to do or refrain from doing some-thing. These potential face-threatening acts issued by the speaker to the addressee might evoke disobedience from the addressee; thus they are also threats to the speaker's face wants. So in order to protect the mutually vulnerable face needs and minimize the nega-tive effect the speaker will select the most appropriate strategy of the 5 by measuring the actual situations and taking three general social variables suggested by Brown and

Levinson into consideration: 1: the social distance (D) between the speaker and addressee; 2: the relative power (P) of the speaker and addressee; 3: the ranking of the imposition (R). The weight of the imposition (W) is measured by the formula $W = D + P + R$. So eventually the single index W becomes the motive for the selection of one of the five strategies. In some situations, a need for urgency or efficiency tremendously influences the selection of strategy too.

As the assessment of cultural context and social variables varies cross-culturally, different societies may utilize different strategies even for the same activities. There is cross-cultural variation in the preferences for orientation towards positive or negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). It is generally stated that English reflects a negative politeness orientation; English speakers consider keeping one's distance as the way of being polite and prefer using indirect strategies when making requests.

Chinese culture is sometimes assumed to have a negative politeness orientation (Young 1982). However, Lee-Wong (1994) demonstrates in her empirical study that imperative, direct strategies are the dominant ways of making requests in Chinese culture. This may contradict the stereotype that Chinese people are inscrutable (Young 1982). In Chinese, it is typical to "always state one's request or one's main point last, after first articulating the reasons for it. The lack of precision and the failure to address the point directly lead to suspicion that the Chinese speakers were beating around the bush"(79). The contradiction may result from the different points on which the two researchers focus: Lee-Wong (1994) only analyzes the construction of head act (the minimal unit, or the core request) of the requests, while Young (1982) focuses more on the way requests are introduced: the fact that supportive moves are extensively issued before the core requests are made may lead to impression that Chinese people are inscrutable.

Gu (1990) points out the inappropriateness of accounting for politeness phenolmena based on the studies of English speech acts. For example, in cultures like Chinese, negative face is not threatened when inviters persist even after the invitees have declined a couple of times. Gu (1990) emphasizes the normative function of politeness in Chinese society. Failure to observe politeness leads to social sanctions. "Society is more than a total sum of its individual constituents when collectivism is more valued than individualism." (Gu 1990: 242)

Gu (1990) suggests that Leech's Politeness Principles (PP) are better able to account for the interaction between Chinese face and politeness. Leech (1983: 132), adopting the concept 'maxim' from Grice's CP, proposes 6 maxims of politeness, each with 2 submaxims:

Tact maxim (in impositives and commissives): (a) Minimize cost to other [(b) Maximize benefit to other]

Generosity maxim (in impositives and commissives): (a) Minimize benefit to self [(b) Maximize cost to self]

Approbation maxim (in expressives and assertives): (a) Minimize dispraise of other [(b) maximize praise of other]

Modesty maxim (in expressives and assertives): (a) Minimize praise of self [(b) maximize dispraise of self]

Agreement maxim (in assertives): (a) Minimize disagreement between self and other [(b) maximize agreement between self and other]

Sympathy maxim (in assertives): (a) Minimize antipathy between self and other [(b) maximize sympathy between self and other]

2. Request Strategies

CCSARP (The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) has been the most extensive cross-cultural study of speech acts. It investigated two speech acts, requests and apologies, across 7 different languages and cultures: in American, Australian, British, and Canadian English, Danish, German, and Israeli, in the same 16 social situations: 8 for requests and 8 for apologies.

In this research I will identify the request as 'request utterances' including the core request, internal and external modifications. Head act will not be used to avoid the confusion because sometimes the head act does not necessarily occupy the beginning position of the request utterances.

It is dangerous to define request utterances as a whole direct or indirect solely based on the directness levels of the core request without considering the internal and external modifications, so I will analyze the request utterances' components such as core request, internal modification and external modification separately.

This study endeavors to investigate the pragmatic aspects of speech act--- requests in Chinese.

3. Data Collected From DCT (Written Questionnaires)
3.1. Participants

25 Chinese students studying at the Ohio State University were asked to complete the questionnaire by providing 14 requests based on the 14 request situations and to rate the weight of each of the 14 requests on a 5-point scale. General information about the subjects, such as their age, gender, education and place of birth, and for the non-Americans, the duration of their residence in America was also been obtained.

The researcher is aware that the linguistic behavior of the Chinese may be affected by their exposure to American culture. In order to minimize this effect, it was emphasized in the questionnaire that situations were taking place in China or Russia respectively and that they were expected to respond in a real Chinese way.

