

Indirectness and Politeness in Mexican Requests

J. César Félix-Brasdefer
Indiana University

1. Introduction

The notions of indirectness and politeness play a crucial role in the negotiation of face during the realization of speech acts such as requests. A request is a directive act and a pre-event which initiates the negotiation of face during a conversational interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), requests are intrinsically face threatening because they are intended to threaten the addressee's negative face (i.e., freedom of action and freedom from imposition). Following their model of politeness, while a request may be realized by means of linguistic strategies such as *on record* (e.g., direct and unmitigated) or *off record* (e.g., hints, irony), a compromise may be reached by the speaker using indirect requests. According to Searle, in indirect speech acts "the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the rational powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (1975: 60-61). Thus, in order to minimize the threat and to avoid the risk of losing face, there is a preference for indirectness on the part of the speaker issuing the request to smooth the conversational interaction.

It has been observed that higher levels of indirectness may result in higher levels of politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983) direct requests appear to be inherently impolite and face-threatening because they intrude in the addressee's territory, and these authors argued that the preference for polite behavior is indirectness. Leech suggested that it is possible to increase the degree of politeness by using more indirect illocutions: "(a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be" (1983: 131-32). According to Blum-Kulka, indirectness is comprised of two types: conventional indirectness (CI) which centers on conventions of language including propositional content (literal meaning) and pragmalinguistic form used to signal an illocutionary force, and nonconventional indirectness (NCI) which relies heavily on the context and tends to be "open ended, both in terms of propositional content and linguistic form as well as pragmatic force" (1989: 42). The link between indirectness and politeness is further supported by Searle's observation that "politeness is the most prominent motivation for indirectness in requests, and certain forms tend to become the conventionally polite ways of making indirect requests" (1975: 76).

2. Previous research

The literature on indirectness and politeness has empirically examined various aspects of requests in diverse languages and in different varieties of Spanish. This literature includes at least the following studies: Australian English, Canadian French, German, Hebrew, and Argentine Spanish (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989); Cuban Spanish (Ružicková 1998); Ecuadorian and Peninsular Spanish (Placencia 1998); Hebrew and American English (Blum-Kulka 1987); Greek and British English (Sifianou 1992); Mexican Spanish (Koike 1994); Peninsular Spanish (Le Pair 1996); Peninsular and Colombian Spanish (Delgado 1994), Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish (Márquez-Reiter 2000); Peruvian Spanish (García 1993); Puerto Rican Spanish (Walter 1979); Polish (Wierzbicka 2003); and, Uruguayan Spanish and British English (Márquez-Réiter 2000), among others. Overall, these studies examined the use of pragmalinguistic information employed by native speakers (NSs) to make requests in situations of equal/unequal status and they investigated the effect that the notions of CI and politeness have in the production and perception of requests.

It is by now generally accepted that the pragmalinguistic resources and the illocutionary force employed to perform an indirect request tend to vary across languages (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Wierzbicka 2003). While most of the studies above focused on the inventory of direct and indirect request strategies in situations of equal or unequal status, there were few attempts to examine request behavior at the level of discourse and to observe the negotiation of face during request interactions. Further, there seems to be agreement in the aforementioned studies that the most frequent type of indirectness found in many languages is CI. Of the studies on Spanish mentioned above, only one examined requests in Mexican Spanish (Koike 1994), but the focus of this study was to examine the mitigating effects of negation in Spanish requests. Finally, while there is a body of literature regarding request behavior in various varieties of Spanish including Colombia, Cuba, Peru, Puerto Rico, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela, the notions of indirectness and politeness need to be further examined in other varieties of Spanish and at the discourse level.

To capture the interactive nature of speech acts, Edmondson suggested that speech acts be examined as speech act sequences: “a sequence of speech acts, rather than having a closed pair of such acts” (1981: 55). In examining the structure of speech acts, requests have been frequently analyzed in terms of discourse sequences: head acts and supportive moves. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), head acts refer to the request proper or the main strategy employed to make the request. Supportive moves are the peripheral elements and refer to the pre- or post-posed moves or strategies that accompany the head act. To better account for the structure of requests, request head acts are classified according to a directness continuum. Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) classification of request head acts included three levels of directness: direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and non-conventionally indirect strategies. Of these head acts, five are considered direct (mood derivable, performative, obligation statement, need statement, need/want statement), two are considered conventionally indirect (query preparatory, suggestory formulae), and two are considered non-conventionally indirect (strong and mild hints). (See Appendix A for the classification of request head acts and examples of the strategies used in the current study).

In addition to Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) classification of request head acts, head acts were examined according to their internal and external modifications (Faerch & Kasper 1989). Internal modifications include mitigators which soften direct requests and comprise both lexical (diminutives, ‘please’, mental verbs such as ‘think/believe’) and syntactic (conditional, imperfect) mitigators. Finally, external modifications include optional supportive moves that modify the head act. These peripheral elements commonly include: reasons, preparators (e.g., I have a problem with the class, can I borrow your notes?), and disarmers (e.g., I know that you take good notes and I see that you have them with you, can I can borrow them?).

