

"Could You Calm Down More?": Requests and Korean ESL Learners

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This study examines the ways in which adult Korean ESL learners perform one speech act, the request, with particular attention to deviations caused by negative transfer. For this purpose, an oral discourse completion test including six request situations was given to three groups; one group of native American English request responses was used as baseline data while one group of Korean subjects served as nonnative English respondents and another group of Korean subjects served as native Korean respondents. In all three language groups, request realizations (directness levels and supportive moves) are significantly determined by the sociopragmatic features of the situational context. However, non-native speakers deviated from native English speaker norms in some situations due to the effect of the pragmatic rules of Korean.

Research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that even advanced learners' speech act performance commonly deviates from target language conventionality patterns and may fail to convey the intended illocutionary point or politeness value (e.g., Cohen & Olshtain 1980: 113-134; Wolfson 1989; Takahashi & Beebe 1987: 131-155; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989; Edmonson & House 1991: 64). Among the various attempts to account for both the underlying processes and communicative effects of such pragmatic deviations, research on negative pragmatic transfer has played a significant role in explaining the formation of interlanguage (Takahashi & Beebe 1987: 131-155; Wolfson 1989; Kasper 1992: 203-231).

It is the purpose of this study to examine the ways in which adult Korean ESL learners perform one speech act, the request, with particular attention to deviations caused by negative transfer. Requests are a frequent and useful speech act, permit a wide variety of strategies, and have high social stakes; for those reasons they are important for second language educators and others involved in cross-cultural communication. Although requests have frequently been studied, it is important to find out about requests in language groups which have not been studied.

Request Schema

Requests are pre-event speech acts which affect the hearer's behavior. Previous studies of requests in several languages have revealed the universal richness available in the modes of performance of a request and the high communicative and social stakes involved in the choice of a specific request form (Ervin-Tripp 1976: 25-66; Brown & Levinson 1987). In order to understand the interlanguage pragmatics of requestive behavior, we must first consider the linguistic, social, and cultural types of information on which speakers rely in comprehending and producing requests.

According to Blum-Kulka (1991: 64), the motivational, intentional source of the request is the *requestive goal*, which speakers strive to achieve with maximum effectiveness and politeness. Requests vary in goals from the least coercive requests (e.g., asking for information, permission, goods, etc.) to the most coercive (e.g., action). In choosing the means by which to perform the request, *effectiveness* is important. An effective request is one in which the hearer clearly recognizes the speaker's intent. However, effectiveness can conflict with *politeness* (Blum-Kulka 1991: 64; Brown & Levinson 1987). For example, the request "Drive me home" may be the most direct and therefore, effective way to perform a request, but it would certainly not be considered the most polite way in most contexts. On the other hand, the most indirect way of performing a request is not necessarily the most polite one (Blum-Kulka 1991: 64; Brown & Levinson 1987).

The decision to perform a specific requestive goal is subject to a *cultural filter* (Blum-Kulka 1991: 64). For example, requests for information concerning age will be acceptable in Korean culture but taboo in other cultures. The degree of imposition involved in a specific request for action (illocutionary act) will also be weighed in culturally relative ways, and in turn might lead to its avoidance or affect its mode of performance.

In her research on requests, Blum-Kulka (1983: 36-55) indicated that although there are some rules that do seem to be less language- and culture-specific than others, one of the major problems confronted by L2 learners deals with the inappropriate transfer of sociolinguistic rules. In arguing against the universalist hypothesis,¹ Blum-Kulka states:

Contrary to such claims, I would like to argue that the nature of interdependence among pragmatic, linguistic, and social factors that determine speech-act realization varies from one language to another, and that as a result, L2 learners often fail to realize their speech acts in the target language both in terms of effectiveness and in terms of social appropriateness (Blum-Kulka 1983: 38).

¹Fraser (1978: 1-21) has claimed that the strategies for performing illocutionary acts are essentially the same across languages. He uses the term "strategy" to refer to "the particular choice of sentential form and meaning which the speaker employs in order to perform the intended act" (Fraser 1978: 12).

L2 learners' request performance often violates norms of appropriateness due to negative transfer, but sometimes differs from both native and target language usage due to interlanguage development (Kasper 1992: 203-231).

The broadest study on requests to date has been the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989). The aim of this study was to compare speech act realizations of native and non-native speakers under different social constraints across seven languages (Australian English, British English, American English, French, German, Danish, and Hebrew). Data were elicited by means of a discourse completion test (DCT).

The findings of CCSARP that are pertinent to the present study are as follows:

1) Learners vary the strategies used by situation, and

2) Learners vary the type and quantity of external modification by situation. Situational variability in choice of directness levels can link L2 learners with their L1. In CCSARP data (House & Kasper 1987: 1250-1288) Germans used the most direct level far more frequently than native British English speakers in two situations—in the case of a policeman asking a driver to move her car ('Policeman request') and the case of asking a roommate to clean the kitchen ('Kitchen request'). The researchers claimed that the German learners' usage of imperatives is most likely a result of negative transfer from their native language into their English interlanguage.

