

Gender Differences in Request – A Statistical Analysis of American English in the NICT JLE Corpus

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Abstract—The aim of this paper is to explore the gender differences in requests in American English. The study analyzes role-plays by native speakers recorded and transcribed in the NICT JLE corpus. Although the amount of data available for the analysis is limited, the results of the study suggest that 1) individual differences rather than gender differences can be seen in vocabulary distribution, 2) vocabulary distribution varies according to the situation presented by the role-play scenario, 3) women tend to use direct requests more, which can be regarded as less polite in terms of politeness strategies, than men do.

Keywords— corpus, gender differences, politeness, request

I. INTRODUCTION

THE existence of gender differences in language use has been discussed for decades from several linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and style. Labov (2001) argued that upper-middle class women use a standard form of negation more than men in Philadelphia [1]. Trudgill (1972) studied pronunciation in Norwich and concluded that men use non-standard forms more than women [2]. Zimmerman and West (1975) examined cross-sex conversations and revealed that virtually all the interruptions and overlaps were made by men [3]. Holmes (1995) examined conversations in New Zealand and suggested that women give and receive compliments and apologies more than men do [4].

This paper will focus on the politeness strategies the speaker employs in making a difficult request. Lakoff (1975) argued that women tend to speak more politely than men do and use hedges and euphemisms more, pointing out that for a woman to refuse to abide by conventions means “social death,” as women are supposed to uphold social conventions (p.56) [5]. The purpose of this study is to explore gender differences in making difficult requests.

Chapter 2 will review literature on politeness and gender differences, and chapter 3 will introduce the data analyzed here. In chapter 4, the results of the study will be discussed.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff (1975) provides three rules that are needed to make linguistic behaviors and non-linguistic behaviors polite. They

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are:

1. Formality: keep aloof.
2. Deference: give options.
3. Camaraderie: show sympathy. (p.65)

Limiting the concern to language, she argues that formality, including the academic passive, the academic authorial *we*, or the impersonal pronoun *one*, will create distance both between the speaker and addressee and the speaker and what is said. In her study, deference gives an option to the addressee as to what to do or how to behave. Hedges and euphemisms, which leave the addressee the option to decide how seriously what the speaker is saying should be taken, are also classified as deference. Camaraderie shows that the speaker is interested in or likes the addressee. It includes the use of first names or nicknames.

Leech (1983) introduces the Politeness Principle, which suggests to minimize the expression of impolite beliefs and to maximize the expression of polite beliefs (p.81) [6]. He also provides a scale of politeness, which indicates that the degree of politeness will increase as a more indirect kind of illocution is used to express the same propositional content. The reason the indirect illocutions tend to be more polite, he explains, is that “they increase the degree of optionality” and “the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be” (p.108).

Blum-Kulka (1987) suggests that the direct-indirect politeness scale which Leech proposed needs “to be modified by distinguishing between two types of indirectness: conventional and non-conventional” (p.132) in a cross-cultural situation [7]. Forty-five requests of nine types are categorized into three groups in Blum-lulka (1987) and Blum-lulka and Olshtain (1984) [8]. Group A includes Mood Derivables, Want Statements, Obligation Statements, and Performatives. Group B includes Suggestory Formulae, Hedged Performatives, and Query Preparatories. Group C has the two types of Hints.

Trosborg (1995) investigated request strategies used by native speakers of English and learners of English. She found that there are four major categories of request strategies: Indirect request, Conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented), Conventionally indirect (speaker-based), and Direct requests (p.225) [9].

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that there are other factors

which determine the degree of politeness [10]. They concentrate on the amount of work the speaker has to do in order to mitigate the force of an act which could threaten the face of the addressee. Face is defined as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself (herself)” (p.61). They claim that “three sociological factors are crucial in determining the level of politeness which a speaker (S) will use to an addressee (H): these are relative power (P) of H over S, the social distance (D) between S and H, and the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing the face-threatening act” (p.15).

In this paper, we will set three research questions as shown below:

1. Are there any differences in language used by men and women in making difficult requests?
2. Are there any differences in language use according to the rank of imposition of the request made?
3. Are there any differences in politeness strategies used by men and women in making difficult requests?

III. METHOD

Corpus Data

This study will analyze the data included in the NICT JLE Corpus, which was compiled and released by the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology in 2004 [11]. The corpus is designed to study the developmental process of Japanese learners of English. It has two sub-corpora: English spoken by Japanese learners at various learning levels and English by native speakers. The data was collected by giving the same tasks to Japanese learners and native speakers in the same situation. The tasks vary widely from self-introduction to telling a story, role play, picture description, and so on.

The data spoken by native speakers in four kinds of role-play task is extracted from the NICT JLE Corpus, and will be analyzed here in the study. The role-plays are “landlord,” “train,” “travel,” and “shopping.” In the landlord role-play, the interviewee plays a tenant who is calling the landlord to get a window pane which was broken in his/her absence repaired. In the train role-play, the interviewee plays a passenger who missed the train and has to ask the ticket seller to refund money, even though exchanges and refunds are against the policy of the train company. In the travel role-play, the interviewee plays a participant of a package tour which was guaranteed to be luxurious, but actually is not. S/he is calling the agency to get compensation. In the shopping role-play, the interviewee plays a purchaser, who has found that s/he does not like the purchase and is going back to the store to ask for an exchange or refund, even though neither is permitted.

In each role play, the interviewer plays a landlord, ticket seller, travel agent, and shop keeper, respectively. S/he tries to refuse the request politely but firmly. The interviewers are professional speaking test raters, well trained to give the same responses and the same reactions while presenting the same

atmosphere to each interviewee. As the previous study showed the utterances made by the interviewer vary very little (Ishikawa, 2012) [12], we will limit our discussion to the utterances of interviewees in this study. The profile of interviewees is shown in Table 1 below. They are all from the USA and their ages range from 20 to 24, as shown by the number following the sex of each interviewee in Table 1.

TABLE I
SEX AND AGE OF INTERVIEWEES

Landlord	Train	Travel	Shopping
No. 1, M, 21	No.10, M, 21	No. 3, M, 24	No. 1, M, 21
No.10, M, 21	No.12, M, 20	No.10, M, 21	No. 3, M, 24
No.11, M, 21	No.13, M, 20	No.12, M, 20	No.11, M, 21
No.14, F, 21		No.13, M, 20	No.12, M, 20
		No.14, F, 21	No.14, F, 21

The file number designates each interviewee. As Table 1 shows, an individual interviewee may play more than one different role-play. For example, interviewee No. 14, who is a 21-year-old woman, played three kinds of role play.

The interviewees are supposed to receive wages for the interview, and therefore the social distance (D1) between the interviewer and each interviewee, and the power of the interviewer over the interviewee (P1) do not change in the real world. However, the social distance (D2) and the power balance (P2) between the speaker and addressee in a role-play - in other words, D and P between the landlord and the tenant, the ticket seller and the passenger, the travel agent and the tour participant, the shopkeeper and the purchaser - as well as the degree of imposition (R) involved in FTA in each role-play, could not be the same.

Procedure

1) To investigate gender differences in language use, words used frequently by each interviewee will be clarified. The most frequent forty words of all the data examined here will be listed. The frequency of each word used in each task will be counted.

2) To clarify gender differences in politeness strategies used in requests, each request will be classified into the four categories that Trosborg (1994) proposed as shown below in Table 2. The propositional context is that the speaker requests to borrow the addressee’s car, and the eight strategies are grouped into three categories.

TABLE 2
REQUEST STRATEGIES PRESENTED BY TROSBORG (1995)

Cat. I	Indirect request	
	Str. 1 Hints (mild) (strong)	I have to be at the airport in half an hour. My car has broken down. Will you be using your car tonight?
Cat. II	Conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented conditions)	Could you lend me your car?
	Str. 2 Ability	Would you lend me your car?
	Willingness	May I borrow your car?
	Permission	How about lending me your car?
	Str.3 Suggestory formulae	

Cat. III	Conventionally indirect (speaker-oriented conditions)	
	Str. 4 Wishes	I would like to borrow your car.
	Str. 5 Desires / needs	I want/need to borrow your car.
Cat. IV	Direct Requests	
	Str. 6 Obligation	You must/have to lend me your car.
	Str. 7 Performatives	
	(hedged)	I would like to ask you to lend me your car.
	(unhedged)	I ask/require you to lend me your car.
	Str. 8 Imperatives	Lend me your car.
	Elliptical phrases	Your car (please).

According to the classification by Trosborg (1995), the addressee’s willingness may be embedded in the appreciation or hope of the speaker forming an if-construction such as “I’d be grateful if you’d send me a parts list,” which can be classified as Cat. II.

In this study Antconc 3.2.4 is used to analyze the text data and SeagullStat is used to process the data statistically.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1 “Are there any differences in language used by men and women in making difficult requests?”

Female data is not included in the train role-play; therefore, the data available from the landlord, travel, and shopping role-plays are used for the analysis. There are four male files for the travel and shopping role-play tasks, and three for the landlord task. Each task contains one female task. The total number of tokens in each data is shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
TOKENS CONTAINED IN LANDLORD, TRAVEL, SHOPPING TASK

	token total	landlord	travel	shopping
Female	1008	325	423	260
Male	4021	882	1751	1388

Based on the most common 40 words, a chi-square test was conducted on the frequency of each word to clarify the statistically significant differences between the female files and male files where the three kinds of role play were presented. For example, “I” is used 66 times and 276 times in the female files and in the male files respectively. The results of the chi-square test show that among the words whose expected frequency are more than 4, the three items, “a”, “t”, and “well,” indicate gender differences in use at a 5% level: men tend to use the indefinite article more, and women tend to use negative contractions and hedges more. However, no significant differences can be seen between the two in the use of other words.

The results of the correspondence analysis seem to designate situational differences, with the first axis which has the highest contribution (49.7%) determining the travel role-plays as Fig. 1 shows. The second axis, whose contribution is 16.9%, seems to determine the shopping role-play and travel role-play played by woman.

TABLE 4
CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS OF THREE TASKS BY FEMALE AND MALE

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
eigenvalue	0.0963	0.0327	0.0243
contribution(%)	49.74	16.87	12.58
cum con(%)	49.74	66.61	79.19

The shopping role-plays are determined by the third axis, which has 12.6% contribution as Table 5 shows.

TABLE 5
FIRST ITEMS: LANDLORD, TRAVEL, SHOPPING TASK

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
F_shop	0.9265	1.8862	-0.5877
F_land	0.9888	-0.1069	2.9617
F_trav	-0.9704	2.4033	1.0591
M_shop	0.686	0.2389	-0.9966
M_land	0.9796	-1.027	0.4399
M_trav	-1.2344	-0.5689	-0.1159

The first items (landlord, travel, and shopping role-plays) plotted by correspondence analysis is shown in Fig. 1, and the second items (the most frequent forty words) are also plotted in Fig. 2 below.

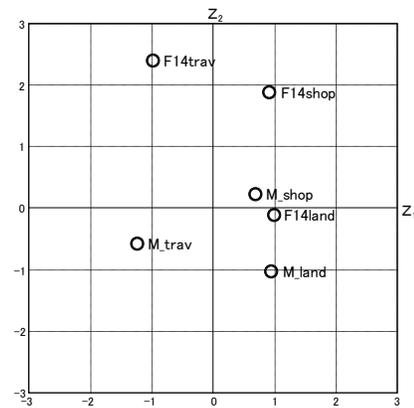


Fig. 1 Role-plays plotted by CA

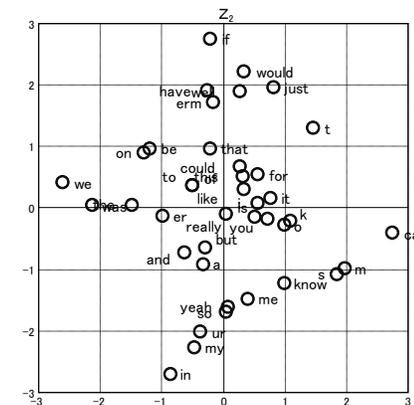


Fig.2 Most frequent 40 words plotted by CA

Fig. 2 suggests that the use of “t”, negative contractions, and “just”, a downer which mitigates requests [13], are plotted in

the first dimension, corresponding to the shopping role-play by the woman. The hedges, “erm” and “well” are plotted in the second domain, corresponding to the travel role-play by the woman. However, the other role-play played by the woman is plotted far from those two data. Therefore, we cannot answer in the affirmative to RQ1, “Are there any differences in language used by men and women in making difficult requests?”, and we need to examine the data more closely in the next section.

RQ 2 “Are there any differences in language use according to the rank of imposition of the request made?”

There are 17 role-play interactions which are involved in the four kinds of tasks we mentioned in Chapter III. The frequencies of the 40 common words used by each speaker in each task are counted. To find out which role-play interactions can be classified into the same group and which words can be categorized into the same type of use, correspondence analysis is applied to the most frequent 40 words and the 17 role-plays.

TABLE 6
CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS OF FOUR TASKS BY FEMALE AND MALE

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
eigenvalue	0.1302	0.0827	0.056
contribution(%)	25.7	16.33	11.06
cum con(%)	25.7	42.03	53.1

The first, second, and third axes account for 25.7%, 16.3%, and 11.1% respectively, and their cumulative contribution rate of them is 53.1% as Table 6 shows. The first axis orders an individual interviewee, making three groups: No. 3 is in the first group, No. 1 and No. 14 are in the second, and the third contains the others. Interviewees are classified according to their style of language use rather than their gender. Each interviewee has his/her own style in making requests, but hesitations such as “er” or “erm” seem to be characteristically used by No. 3.

On the other hand, the second axis determines the travel role-plays. The role-plays are all placed at the negative end. The third axis classifies interviewees again into three: No.11 is one, No. 10 is another, and the other contains the rest.

TABLE 7
CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS OF 17 ROLE-PLAYS

first items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
F14_shop	-0.3792	1.1402	-0.1939
F14_land	-0.1178	1.147	-0.0076
F14_trav	-0.4054	-0.9767	0.389
M1_land	-0.2766	1.3231	-0.4971
M1_shop	0.1793	1.2397	-0.2579
M3_shop	-1.7075	0.9362	0.0186
M3_trav	-2.2842	-0.8543	0.0276
M10_land	0.4691	0.7021	0.8965
M10_train	1.0693	0.2117	2.7647
M10_trav	0.6093	-1.753	0.7697
M11_land	0.9994	0.6789	-1.8796
M11_shop	0.8144	0.5423	-0.9261
M12_shop	0.5881	-0.3202	0.1801
M12_train	0.7202	-0.0626	0.7615
M12_trav	0.1948	-1.0849	0.0687
M13_train	0.414	-0.1596	-0.0442

M13_trav	0.843	-1.5759	-1.8047
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When categories and items are plotted according to the value of the first axis and the second axis, we get a clearer picture as Fig. 3 shows below.