In this paper, I will investigate the notions of indirectness and politeness in the speech act of requests among NSs of Mexican Spanish in formal and informal situations. I will analyze the inventory of request strategies across the entire request interaction. In particular, I will examine the pragmalinguistic information employed during a request sequence, including: head acts and external modifications.

3. Method

3.1 Subjects

Ten NSs of Mexican Spanish participated in the study. The data were collected at a large public American university from a group of Mexican students who had recently arrived in the United States as part of a study abroad program. The sample included four males and six females (mean age: 22.7). The data were collected during the first month after the subjects’ arrival. All subjects were university students at *Tecnológico de Monterrey* in México.

3.2. Instrumentation and procedures

An open-ended role-play instrument was used to collect the data. Since the goal of the present study was to examine request sequences at the discourse level, a role-play instrument was selected because the entire conversational interaction may be observed, including openings and closings

(Scarcella 1979), and because it has been theoretically and empirically shown that role-play data represent an approximation of spoken discourse where speech act sequences can be observed (Félix-Brasdefer 2003a; Kasper 2000). Further, while authentic data may represent the ideal methodology to examine pragmatic behavior (Davis & Henze 1998), it has been observed that a naturalistic corpus may not produce enough data necessary to detect high frequencies of the pragmatic feature in question (e.g., indirectness, politeness, mitigation) (Kasper 2000).

All subjects participated in ten role-play situations which included five experimental and five distractor items. Each participant role played the situations with two NSs of Mexican Spanish: one for formal situations (university professor) and another for informal situations (university student). Each subject was instructed to carefully read the role-play description and to respond in the role play situation as s/he would in a natural conversation. All role plays were recorded on tape and video tape and were subsequently transcribed according to the conventions noted in Jefferson (1986).

The experimental items included five requests describing in detail the situation including the place where the event took place, level of familiarity (+ or – Distance), and the power relationship between the interlocutors (+ or – Power) (mean: 155.6 words per situation). Situations were classified according to three politeness systems described in Scollon and Scollon (2001): hierarchy, deference, and solidarity. Due to space constraints, a brief description of each situation is presented below:

Hierarchical politeness system (+Power, + Distance)

- A student asks a professor for an extension on a final paper (Paper)
- An employee asks his boss for time off to go to a concert (Concert)

Deferential politeness system: (- Power, +Distance)

- A person whose car just broke down asks a stranger for a ride to the closest gas station (Ride)
- A student who frequently misses class asks to borrow a classmate's notes (Notes)

Solidarity politeness system (- Power, - Distance)

- A student asks his/her roommate to clean the bathroom (Bathroom)

The two formal situations belong to a hierarchical politeness system (Paper, Concert) where the relationship between the interlocutors expresses power and distance (+Power, +Distance). In this politeness system one person is in a subordinate position (student, employee) and the other in a superordinate position (professor, boss). The Ride and Notes situations belong to a deferential politeness system where both interlocutors (strangers [Ride], classmates [Notes]) are of equal social status but share a distant relationship (-Power, +Distance). Of these situations, a higher level of distance is observed in the Ride situation since the subjects were strangers and had never seen each other previously, while a semi-distant relationship is observed in the Notes situation since both classmates know each other but rarely interact. Finally, the Bathroom situation belongs to a solidarity politeness system where both interlocutors (roommates) are of equal social status and where the relationship is close (-Power, -Distance).

3.3 Data analysis

The data were analyzed according to a modified classification of request strategies originally presented by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and included strategies used as head acts and strategies used as external modifications to the head act. Head acts were examined according to three degrees of directness: 1) direct; 2) conventionally indirect; and, 3) non-conventionally indirect (hints) (See Appendix A). External modification included peripheral elements which preceded or followed the head act: precursors, preparators, disarmers, reasons, alternatives, and positive politeness strategies. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 11.5) was used to analyze the data. Two statistical analyses were employed: repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) and paired-samples *t*-tests. The alpha level was set at .05.

4. Results and discussion

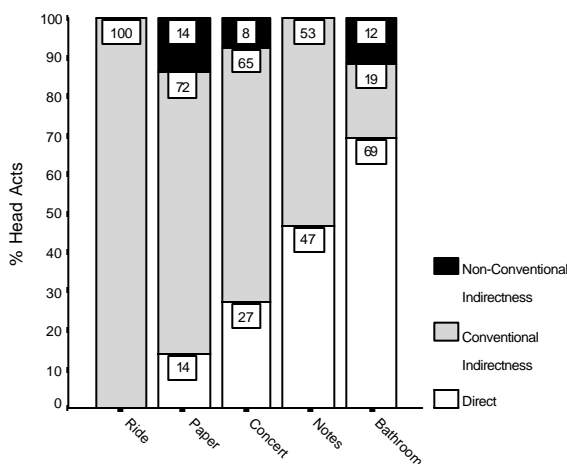
This section presents the pragmalinguistic strategies observed in the interactions across the five request situations. The results will be presented according to the strategies used across the request sequence: head acts and external modifications.

Overall, the 10 subjects produced a total of 511 strategies across the five situations, of which 26% ($n = 132$) were head acts and 74% ($n = 379$) were external modifications. Of the 132 head acts produced by the 10 subjects across the five situations, 61% ($n = 80$) were conventionally indirect (CI) requests, 32% ($n = 43$) were direct requests, and 7% ($n = 9$) were employed as hints, expressing non-conventional indirectness (NCI). A repeated measures ANOVA comparing the means of strategy use across the five situations (Direct: 4.30 [SD : 1.70]; CI: 8.0 [SD : 3.19]; NCI: .90 [SD : .99]) revealed that this difference is significant, $F(2,18) = 25.09$, $p < .00$, and shows that in Mexican Spanish, CI is the preferred strategy among these subjects when making a request, followed by direct requests, and a lower preference was observed for the use of NCI or hints.

4.1 Head acts

Figure 1 shows the distribution of request head acts in percentages across the five situations at each level of directness: direct, conventional indirectness, and non-conventional indirectness.

Figure 1. Distribution of Request Head Acts in Mexican Spanish (N = 10; $n = 132$)



Regarding the preference for CI across the five situations, a repeated measures ANOVA comparing the means of these strategies (Ride: 2.10; Paper: 2.10; Concert: 1.70; Notes: 1.60; Bathroom: .50) showed that the difference is significant, $F(4, 36) = 5.864$, $p < .001$, with the first four situations (Ride, Paper, Concert, Notes) revealing a preference for indirectness, and the Bathroom situation a preference for directness. What the first four situations have in common is the social factor social distance (+Distance), and this finding shows that the more distant the relationship between the interlocutors, the more likely it is for these subjects to issue a request indirectly. The results from the current study coincide with previous literature in that CI is the most preferred strategy in other varieties of Spanish (García 1993; Le Pair 1996; Márquez-Reiter 2002) and in other languages (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Hassall 1999). Examples of conventionally indirect strategies in Mexican Spanish are shown below: (head acts are underlined)

- (1) [...] quería ver si usted me podría aceptar el trabajo aunque sea dos días tarde. (Paper, Male)

‘[...] I wanted to see if you could accept the paper even if it’s two days late’

- (2) Hola, disculpe, lo que pasa es que me quedé sin gasolina, podría, qué pena me da, pero podría, este, darme un aventón a la gasolinera? (Ride, Female)

‘Hi, excuse me, the thing is that I ran out of gas, would you, I feel bad, but would you, um, give me a ride to the gas station?’

- (3) Buenas tardes, este, quería ver la posibilidad si podía ausentarme en la noche de mañana porque va a haber un concierto. (Concert, Male)

‘Good afternoon, um, I wanted to see if it would be possible to miss tomorrow night because there’s going to be a concert.’

- (4) Me da pena muchísimo molestarlo, pero no sé si me pueda dar un un raid aquí a la gasolinera más cercana, o que me pudiera decir cómo eh tomar un taxi o algo para llegar ahí. (Ride, Female)

‘I really feel bad to bother you, but I don’t know if you could give me a a ride here to the closest gas station, or if you would be able to tell me how uh to take a taxi or something to get there.’

- (5) Oye, disculpa, este, no me puedes prestar las las, las notas de esta clase? te las traigo, o sea, al rato. (Notes, Female)

‘Hey, excuse me, um, can’t you lend me the the the notes for this class? I’ll bring them back to you, I mean, in a little while.’

- (6) Pues ves que el depa está medio sucio, no?, y yo sé que me toca, pero no te podrás hacer cargo? (Bathroom, Male)

‘Well you see that the apartment is kinda dirty, don’t you? And I know it’s my turn, but would you be able to take care of it?’

- (7) Qué te parece si te intercambio la semana? tú vuelves a limpiar el baño esta semana y yo lo limpio la otra. (Bathroom, Female)

‘What do you say I trade weeks with you? you clean the bathroom again this week and I’ll clean it the next.’

Overall, CI was often conveyed by query preparatory containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability, willingness) as conventionalized in the Spanish language, and less frequently by means of suggestory formulae. Indirect requests were expressed using the conditional form employing the modal verb *poder* (‘to be able to’) to express deferential politeness (*podría*), as in (2), when addressing a person of distant relationship (Ride), the present indicative when addressing a classmate, as in (5), or the future tense to express willingness when addressing the roommate, as in (6). Modal verbs were often preceded by various hedges or mental verbs which made the request more tentative and polite, followed by a suppositional clause. The requests in examples (1) and (3) contain a mental verb such as *ver* (‘to see’) preceded by the verb *querer* (‘to want’) in the imperfect form *quería*, followed by a suppositional clause making the indirect request more hesitant. Note that the modal verbs included in the suppositional clause are used in the conditional (*podría* [‘would you be able to’]) in (1) and in the imperfect (*podía* [‘would be able to’]) in (3) and were strategically used to express higher levels of deferential politeness with a person of distant relationship (Paper, Concert). Further, the request head act in (4) is introduced by the hedge *no sé* (‘I don’t know’) followed by a suppositional clause using the subjunctive forms *pueda* and *pudiera* making the request hesitant, but at the same time polite. Conventionally indirect requests were less frequently used as suggestions, as in (7). Overall, the use of conditional, imperfect, or subjunctive forms to convey an indirect request seems to be the preferred strategy by these speakers to produce a politeness effect. This kind of

internal modification may serve as a distancing tactic (Haverkate 1994) to express deferential politeness, distancing the speaker from the content of the proposition and from the addressee. (For a detailed analysis of lexical and syntactic internal mitigation in Mexican Spanish, see Félix-Brasdefer 2004).

Unlike conventionally indirect requests which were found across the five situations, instances of directness and NCI (i.e., hints) were less frequently observed. With respect to the degree of directness, a repeated measures ANOVA which compared the means of direct strategies across four situations (Paper: .40; Concert: .70; Notes: 1.40; Bathroom: 1.80) was significant, $F(4, 36) = 4.931, p < .003$, and shows that higher levels of directness were observed in situations where the relationship is closer and equal (Notes, Bathroom). More specifically, and as illustrated graphically in Figure 1, this finding shows that the less distant the relationship between the interlocutors, the more likely it is for these Mexican university students to make a direct request. Notice that no instances of direct strategies were found in the Ride situation between the strangers, which showed a preference for CI (100%). A paired-samples t -test which compared the means of direct strategy use in the Paper situation (in which 14% of the strategies were direct) and the Bathroom situation (in which 69% of the strategies were direct) was significant ($t[9] = -2.806, p < .021$), revealing a higher preference for direct requests where the relationship between the participants is equal and more intimate (-Power, -Distance). Examples of direct requests are shown below (head acts are underlined):

- (8) Ayúdame a limpiar el baño, POR FAVOR por favor (Bathroom, Female)
‘Help me clean the bathroom, PLEASE please’
- (9) Yo sé que me toca hoy, por favor, te lo pido de favor (Bathroom, Female)
‘I know it’s my turn today, please, I’m asking you this favor’
- (10) Un favor, necesito tus notas para estudiar (Notes, Female)
‘A favor, I need your notes to study’

As shown in the examples above, direct requests were employed using a verb in the imperative (mood derivable) as in (8), a performative verb to express the illocutionary force of the request as in (9), or by means of utterances stating the speaker’s desire that the hearer perform the act (want statement), as in (10). It should be noted that direct requests were often internally modified by the lexical mitigator *por favor* (‘please’) to soften the harshness of a direct request and was used as an indicator of positive politeness. The preference for direct requests in the Bathroom situation ($n = 18$) (-Power, -Distance) seems to be an instance of solidarity or positive politeness and shows that being direct among these Mexican university students expresses camaraderie and is consistent with cultural norms in situations of equal status. These results support previous claims in other varieties of Spanish which also examined role-play data and found a preference for direct requests in situations where participants are familiar with each other, specifically, intimates-friends and friends-acquaintances (Márquez-Reiter 2000), as well as in other cultures with a positive politeness orientation such as Israel (Blum-Kulka 1983) and Indonesia (Hassall 1999).

Finally, as can be seen in Figure 1, hints were the least preferred strategy and occurred only in three situations with low means (Paper: .40; Concert: .20; Bathroom: .30). An example of a hint is shown in (11):

- (11) S: Student (Female); P: Professor (Male) - (Paper)
- S: 1 y no puede ser de ninguna manera el lunes?=
P: 2 =no, porque tendría que hacer la misma excepción con todos.
S: 3 *es que está súper interesante el proyecto y le va a encantar y va a*
4 *salir bien* (Hint)
P: 5 me imagino y conozco tu capacidad, pero entiéndeme también que
6 si hago esto contigo tengo que hacer lo mismo con todos.
S: 7 claro, pues entonces se lo voy a tener que dar, una hora después.

English translation

S: and there's no way it can be on Monday?

P: no, because I would have to make the same exception with everyone

S: it's just that the project is really interesting and you're going to really like it and it's going to be good.

P: I imagine that it will and I know your ability, but you have to understand that if I do this with you, I have to do the same with everyone.

S: right, well then I am going to have to give it to you, an hour later.

The interaction in (11) illustrates an instance of NCI by means of a hint in which the student, after her first indirect request (line 1), makes a second attempt to indirectly request again by means of a hint (line 3-4) followed by the professor's negative response (lines 5-6). The interaction ended smoothly with the student accepting the professor's firm response in not extending the deadline for the paper (line 7). The low preference for hints among these Mexican subjects reflects similar behavior in Uruguayan (Márquez-Reiter 2000) and Peninsular (Le Pair 1996) Spanish and in other languages (Blum-Kulka 1987; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989, Hassall 1999).

4.2 External modification

External modification of the request accounted for the majority of strategies or supportive moves (74%; $n = 379$) and either preceded or followed the request head act. Six different external modifications were identified in the data: preparators, disarmers, precursors, reasons, alternatives, and expressions of positive politeness. Table 1 shows the distribution (frequencies) of the external modifications found in the data across the five situations:

Table 1. Distribution of External Modifications in Mexican Requests ($N = 10$; $n = 379$)

	Ride	Paper	Concert	Notes	Bathroom	Total
Preparators	5	7	5	5	10	32 (8%)
Disarmers	0	0	6	8	5	19 (5%)
Precursors	31	8	6	30	21	96 (25%)
Reasons	21	27	13	18	29	108 (29%)
Alternatives	0	0	30	16	13	59 (16%)
Positive Politeness	22	18	10	11	4	65 (17%)
Total	79	60	70	88	82	379

4.2.1 Preparators and disarmers

As shown in Table 1, preparators and disarmers were the least preferred strategies among the subjects. These functioned as pre-sequences and often occurred within the same request sequence at the beginning of the interaction. Preparators were found across the five situations (8% [$n = 32$]) and were used to introduce the request or to prepare hearer for an upcoming request. Disarmers were infrequently used among the subjects (5% [$n = 19$]) and were found in three situations (Concert, Notes, Bathroom). According to Márquez-Reiter, by employing disarmers in requests, the speaker "provides reasons to 'disarm' the addressee from the possibility of refusal" (2000: 93). The interaction in (12) shows an instance of a preparator and a disarmer:

(12) C1: Classmate requesting (Male); C2: Classmate responding (Notes, Female)

C1: 1 Víctor, Víctor, este, hola

C2: 2 hola=

C1: 3 = soy Verónica

C2: 4 si

C1: 5 llevo clase contigo, te acuerdas de mí?

C2: 6 claro, claro, qué pasó?

C1: 7 oye, *un favorsote*, (Preparator)

8 mira, la verdad es que, qué pena, pero no tengo todos los apuntes

9 de la clase y *yo sé que tú eres súper cuidadoso con esas cosas* (Disarmer)

10 y no sé si tienes tiempo para que me prestes tus apuntes. (Head Act)

English translation

C1: Victor, Victor, um, hi

C2: hi

C1: I'm Veronica

C2: yeah

C1: I'm in your class, do you remember me?

C2: of course, of course, what's up?

C1: hey, I need a huge favor, (Preparator)

look, the truth is, I feel bad, but I don't have all of the class

notes and I know that you are really on top of that kind of stuff (Disarmer)

and I don't know if you have time so that you can lend me your notes (Head Act)

As shown in the interaction above, the preparator (line 7) and the disarmer (line 9) employed in the request sequence were used in the seventh turn, and were utilized to introduce the head act by means of an indirect request (line 10). The upgraders *favorsote* ('big favor') in line #7 and *súper cuidadoso* ('super careful') in line #9 in each of these strategies, function as markers of positive politeness expressing solidarity or camaraderie. These upgraders may represent "element[s] of attempting to increase the interest of the conversational contribution by expressing them dramatically" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 107).

4.2.2 Precursors

Precursors or alerters (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) are external elements which function to draw the interlocutor's attention to the request. While the inventory of precursors varies among languages and even among different varieties of Spanish, the data from the present study identified the following forms which often occurred at the beginning of the interaction: titles (*profesor* ['professor'], *maestro* ['teacher'], *jefe* ['boss']), greetings (*hola* ['hello'], *¿qué pasó?* ['how are you doing?'], *¿cómo estás?* ['how are you?'], *buenas tardes* ['good afternoon']); names, apologetic formulae (*disculpa/disculpe* ['excuse me'], *perdón* ['excuse me']), and discourse markers (*oye/oiga* ['hey'], *mira/mire* ['listen'], *¡¡jese* ['listen']). In general, precursors occurred together in various combinations and were often found across the five situations preceding the head act accounting for 25% ($n = 96$) of external modifications. A repeated measures ANOVA comparing the means of precursors across the five situations (Ride: 3.10; Paper: .80; Concert: .60; Notes: 3.0; Bathroom: 2.10) was significant, $F(4, 36) = 11.83$, $p < .00$, and shows a significantly higher frequency of precursors in three situations (Ride [42%; $n = 31$], Notes [40%; $n = 30$], Bathroom [31%; $n = 21$]). What these three situations have in common is the social factor –Power. This result shows a higher preference for precursors between equals where the situation may be either distant (Ride, Notes) or close (Bathroom). It is also possible that the higher frequency of precursors was determined by the type of situation (Ride, Notes, Bathroom). Combinations of these precursors can be seen in the aforementioned examples (2), (3), (5), and in the interaction in (12) which includes a title and a greeting in line #1.

Discourse markers such as *mira/mire* ('look') or *oye/oiga* ('listen') were commonly used among these Mexican subjects. While both markers were found in formal and informal situations, the discourse marker *oye* (or its formal variant *oiga*) was used more frequently. According to Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999) *mira* and *oye* are used to introduce a new segment of discourse which is relevant to the hearer. These authors add that while *oye* is hearer-oriented in that the speaker attempts to introduce him/herself in the hearer's domain, *mira* is speaker-oriented because the speaker wishes to attract the hearer to his/her own realm. Examples of these discourse markers indicating the

speaker's and hearer's perspective are found in the interaction in (12) in line #7 (*oye*) and line #8 (*mira*) by the classmate making the request (Notes). In these examples *oye* and *mira* are used as markers of positive politeness introducing pre-sequences (preparators, reasons) and mitigating the direct effects of a request. Unlike studies in Uruguayan (Márquez-Reiter 2002) and Ecuadorian (Placencia 1998) Spanish, which did not document any instances of *oye/oiga* among those subjects, the data from the current study showed that both discourse markers are common among these Mexican subjects; in particular, the marker *oye/oiga* ('listen') was the most frequently used marker in formal and informal situations.

4.2.3 Reasons and alternatives

Reasons and alternatives were two indirect strategies used to mitigate the illocutionary force of a request and to smooth conversational interaction. According to Table 1, reasons were the most preferred means of external modification (29%). These occurred across the five situations and either preceded or followed the head act. On the other hand, alternatives were the fourth most frequent means of external modification (16%). They were only found in three situations (Concert, Notes, Bathroom), often following the head act. A paired samples *t*-test was used to compare the means of these strategies (reasons: 10.8; *SD* = 3.97; alternatives: 5.9; *SD* = 1.97) and the difference was significant [$t(9) = 5.106, p < .001$]. These results show that reasons were used significantly more often than alternatives across the request interaction. The interaction in (13) below shows the co-occurrence of reasons and alternatives in an interaction between two roommates (-Power, -Distance):

(13) C1: Requesting to clean bathroom (Female); C2: Responding (Male) - Bathroom

- C1: 1 Víctor, te necesito pedir un favor (Preparator)
 C2: 2 a ver, ¿qué pasó, chaparrita?
 C1: 3 ya sabes que me toca limpiar el baño, pero me tengo que ir rapidísimo,
 4 ya sabes que mis papás vienen y pues ya los conoces, (Reason)
 5 por favor, *tú puedes limpiar eso* (Head Act)
 6 y yo lo limpio la siguiente semana y la otra = (Alternative)
 C2: 7 = es que con la fiesta que organizamos lo dejaron todo cochino el baño.
 C1: 8 Yo sé, es que es por mis papás, te juro que ya me tengo que ir (Reason)
 9 (2.0) *por favor*:r (Head Act)
 10 yo lo hago la siguiente semana (Alternative)
 C2: 11 bueno, me debes una.

English translation:

- C1: Victor, I need to ask you a favor
 C2: okay, what's up, shorty?
 C1: you know that it's my turn to clean the bathroom, but I've gotta run,
 you know that my parents are coming and you know how they are,
 please, you can clean that
 and I will clean it next week and the following week
 C2: it's just that with the party we had they left the bathroom filthy.
 C1: I know, it's because of my parents, I swear I have to go
 (2.0) please
 I'll do it next week
 C2: alright, you owe me one.

The interaction in (13) is realized in six conversational turns and shows that the negotiation of the request is largely accomplished indirectly by means of reasons and alternatives which allow the person making the request to smooth the harshness of a direct request and to appear polite. During the first episode of the interaction (lines 1-7), the person making the request employed two pre-sequences, a preparator (line 1) and reasons (lines 3-4) which attenuate the head act (line 5) followed by an

alternative (line 6) which further mitigates the direct request. The roommate responding refuses indirectly by means of another reason (line 7) and closes the first request sequence. During the second episode of the conversation, the roommate making the request insists by means of a reason (line 8) followed by the head act in the form of an insistent polite marker *por favor* ('please') lengthening the last syllable (line 9), which is followed by another alternative (line 10) mitigating the request. Finally, the conversation ends politely with the roommate accepting the request (line 11), and thus, the negotiation of face is accomplished successfully by both interlocutors.

The preference for reasons across the five situations may reflect positive politeness in that offering reasons during a request is "a way of implying 'I can help you' or 'you can help me', and, [assumes] cooperation" (Brown & Levinson 1987:128). Expressing requests for cooperation using reasons has also been documented in studies on different varieties of Spanish which have identified reasons or explanations as the most frequently used strategy in making requests in Argentina (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), Peru (García 1993), and Uruguay (Márquez-Reiter 2000), and also in declining invitations in Latin American Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer 2003b).

According to Table 1, the preference for alternatives seems to be situation-dependent, as this strategy was only found in three situations (Concert, Notes, Bathroom). This strategy may also be viewed as an expression of positive politeness in that the person requesting offers alternatives as a way of implying cooperation and a commitment for something in exchange. Alternatives were used to facilitate negotiation among the interlocutors and to smooth the interaction. Overall, the use of reasons and alternatives allowed these Mexican subjects to negotiate face by means of various instances of indirectness across the request interaction, permitting the interlocutors to save positive face and to end the interaction politely.

4.2.4 Positive politeness

Expressions of positive politeness were used as post-sequences following the request head act and were largely realized by means of agreement, gratitude, and empathy to end the interaction politely. As shown in Table 1, expressions of positive politeness were the third most frequent means of external modification, accounting for 17% of the data. While expressions of positive politeness were found across the five situations, high levels of politeness were found in the two situations with the highest degree of distance (Ride, Paper). An ANOVA comparing the means of these strategies across the situations (Ride: 2.20; Paper: 1.80; Concert: 1.0; Notes: 1.10; Bathroom: .40) was significant, $F(4, 36) = 8.65, p < .00$, and indicates that a higher degree of positive politeness is more likely to occur with a stranger (Ride [$n = 22$]) and a person of higher status (Paper [$n = 18$]). Examples of positive politeness strategies are shown in (14) and (15):

(14) Se lo agradecería muchísimo, sí de veras, se lo agradezco mucho (Ride, Male)
'I would really appreciate it, yes really, I would appreciate it a lot'

(15) Claro claro, yo entiendo, si no se puede, no importa, yo entiendo (Paper, Female)
'Sure, sure, I understand, if it's not possible, that's fine, I understand.'

As shown in the examples above, expressions of positive politeness were reinforced by intensifiers such as *muchísimo* ('very much'), *mucho* ('much'), or *sí de veras* ('really'), as in (14), or by minimizing the imposition by giving the hearer the option to opt out, as in (15) *si no se puede, no importa* ('if it's not possible, it doesn't matter'). The use of intensification in the expression of gratitude in (14) is seen as an instance of positive politeness by intensifying the speaker's request at the end of the interaction. Further, the expression of agreement in (15) represents another example of positive politeness in that the speaker is seeking common ground or understanding with the hearer (Brown & Levinson 1987). Finally, notice the use of the passive form in (15) (*si no se puede* ['if it's not possible']) which attenuates the response and minimizes imposition.

5. Concluding remarks and future research

In this paper I examined the notions of indirectness and politeness in the speech act of requests, including head acts and external modifications, among Mexican university students in formal and informal role-play situations. It was found that conventional indirectness, mostly realized by means of ‘query preparatory’, was the most common means of requesting in situations which display + Power or + Distance, whereas directness was more common as the relationship between the interlocutors was closer (-Distance). These results lend support to Blum-Kulka’s (1987) observation that unlike non-conventional indirectness (e.g., hints), there seems to be a relationship between conventional indirectness and politeness; this suggests that, at least for the current study, conventionally indirect requests increased levels of deferential politeness and were used to express respect or distance between the interlocutors. As previously observed (Blum-Kulka 1987; Márquez-Reiter 2002), conventional indirectness is often employed to balance pragmatic clarity and non-coerciveness during the negotiation of face which allows interlocutors to end the interaction successfully and politely.

Unlike Brown and Levinson’s (1987) and Leech’s (1983) observations that indirectness increases degrees of politeness during the realization of a face-threatening act such as requests, the results from the present study showed that *on-record* or direct requests are situation-dependent and seem to be the expected behavior among these Mexican subjects in a solidarity politeness system (-Power, -Distance). The results of the present study are consistent with other studies which found that directness in German and Polish cultures should not be considered impolite, but rather should be seen as a way of expressing closeness and affiliation (Pavlidou 2000; Wierzbicka 2003).

The results of the present study cannot be generalized to all NSs of Spanish, but rather, should be taken as preliminary indicators of the behavior of Mexican university students when initiating a request. Regarding the data elicitation method used in the present study, the literature in first- and second-language pragmatics has shown that role-play data, if elicited carefully, represent an approximation of natural discourse (Cohen, 1998; Félix-Brasdefer 2003a; Kasper 2000). In the future, studies employing a larger population of male and female subjects should examine speech act patterns of request behavior by including ethnographic data as well as data which examine perceptions of NSs of Spanish. In addition, a larger population may shed light on the issue of gender differences in speech act behavior. Finally, other studies need to examine prosodic aspects of (im)politeness such as intonation or the low or high pitch of (im)polite utterances in verbal interaction as possible indicators of (im)polite behavior.

Notes

* I am thankful to Dr. T. Greenslade and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and discussion of several points. Any remaining errors are my own.

Appendix A

Classification of Request Head Acts (Adapted from Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper 1989)

1. Direct strategies

a. Mood derivable

Préstame tus apuntes y les saco copia ahorita rápido, ¿no?
(‘Lend me your class notes and I’ll xerox them right away, okay?’)

b. Performative

Te pido que me ayudes a limpiar el baño
(‘I am asking you to help me clean the bathroom’)

c. Need/Want statement

Necesito/quiero que me prestes tus puntes
(‘I need/want you to lend me your class notes’)

2. Conventional Indirectness

d. Suggestory formulae

¿Qué te parece si te intercambio esta semana y tú limpias el baño ahora?
(‘How about if I trade weeks with you and you clean the bathroom now?’)

e. Query preparatory

¿Podría darme un aventón a la gasolinera?
(‘Could you give me ride to the gas station?’)

Quería ver la posibilidad si podía ausentarme la noche de mañana
(‘I wanted to see about the possibility of taking tomorrow night off’)

3. Non-conventional indirectness

f. Hints

Necesito los apuntes de la clase y tú eres el único estudiante que conozco
(‘I need the class notes and you are the only student I know’)

References

- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana. 1989. Playing it safe: The role of conventionality in indirectness. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*, ed. by Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House, and Gabriele Kasper, 37-70. Norwood: Ablex Publishing.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana. 1987. Indirectness and politeness in requests: Same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics* 11.131-146.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, Juliane House, and Gabriele Kasper. (eds.) 1989. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood: Ablex Publishing.
- Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, Andrew D. 1998. *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. London, UK: Longman.
- Davis, Kathryn, and Rosemary C. Henze. 1998. Applying ethnographic perspectives to issues in cross-cultural pragmatics. *Journal of Pragmatics* 30.399-419.
- Delgado, Vilma L. 1994. *Politeness in Language: Directive speech acts in U.S. English, and Colombian and Castilian Spanish*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. State University of New York at Stony Brook.
- Edmonson, Willis. 1981. *Spoken discourse: A model for analysis*. London, UK: Longman.
- Færch, Claus, and Gabriele Kasper. 1989. Internal and external modification in interlanguage request realization. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*, ed. by Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House, and Gabriel Kasper, 221-247. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. César. 2004. *La mitigación en el discurso oral de mexicanos y aprendices de español como*

- lengua extranjera. *Pragmática sociocultural: Estudios sobre el discurso en cortesía en español*, ed. by Diana Bravo and Antonio Briz, 285-299. Spain: Ariel.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. César. 2003a. Validity in data collection methods in pragmatics research. Theory, practice, and acquisition. *Papers from the 6th Hispanic Linguistic Symposium and the 5th Conference on the Acquisition of Spanish and Portuguese*, ed. by Paula Kempchinsky and Carlos E. Piñeros, 239-257. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. César. 2003b. Declining an invitation: A Cross-Cultural Study of Pragmatic Strategies in Latin American Spanish and American English. *Multilingua* 22(3). 225-255.
- García, Carmen. 1993. Making a request and responding to it: A case study of Peruvian Spanish speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19.127-152.
- Hassall, Tim. 1999. Request strategies in Indonesian. *Pragmatics* 9(4).585-606.
- Jefferson, Gail. 1986. Transcript notation. *Structures of social interaction. Studies in conversational analysis*, ed. by J. Atkinson and J. Heritage, ix-xvi. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kasper, Gabriele. 2000. Data collection in pragmatics research. *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures*, ed. By Helen Spencer-Oatey, 316-369. London, UK: Continuum.
- Koike, Dale. 1994. Negation in Spanish and English suggestions and requests: Mitigating effects? *Journal of Pragmatics* 21.513-526.
- Leech, Geoffrey. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. New York: Longman.
- Le Pair, Rob. 1996. Spanish request strategies: A cross-cultural analysis from an intercultural perspective. *Language Science* 18.651-670.
- Márquez-Reiter, Rosina, 2002. A contrastive study of conventional indirectness in Spanish: Evidence from Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish. *Pragmatics* 12(2).135-151.
- Márquez-Reiter, Rosina. 2000. Linguistic politeness in Britain and Uruguay: A contrastive study of requests and apologies. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Martín Zorraquino, María A., and José Portolés Lázaro. 1999. Los marcadores del discurso. *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, vol. 3, ed. by Ignacio Bosque and Violeta Demonte, 4051-4213. Madrid, España: Espasa.
- Pavlidou, T. 2000. Telephone conversations in Greek and German: attending to the relationship aspect of communication. *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures*, ed. by Helen Spencer-Oatey, 121-140. London: Continuum.
- Placencia, M. Elena. 1998. Pragmatic variation: Ecuadorian Spanish vs. Peninsular Spanish. *Spanish Applied Linguistics* 2(1).71-103.
- Ružicková, Elena. 1998. Face, face-threatening acts and politeness in Cuban Spanish. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Pittsburgh.
- Scarcella, Robin. 1979. On speaking politely in a second language. *On TESOL '79: The learner in focus*, ed. by C. Yorio, K. Perkins, and J. Schachter, 275-287. Washington, DC: TESOL.
- Scollon, Ron., and Suzanne Scollon. 2001. *Intercultural communication*. Second edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Searle, John. 1975. Indirect speech acts. *Syntax and semantics*, ed., by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, 59-82. New York: NY: Academic Press.
- Sifianou, Maria. 1992. *Politeness phenomena in England and Greece. A cross-cultural perspective*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Walters, Joel. 1979. Strategies for requesting in Spanish and English: Structural similarities and pragmatic differences. *Language Learning* 29.277-293.
- Wierzbicka, Ana. 2003. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Second edition. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Selected Proceedings of the 7th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium

edited by David Eddington

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2005

Copyright information

Selected Proceedings of the 7th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium
© 2005 Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA. All rights reserved

ISBN 1-57473-403-2 library binding

A copyright notice for each paper is located at the bottom of the first page of the paper.
Reprints for course packs can be authorized by Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

Ordering information

Orders for the library binding edition are handled by Cascadilla Press.
To place an order, go to www.lingref.com or contact:

Cascadilla Press, P.O. Box 440355, Somerville, MA 02144, USA
phone: 1-617-776-2370, fax: 1-617-776-2271, e-mail: sales@cascadilla.com

Web access and citation information

This entire proceedings can also be viewed on the web at www.lingref.com. Each paper has a unique document # which can be added to citations to facilitate access. The document # should not replace the full citation.

This paper can be cited as:

Félix-Brasdefer, J. César. 2005. Indirectness and Politeness in Mexican Requests. In *Selected Proceedings of the 7th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. David Eddington, 66-78. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Félix-Brasdefer, J. César. 2005. Indirectness and Politeness in Mexican Requests. In *Selected Proceedings of the 7th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, ed. David Eddington, 66-78. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #1087.