3.2. Analysis of Chinese Data

25 Chinese students studying at The Ohio State University participated in the research by filling out the questionnaire containing 14 request situations in Chinese. 345 request utterances were obtained instead of 350. One participant declined to produce a specific request utterance due to the possible excessive imposition of the request. In two cases, individual participants left blanks instead of answering a question. In two cases, the researcher discarded responses that reflected misunderstanding of the situation. Of the 345 request utterances, 125 solely comprise core requests, 220 request utterances with external modifications. Within these 220 request utterances there are 133 request utterances where the external modifications are prior to the core requests and there are 56 request utterances where the external modifications are subsequent to the core requests. There are 31 request utterances which include external modifications both prior and subsequent to the core request. As a result, the total number of external modifications exceeds the number of utterances with external modifications. When the number of the modifications prior or subsequent to the core requests is counted, all the prior modifications are considered as one in the request utterance if the same strategy is used. For instance:

老师，有一本书我急用。但是在图书馆没借到。听说你有.方便借我看看吗?用完就还给你。

Instructor, I need a book urgently. But the library does not have it. I heard that you have it. Is it convenient for me to take a look at it? Once I finish, I will return it to you promptly.

This request utterance has external modifications both prior and subsequent to the core request. Two grounders are used before the core request ("I need a book urgently." "The library does not have it.") and are considered as one prior modification. The preparatory "I heard that you have it." is considered another prior external modification and "Once I finish, I will return to you promptly." is treated as one subsequent external modification, so in this request, two prior modifications and one subsequent modification are used.

Table 1: Chinese request utterances:

Total number of request utterances	Core requests only	Request utterances with external modifications
345	125	220

Table 2: External modifications of the utterances

Requests with prior modification(s)	133
Requests with subsequent modification(s)	56
Requests with both prior and subsequent modification(s)	31

Among the external modifications, one group of modifications is semantically-oriented, based on the meaning of the sentence, and another group is lexically-oriented, based on specific lexical phrases. 7 types of strategies belong to the semantically-oriented group, and 5 types of strategies are categorized into the lexically-oriented group.

The 7 strategies which belong to semantic-oriented group are:

1. Grounders: reasons or justifications for the requests issued.

   同学，有几个单词我不认识，你的字典能借我用一会吗?
   Classmate, I do not know a couple of words. Can you lend me your dictionary for a moment?

2. Preparators: the availability of conditions which make the requests more likely to realize.

   你带钱了吗? 借我十元左右。
   Do you have any money with you? Lend me 10 Yuan.

3. Compliments: praise the hearer

   您好，我想找一本书，但就是找不到。这里您比较熟悉，能帮我一下吗?
   I want to find a book, but can not find it. You are pretty familiar with the surroundings. Can you help me a bit?

4. Promise of reward: Promise to offer something in return of the favor.

   我周六要搬家，你过来帮我吧，我请你吃大餐.
   I am going to move this Saturday. Come help me. I will treat you to a feast.

5. Imposition minimizors: to minimize the imposition of the request.

   亲爱的，周末去俱乐部玩，可以借你的照相机用一下不? 我给你好好保管哈.
   Dear friend, this weekend I am going to a club. Can I borrow your camera? I will take good care of it.

6. Avoiding (warning) consequence:

   老师，我正在找工作，现在缺少一份推荐信，您看，您也不希望您的学生失业吧。

I am looking for a job right now. I need a letter of reference. You do not want your students to be unemployed.

7. Favor: the requester will do a favor for the requestee.

我周末有个活动，你那个贵重的照相机拿来，<u>我替你试用一下</u>?
This weekend I have a party. Lend me your expensive camera. I will try it out for you.

Table 3: The distribution of the semantic-oriented group of external modifications

Total number of external modifications	293
Total number of semantically-oriented external modifications	233
Grounder	164
Preparator	39
Imposition minimizer	17
Compliment	6
Promise of reward	3
Avoiding (warning) consequence	3
Favor	1

In this semantic-oriented group of external modifications the two main strategies utilized are grounders and preparators. Grounders are the dominant means that accompany the core requests, used far more than other strategies in issuing the requests. In an addition, grounders occur most often before a request utterance. Among these 164 grounders, 122 occur prior to the request utterance and 42 are subsequent to the request utterance.

Table 4: The distribution of the grounders utilized

Total number of grounders used	164
Grounders prior to the request utterance	122
Grounders subsequent to the request utterance	42

The 5 strategies which belong to the lexical-oriented group are the following:

1. Appreciation. It is expressed by the words 谢谢 "Thank you".

请问现在几点了? <u>谢谢!</u>
What time is it now please? <u>Thank you!</u>

2. Causing inconvenience. Words such as 麻烦您，麻烦您一下 "Bother you" or 打搅一下 "bother a little" are used.

麻烦您一下，请问现在几点了?
Bother you once, what time is it now?