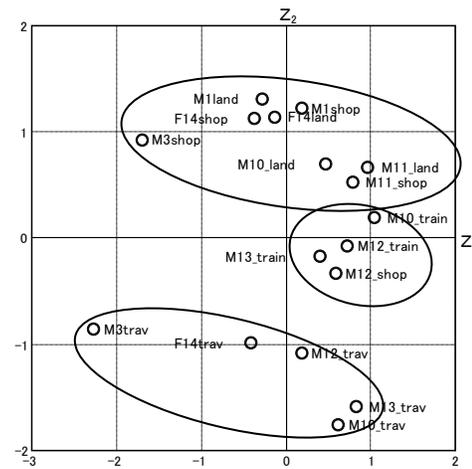


Fig. 3 First item score in CA

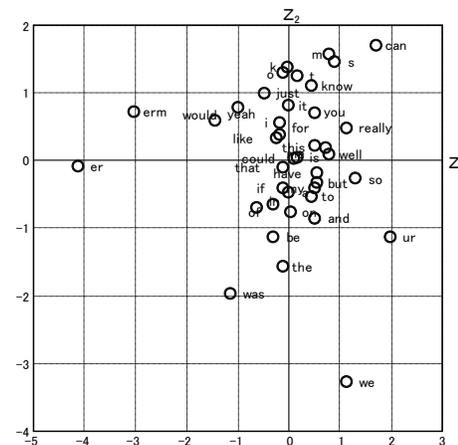


Fig. 4 Second item score in CA

Three categories seemed to emerge from the results of the CA as shown in Fig. 3, namely the travel role-plays, the train role-plays, and the landlord and shopping role-plays. Fig. 4 represents the distribution of the words used in each file. It may lead us to say that “we” characterize the travel role-play; “so,” “really,” and “well” characterize the train role play; and “can,” “would,” “yeah,” “just,” “you,” and “know” characterize the landlord and shopping role-plays.

In the travel role-play, interviewees tried to get compensation for the trip which had been guaranteed to be luxurious. It was reasonable for them to claim the compensation, for the travel agency was responsible for the situation. However, in the other role-play scenarios, the landlord, shopkeeper, and ticket seller were not responsible for the situation. Even though the interviewee understood that and exchange or refund was not permitted, s/he tried to get the ticket or clothes refunded or exchanged in train role play and shopping role play. The answer to RQ 2, “Are there any differences in language use according to the rank of imposition

of the request made?”, is “yes,” though a more detailed examination will be needed in future studies in order to clarify how P, D, and R in the tasks are working.

RQ 3 “Are there any differences in politeness strategies used by men and women in making difficult requests?”

All requests made in the landlord role play, travel role play and shopping role play are classified according to the four categories Trosborg (1995) proposed. Table 8 represents the total times each type of request emerged in the interactions in percentage form.

TABLE 8
GENDER DIFFERENCES IN POLITENESS STRATEGIES

	Cat. I	Cat. II	Cat. III	Cat. IV
Female (%)	34.8%	30.4%	17.4%	17.4%
Male (%)	45.0%	25.0%	23.3%	11.06

The results of the chi-square test show that there are no significant differences in request strategies used by men and women, contrary to expectations. However, we can see the tendency that woman used direct request more in every case as Fig.5 shows.

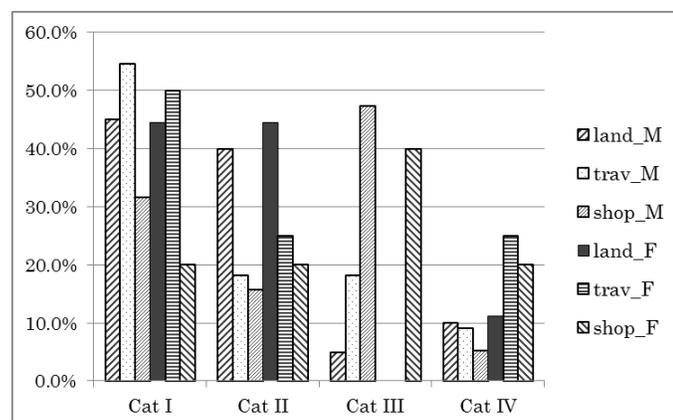


Fig. 5 Request strategies used in each role-play

For example, female interviewee No. 14 playing a tenant in the landlord role-play used a direct request, after having used the strategy in Cat. I, and in Cat. II twice, and Cat. I again, as shown in Example 1 below.