On the other hand, it has been claimed that certain deviations of interlanguage request performance, such as overelaboration in the use of supportive moves, persist regardless of mother tongue. It has been hypothesized that learners are more verbose than native speakers because learners try to compensate for their language difficulties by adding a great deal of unnecessary information (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1986: 47-61; House & Kasper 1987: 1250-1288; Edmonson & House 1991: 64).

Although the CCSARP was a comprehensive study of request realizations, there are two major shortcomings that need to be addressed. First, the researchers failed to include other languages and cultures in their data. Perhaps the language groups used as subjects for CCSARP were the most pertinent subjects of study for the researchers and their respective locations. However, for ESL instructors in the United States, it is extremely important to learn more about the groups of international students who make up a large portion of local enrollment. Students from Japan and Korea usually make up the largest groups in intensive English programs across the United States. Although some research has been done concerning Japanese learners and speech acts (Takahashi & Beebe 1987: 131-155; Beebe & Takahashi 1989; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz 1990), research is needed in the area of Korean learners of English and their speech act realizations.

Second, although DCTs allow the researcher to gather large amounts of data quickly and control for specific variables of the situation, data collected in this manner cannot produce all the information needed about the ways in which speech acts are performed; writing an answer permits more time to plan and evaluate than does orally performing the speech act. Indeed, DCTs have underlying limitations which make it impossible to collect the kind of elaborated behavior found in oral speech (Wolfson 1989; Beebe & Cummings 1994).

The specific questions addressed in this study are the following:

- 1) Under varying social constraints, how do advanced Korean learners of English compare to native American English speakers in request realizations—or more specifically, in directness levels and external modifications?
- 2) By including a comparison of Korean subjects requesting in English and subjects requesting in Korean, will there be any evidence of negative transfer? If so, under what contextual conditions?

Method

Two groups of subjects participated in this study. One group consisted of 25 native Korean speakers (13 male, 12 female) who were enrolled in high intermediate to advanced level ESL classes or as graduate students in a university in Philadelphia. A high intermediate to advanced group of learners was chosen with the expectation that they would have a larger linguistic repertoire and be more sensitive to the subtleties of English pragmatics than would be less advanced learners. The Korean-speaking subjects ranged in age from 21 to 30 (average age 24) and length of stay in the United States ranged from 1 month to nine months. The other group comprised 15 native speakers of American English, 8 male and 7 female, who were enrolled in various graduate programs. The range of this group was 23 to 30 (average age 24).

In order to set up norms for "acceptable" requests, the subjects were divided into three groups. The Americans served as informants for native English speakers' requests, 10 of the native Korean speakers served as informants for requests in comparable situations in Korean, and the remaining 15 Korean speakers served as the nonnative speakers requesting in English and the main focus of this study.

Data Collection

The task consisted of an oral discourse completion test (composed for purposes of this study) with six situations each of which was designed to assess pragmatic competence among nonnative speakers of English. They included

- 1) asking a professor for an extension,
- 2) asking a friend to lend you money,
- 3) asking the waiter to take back an order,
- 4) asking a neighbor to turn down his/her music,
- 5) asking your boss to let you out of work early,
- 6) asking a little boy to go to sleep.

These situations vary in terms of the interlocutors' role relationship, i.e., on the dimensions of: dominance (professor/boss higher status than respondent; friend/neighbor at same status; waiter/little boy at lower status) and social distance (a neighbor or waiter being least familiar and a friend being most familiar), interlocutors' rights and obligations, and degree of imposition involved in the event. The full text of the situations appears in Appendix A.

The investigator first read the instructions out loud in English and then each subject was asked to read silently the six situations which were typed onto file cards in the appropriate language. Each subject was then asked to respond to the verbal cue issued by the investigator. Responses were tape-recorded and then transcribed

Data Analysis

The major aim of data analysis was to compare the request realizations of nonnative English speakers (Korean) to native American English speakers and also trace any patterns of transfer from native Korean speakers. The CCSARP (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989) coding scheme for requests served as a point of departure in setting up ways in which to analyze directness level and external support on the basis of the responses by all subjects:

1. **Directness Levels:** The CCSARP coding scheme identifies the following types or requests, according to their level of directness:²

A. **Mood derivable** (the grammatical mood of the verb signals the illocutionary force)

-Go to sleep!

B. **Performative** (the illocutionary force is either explicitly named or modified by hedging expressions)

-I'm requesting that you give me some extra time.

²According to the CCSARP coding scheme, Performatives are split into two groups—Explicit and Hedged—and Hints are separated into—Strong and Mild. Due to the small number of participants in this study, Explicit and Hedged Performatives will be listed under Performatives and Mild and Strong Hints under Hints.

C. **Locution derivable** (the illocutionary force is derivable directly from the semantic content of the request)

-I think you'll have to bring this back.

D. **Suggestory formulas** (a suggestion to do the action)

-How about going to sleep?

E. **Preparatory** (reference to preparatory conditions such as ability or willingness)

-Can you lend me money?

F. **Hint** (partial reference to the object or element needed for implementation of the act or no reference but still interpretable as request through context)

-I had ordered this to be well-done.