打搅一下，你能借我用一下你的笔吗?
Bother you a little, can you lend me your pen?

3. Embarrassment. It is expressed by the specific words such as 不好意思 "I am embarrassed" or 不好意思打搅一下 "I am embarrassed to bother."

同学， 不好意思打搅一下， 请问校医院怎么走啊?
Tongxue, I am embarrassed, how to get to university hospital?

老师，不好意思，能不能请您帮忙找一本书啊? 找了好久都没有找到。
Teacher, I am embarrassed, can you help me find a book? I can not find it.

4. Apology. The phrase 对不起 "I am sorry" is used.

老师，对不起，由于我个人的原因，作业可能无法按时交了。我可不可以晚一点交啊? 谢谢!
Teacher, I am sorry. Because of my personal reasons, I could not turn in the homework in time. Can I turn in later? Thank you!

5. Would you help. The phrase 劳驾 or方便 is used.

劳驾，问一下，去校医院怎么走?
Would you help, how to get to university hospital?

老师，有一本书我急用，但是图书馆没借到。听说你有，方便借我看看吗? 用完就还你。
Teacher, I need a book urgently, but I could not find it in the library. I hear that you have it. Is it convenient to lend it to me? When I have done, I will return it back to you.

The phrase "麻烦您" 'bother you' in the strategy of external modification causing inconvenience can stand out as an independent request utterance. For example,

老师，这本书对我很重要。 我没找到。 麻烦您了!
Teacher, this book is so important to me. I did not find it. Bother you !

Table 5: The distribution of the lexically-oriented group of strategies

Total number of external modifications	294
Total number of lexically-oriented external modifications	61
Appreciation	26
Causing inconvenience	18
Embarrassment	9
Apology	7
Would you help	1

Among the core requests, the distribution of perspectives of the conventional indirect requests is following:

Total number of conventional indirect requests	165
Speaker's perspective	60
Hearer's perspective	105

Speaker's perspective	60
Covert speaker's perspective	42
Overt speaker's perspective	18

Hearer's perspective	105
Covert hearer's perspective	68
Overt hearer's perspective	37

In Chinese, within the conventional indirect requests, requests with inclusive and impersonal perspectives do not occur in the data. The requests attested are either from the speaker's perspective or from the hearer's perspective. Requests with the hearer's perspective occupy a dominant position in the indirect requests. Conventional indirect requests are usually with covert subjects no matter whether they are from the speaker's or hearer's perspective. It is characteristic of Chinese culture that most requests use the unexpressed "you" or "I" as subjects. For instance,

> 你好，能告诉我现在几点了吗?
> Hi, can (you) tell me what time it is now?

> 导师，这本书我在图书馆找不到，可否借您的用一下?
> Advisor, I could not find this book in the library. Can (I) borrow your book for a little while?

The usage and the distribution of the request strategies in the core requests will be discussed next. The request strategies are defined by combining the functional and syntactical structure of the requests. The main strategies utilized in the data are the followings:

1. Command strategy: The speaker commands the hearer to do something. The syntactic structure is bare imperative.

   你带钱了吗? 借我十元左右。
   Do you have money with you? Lend me ten Yuan.

2. Possibility strategy: The speaker is asking for the possibility that if the hearer can perform the request. The syntactic structure usually is interrogative. This strategy is traditionally termed as conventional indirect strategy.

   你好，能告诉我怎么才能到校医院吗?
   Hello, can (you) tell me how to get to university clinic?

3. Plea strategy: the syntactic structure of the plea strategy is Qing (please) plus bare imperative.

   请借我用一下词典。
   Please lend me the dictionary.

4. Inquiry strategy: the speaker usually uses this strategy to ask for some information.

   你好，系主任在不在?
   Hello, is dean of the department in?

   请问Qingwen 'please ask' plus inquiry strategy:

   你好，请问校医院怎么走啊?
   Hello, please how to get to the university clinic?

   Politeness elements plus Qingwen plus inquiry strategy:

   Those politeness elements considered as external modifications are, for instance:

   不好意思， 不好意思打搅一下, 麻烦一下, 劳驾.

   同学不好意思，请问现在几点了?
   Classmate, I am embarrassed to ask, what time it is now?

5. Desire strategy: The speaker expresses his or her desire, want. The syntactical structure of the desire strategy usually is statement.