On the other hand, male interviewee No. 1 never used a direct request, though No. 14 and No. 1 interviewees are classified in the same group by the results of the correspondence analysis in the previous section.

He changed his strategy after he was refused several times. He used positive politeness strategies, showing camaraderie to the interviewer as Lakoff (1995) proposed. He showed his interests in the addressee, asking “What are you doing right now?” He also tried to show sympathy when the interviewer said “I’m watching the game on TV,” replying to the interviewer, “O K. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was watching that, too.” He continued the conversation and deliberately changed the proposition from “the interviewee wants the interviewer to come” into “the interviewer wants to come,” by saying “I’m actually recording the game right now. If you wanna come up,

we could just watch it later. I could help you to see whatever you missed.”

The strategies the male interviewee used in the request are shown in Example 2.

Example 1: female interviewee

1. I have kind of a problem with my apartment. I came home from classes today and the window in my bedroom is broken. (Cat.I)
2. Do you think you could fix it sometime soon? (Cat.II)
3. Can you give me some sort of date, like possibly tomorrow or later today or hopefully by the end of the week? (Cat.II)
4. I wouldn't want to have any problems because it's too cold at night. (Cat. I)
5. You should be obligated to fix this window sometime soon. (Cat. IV)

Example 2: male interviewee

1. I have this broken window in my room, and I was wondering if I can get it fixed as soon as possible. (Cat. I)
2. I don't want any birds in my room or anything like that. (Cat. I)
3. So is there any way you could come up here and fix it today? (Cat. II)
4. I got a kind of cold because there's a hole in my window. (Cat. I)
5. Could you come up and fix it right now? (Cat. II)

Another example of a direct request made by the female interviewee playing the shopping role-play may lead us to the suggestion that there can be gender differences in using request strategies and that women could possibly tend to use direct requests more than men. None of the male interviewees examined here used the same type of direct request as she used twice in Example 3.

Example 3: female interviewee playing a purchaser (P), interviewer a shopkeeper (S)

P: I was wondering if I could exchange it for something else.
S: Well basically, we do have a policy against exchanges or refunds.

...

P: Could you make an exception just this once?

S: Just for you?

P: Please?

...

P: It would mean a lot to me. Please.

This example may remind us of Lakoff’s argument. Women are expected to say “thank you” and “please” strongly and exclusively in order to be polite, and women may not speak as clearly as men do, she claimed. Though “please is probably not good enough” to persuade someone in negotiations, as the interviewer playing the part of shopkeeper in the role-play said, it may actually have some effects in a situation such as making a request at a shop.

The answer to RQ 3 “Are there any differences in politeness strategies used by men and women in making difficult requests?” could be “yes” and “no.” Though there is no

statistically significant difference, the data in the NICT JLE Corpus suggests that the woman tends to use direct requests more than men.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper we reviewed literature where indirect requests and direct requests were classified and aligned along with a politeness scale. It has been said that the more indirect request strategies are taken, the more polite the statements become, and it has been widely believed that women tend to take more polite strategies than men.

To explore the relationship between gender and politeness strategies, we analyzed the interactions included in the NICT JLE Corpus. The results of the study suggested that significant gender differences are hardly seen in the language use in requests, and that language use tends to vary according to the role-play task. Word distribution as well as politeness strategies can be possibly influenced by the imposition of the task involved, social distance between the speaker and the addressee, and the relative power of the speaker over the addressee. More extensive study should be done before we reach a conclusion, but this study suggested that there is a possibility that women tend to use direct request strategies more than men in making difficult requests.

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