2. **External modification:** In externally modifying a central speech act, a speaker chooses to aggravate or mitigate her request by using specific types of supportive moves. Examples of aggravating supportive moves are threats or insults. Since they occur very infrequently in the data, aggravating supportive moves will be disregarded in this study.

The following mitigating supportive moves (Blum-Kulka, 1983, House & Kasper, 1989) were found in the data of the present study:

A. **Preparator.** (the speaker prepares his or her hearer for the ensuing request)

-I have a request to make.

B. **Getting a precommitment.** (In checking on a potential refusal before making his or her request, a speaker tries to commit his or her hearer before telling him or her what he is being requested)

-Could you do me a favor?

C. **Apology.** (Although not found in the CCSARP coding scheme, apologies were included as an example of a mitigating supportive move because of the frequent occurrence in the data and also quite simply because apologies mitigate the ensuing request. By apologizing, the speaker acknowledges that s/he is making an imposition on the hearer and expresses his or her regret.)

-I'm sorry, but...

D. **Grounders.** (The speaker gives reasons, explanations, or justifications for his or her request, which may precede and/or follow it.)

-I'm trying to study for an exam.

E. **Disarmer.** (The speaker tries to remove any potential objections the hearer might raise upon being confronted with the request.)

-I know you don't like this, but...

F. Promise of reward. (To increase the likelihood of the hearer's compliance with the speaker's request, a reward due on the fulfillment of the request is announced.)

-I'll make it up to you.

The data analysis included both identifying pragmatic deviation from native patterns of apology and investigating whether the deviation would likely be the result of negative transfer from patterns in the native language.

Table 1
Situation 1: Professor's Office

Directness Levels	Native English		Non-native English		Native Korean	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Mood Derivable	0	0	1	6.7	1	10
2. Performative	3	20	0	0	0	0
3. Locution Derivable	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Want Statement	1	6.7	1	6.7	1	10
5. Suggestory Formula	0	0	0	0	0	0
6. Preparatory	11	73.3	12	80	8	80
7. Hints	0	0	1	6.7	0	0
Supportive Moves³						
1. Preparator	8	53.3	0	0	0	0
2. Precommitment	0	0	1	6.7	0	0
3. Apology	2	13.3	7	46.7	5	50
4. Grounder	14	93.3	13	86.7	9	90
5. Disarmer	1	6.7	0	0	0	0
6. Promise of Reward	0	0	1	6.7	0	0

+dominance

-social distance

Results

The results of each of the six situations are summarized in Tables 1 to 6. In Table 1, it is apparent that all three groups tend to concentrate on level 6=Preparatory conditions (*Could you give me an extension?*). On closer examination, however, the quantitative data presented here does not describe the vast difference between native and non-native speaker forms within the level of Preparatory conditions. Although native and non-native English speakers used the same level of directness, native speakers further mitigated their requests by using internal modification plus routinization. Native speakers commonly used phrases like: *I was wondering if I could get an extension on the due date...or Would it be possible to get a few more days to write my paper?* while Preparatory requests of the type: *can/could you do X...?* were heavily routinized in nonnative speaker behavior.

³Each respondent may have used none, one, or more than one supportive move. Each type of move used by the respondents has been accounted for. Therefore, totals in this section will not necessarily equal 100 percent.

Table 2
Situation 2: Money

Directness Levels	Native English		Non-native English		Native Korean	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Mood Derivable	2	13.3	2	13.3	2	20
2. Performative	0	0	0	0	0	0
3. Locution Derivable	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Want Statement	1	6.7	2	13.3	1	10
5. Suggestory Formula	0	0	0	0	0	0
6. Preparatory	12	80	11	73.3	7	70
7. Hints	0	0	0	0	0	0
Supportive Moves						
1. Preparator	0	0	0	0	0	0
2. Precommitment	1	6.7	0	0	0	0
3. Apology	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Grounder	7	46.7	13	86.7	8	80
5. Disarmer	0	0	0	0	0	0
6. Promise of Reward	5	33.3	5	33.3	3	30

+dominance

-social distance

As for external modifications, 53% of the native English speaking subjects used Preparators while neither of the two Korean groups used Preparators at all. All three groups used Grounders as a common supportive move. However, native speakers had more of a tendency to use Grounders both before and after the head act (*I have this mandatory FTX session this week which is part of my ROTC scholarship. Is there any way I could get an extension on my paper? I really don't think I'll have time to write a paper with this kind of commitment*). Additionally, nonnative speakers and native Korean speakers used more Apologies in their requests than did the native English speakers.

In Situation 2, the requester is not endowed with a "contractual" right to make his or her request, just as the requestee is by no means obligated to comply with it. On the other hand, since borrowing money is a common transaction among best friends (and does not constitute a face-threatening act) the request may be performed without an abundance of politeness. Speakers from all three groups occasionally used the most direct level (*Give me some money.*)⁴ Most respondents chose to use the Preparatory requests of the type: *Can/could you...?*

The request may be performed without a high frequency of supportive moves. All three groups used only Grounders and Promises of Reward. However, nonnative speakers and native Korean speakers used Grounders more than native English speakers did.

⁴Only male subjects in all three groups used imperatives in this situation.