   对不起，老师，因为家里发生了一些事情，所以我的作业没有按时完成。我希望你能够再给我些时间，这次我会按时完成。

Sorry, teacher, because there are some things happening at home, so I have not finished homework on time. <u>I hope you can give me more time.</u> This time I will have it done on time.

Politeness elements (external modifications) plus desire strategy: 麻烦你一下 plus desire strategy.

老师有时间吗? 麻烦你一下，有个问想向你请教!
Teacher, do you have time. Sorry to bother you. I want to ask you something.

Desire strategy plus permission:

老师，我想向您借一本书，不知可以么? 那本书我在图书馆借不到。
Teacher, I want to borrow a book from you. I do not know if I can. I was not able to borrow it from library.

6. Hint Strategy: The speaker does not request directly.

老师，<u>我正在找工作，现在缺少一份推荐信。</u>您看，您也不希望你的学生失业吧.
Teacher, <u>I am looking for a job now. There is a letter of recommendation lacking.</u> You do not want your student under unemployment, don't you?

7. Consultation strategy: The speaker states about what he or she will do and then asks for consultation or permission.

老师，我的作业不能按时交给你了。 晚一些给你，行吗?
Teacher, I can not turn in the homework on time. <u>I will give it to you later, is it possible?</u>

8. Need strategy: The speaker expresses his or her needs.

老师，请问你最近有时间吗?<u>我的论文里面有一些问题需要请教您.</u>
Teacher, do you have time? <u>I need to ask you some question about the thesis.</u>

Table 6: The distribution of the strategies used in the Chinese questionnaire

Total number of request utterances	345
Possibility strategy	165
Inquiry strategy	69
Command strategy	64
Desire strategy	20
Hint strategy	8
Plea strategy	6
Consultation strategy	6
Need strategy	6

4. Conclusion

When making requests, Chinese students prefer using possibility strategy, inquiry strategy and command strategy. External and internal modifications are utilized elaborately as well. Grounders and preparators are the preferred external strategies used in making requests. The grounders are often provided prior to the core requests introduced. Under different situations one strategy is more preferable than the other. This research provides insights for Chinese instructors to reflect how to better teach students to appropriately make requests in Chinese.

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Chinese Questionnaire:

谢谢您参加我们的这次问卷调查.调查中设置了14个情景.请设想这些情景是真实发生的.请您写出在这些情景下您会如何表达您的请求.

第一部分: 您的信息:
年龄: 18   19   20s   30s   40s
性别: 男 女
您的出生地:
您的教育程度: 博士 研究生 大学生
您来美国多久了:

第二部分: 14 个情景:

1:你是一名学生.你最好的朋友最近买了一个比较贵重的照相机.你想借他(她)的照相机用一用.因为你这个周末要去参加一个俱乐部的活动. 你对他(她)说:
2:你是一名学生。现在是午餐时间,你发现你今天忘带饭卡了,钱包也忘带了,你想向你的好友借点儿钱(5-10块). 你对他(她)说:
3:你是一名新生.你要去校医院但不知怎么走.于是你问一位正从对面走过来的男生校医院在哪儿. 你对他说:
4:你是一名学生.你正在一计算机房上网查寻信息.你发现你忘带笔了.但是你需要记下一个重要的信息,你发现做在你旁边的女同学有多余的笔,于是你对她说:
5:你下周末要搬家.你想请你的一位朋友来帮忙,你对他(她)说:
6:你想知道现在几点了,你看到坐在你后面的一位同班女生戴着手表,你跟她并不十分熟悉,只不过说过几次话而已,你对她说:
7:在一语言阅读课上,你在读一篇文章时遇到几个生单词,你看到坐在你旁边的同班男生的桌子上有一本简明外语词典, 你想借来用用, 于是你对他说:
8:因为家里发生了一些事情,所以你无法按时交上作业,你想请你的任课男老师能给你延长一些时间.于是你对你的任课男老师说:
9:你因为生病了所以无法参加期中考试,你想请你的任课老师给你一次补考机会.你对她说:
10:你的导师是一位男教授,你想向他借一本书.因为这本书无法在图书馆借到,而你知道你的导师有这本书,于是你找到你的导师,对他说:
11:你的导师是一位女教授.你想与她约一个时间请教一下有关论文的一些问题.你的导师正巧走过来,你对她说:
12: 你正在找工作,你想请你的任课老师(他是一位教授)帮你写一封推荐信.你对他说:
13:你是一名学生,你想请一位中年男图书管理员帮你找一本书,你在书架旁已找了很久,但没有找到. 你对他说:
14:你要问系主任办公室里的一位女工作人员,系主任现在是否在他的办公室里,你对她说: