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Cross-Cultural Comparisons of English Request Speech Acts in Native Speakers of English and Chinese

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Abstract

This paper aims at comparing the uses of the English request speech acts in native speakers of English and Chinese. An oral discourse completion task (ODCT) was used to collect data and the chi-square analysis method was applied to examine the data. From the results, the comparisons of request strategies and internal modifications between Chinese and English native speakers showed no significant differences; both groups frequently used indirect strategies. However, with regard to the use of alerts and external modifications, significant differences were found between these two groups. Further results also indicated the effects of social status and familiarity on both groups. To interlocutor in higher status, both groups showed significantly different usages of internal and external modifications. As to interlocutors in equal status, they performed different request strategies, alerts and external modifications. In addition, significant differences were found in the use of alerts to interlocutors in lower social status. To familiar interlocutors, both groups showed different usages in alerts and external modifications. To unfamiliar interlocutors, significant differences were also found in the use of alerts and external modifications. At last, Chinese native speakers with high and low proficiency levels showed significantly different usages in alerts.

Key words: English request speech act; Oral discourse completion task; Chi-square analysis; English native speaker; Chinese native speaker

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INTRODUCTION

Speech acts, such as requests, refusals, compliments and complaints play an important role in daily communication. It is important for non-native speakers to know the appropriate use of speech acts in their target language. In this study, an oral elicitation questionnaire offers details about the types of English request strategies used by native speakers of Chinese and English so as to have a comprehensive understanding of how Chinese and English native speakers perform English request behaviors. Three factors are used to analyze relationships among the participants' request behaviors: social status, familiarity, and English proficiency. Based on the three factors, the study investigates whether Chinese and English native speakers perform differently in request production.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Speech Acts

Speech act theory could be traced back to Austin's (1962) introduction of the three characteristics of speech utterances: locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions, and Searle's (1969) classifications of speech acts into representatives, directives, expressives, commisives, and declarations according to their communicative functions. Another approach for the classification of speech acts is Searle's (1979) distinction between direct and indirect speech acts according to the relationship between the structural forms and communicative functions. A direct

speech act refers to utterances whose meaning can be understood through linguistic forms, while indirect strategies are used to show an appropriate level of politeness.

1.2 Politeness

The history of politeness theory can be traced back to Grice's theory of Cooperative Principles (Grice, 1975). In his theory, the maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner were identified. In 1975, Brown and Levinson further developed the notion of face and proposed positive politeness and negative politeness. At last, Leech (1983) added a politeness principle with six sub-maxims, namely sympathy, agreement, modesty, approbation, generosity and tact maxim, and clarified a new idea about politeness.

Among all of the perspectives, one of the most influential and important approaches in the field of linguistic politeness is the notion of face, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their framework was the first to connect the notion of face with politeness. Politeness, in the process of communication or interaction, is used to show awareness of another person's face. In social interactions, people are expected to help each other maintain face, and avoid face-saving defenses. The function of politeness is to minimize cost and maximize benefit. The speech acts, known as "face-threatening acts" are hereafter FTAs. Another important issue, proposed by Brown and Levinson, is the relationship between social variables and the degree of politeness. In social interactions, social variables including power (P), distance (D) and rank of imposition (R) influence the relative politeness between the speaker and the interlocutor.

1.3 Request Speech Acts

A request is defined as face-threatening acts (FTAs). According to Searle (1979), requests can be grouped into direct and indirect strategies, based on their level of directness. A request is considered direct, when the utterance and intention of the speaker are directly revealed by its linguistic content. Indirect strategies can be further classified as conventional indirect or nonconventional indirect. A request is conventional indirect when the meaning of the utterance is interpreted through its linguistic content and conventional usage, while a request is nonconventional indirect, when the meaning of the utterance is interpreted through the contextual inference.

Generally speaking, a request is composed of a request head act (RHA), with optional alerts and modifications (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989). In the project of *Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns* (CCSARP), nine request strategies were specified from the most direct to the least direct, in accordance with the 3 levels of directness with 9 subcategories (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989). The most direct strategies include mood derivable, performatives, hedged performatives, obligation statements and want statements. Conventional indirect strategies include suggestive formula and query preparatory. Nonconventional indirect strategies include strong and mild hints. An alert warns the listener of an ensuing speech act. An alert include 3 types with 9 subcategories, i.e., use of terms/pronoun (a title/role, surname, first name, nickname, endearment term, offensive term, pronoun), use of attention getter or a combination of all. In addition, in CCSARP project, the researchers also analyzed the modifications (i.e., internal and external) used in each request strategy utterance. According to their categorization, internal modification consists of syntactic downgraders and lexical downgraders (with 7 subcategories respectively), which are used to soften and intensify the force of the request respectively. External modification refers to either mitigating moves or aggravating moves (with 7 and 3 subcategories respectively). The subcategories for internal and external modifications are expected to be able to be applied to all languages. This classification by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) was used as the coding framework in this study.

1.4 Empirical Studies on Request Speech Acts

Based on CCSARP, Cenoz and Valencia (1995) studied the similarities and differences in requesting behavior, presented by American and European speakers in English and Spanish. Participants were 29 Americans and 78 European university students. Data was obtained through a discourse completion task (DCT), containing four request situations and four apology situations. The results indicated that for both groups, conventional indirect strategies are the most frequently used. Conventional indirect strategies represented 85.2% of the request production. Direct strategies were used in 10% and nonconventional indirect strategies were used 4.8% of request productions for native speakers of English. Yang (2008) studied the acquisition features of Chinese learners' making English request and found that Chinese learners' use of direct request decreased, conventionally indirect request increased and the number and variety of internal modifiers increased with the increase of proficiency. Yang's study also found that L1 pragmatic transfer influenced learners' request behaviors. However, limitations were also shown in the aforementioned studies. First, in Yang's study, participants were junior and senior high school students and adult English native speakers. Second, these studies used written discourse completion task (DCT) as the research tool, which may not truly present the authentic utterances in request speech acts. Finally, these studies used descriptive statistics and more advanced statistics for analysis yield more in-depth results.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to compare English request speech acts among Chinese and English native speakers. Based on this purpose, the data was collected by an oral elicitation task, known as oral DCT (hereafter ODCT).

Chinese native speaker participants with a mean age of 18-19 from the researcher's university first took an English oral test individually for the division of high and low level. Three raters scored their performances of the volunteers according to the scoring rubric. The scores were rated on a 0-to-7 scale, with a score of "7" indicating the highest range of performance, and "0" indicating the lowest. According to the oral test result, 10 males and 10 females who scored 5-7 were assigned into the high proficiency group and another 10 males and 10 females who scored 0-3 into the low proficiency group. And 20 English native speakers (10 males and 10 females; mean age 18-19) recruited by the researcher's friend who studied as a postgraduate student in an American university. All the participants received the same ODCT expected to last 15 minutes for each.

The ODCT included two parts: questionnaire direction and the statement of 12 scenarios, in which every statement was ended with a question requiring the participant to make a request. The ODCT was embedded with two social variables, social status and familiarity, i.e. the interlocutor was of higher/lower/equal social status [S+/－/=], or the interlocutor was (not) familiar with the speaker [F+/－]. When both variables were considered, such combination results in six situations, based on which twelve scenarios were designed in the ODCT, in which each situation consisted of two scenarios. The details concerning the familiarity and relative social status between the interlocutors were specified in the descriptions. The scenarios were designed to be found in the participants' real lives. Additionally, the word "request" was avoided to avoid influencing the participants' performance. Finally, the distributions of the 12 scenarios were scrambled. The researcher and the two raters first followed the coding framework by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) and segmented the request utterances into request strategy types, alerts, internal and external modifications. Later, the effect of social variables and proficiency level were examined to compare performances between the Chinese and English native speakers.

3. ORAL DISCOURSE COMPLETION TEST RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the chi-square analyses showed that Chinese and English native speakers showed no significant differences according to their use of direct and indirect request strategies (x^2 (1, N = 720) = 0.101, p = 0.751). For both groups, they frequently used conventional indirect strategies (CNS: 85%, ENS: 86%) with limited use of direct strategies (CNS: 13%, ENS: 12%). With regard to the use of alerts, the chi-square analyses suggested significant different usages of alerts between Chinese and English native speakers (x^2 (2, N = 535) = 4.744, p = .000). To be more specific, Table 1 showed that combination was the most frequently used strategy in both groups (CNS: 43%, ENS: 47%). As to the comparisons of terms/pronoun and attention getter, table 1 showed that Chinese native speakers tended to use more attention getters (e.g. excuse me) (CNS: 36%, ENS: 16%) and English native speakers preferred to use more terms/pronoun (CNS: 21%, ENS: 37%). The use of modifications was reported in two categories: internal modifications and external modifications. Regarding internal modifications, Table 1 showed that both Chinese and English native speakers used more syntactic downgraders (CNS: 78%, ENS: 74%) than lexical downgraders (CNS: 22%, ENS: 26%). Among the valid cases of external modifications, English native speakers used more preparator, grounder and disarmer than Chinese native speakers (CNS: 69%, ENS: 90%), while Chinese native speakers tended to use more thankings than English native speakers (CNS: 31%, ENS: 10%). According to Table 1, the chi-square analyses of internal modifications showed that Chinese and English native speakers showed no significant differences in their use of internal modifications (x^2 (1, N = 856) = 1.109, p = 0.292), and indicated significant differences in the two subcategories with valid cases under the external modifications categories between the two groups (x^2 (1, N = 279) = 15.612, p = 0.000).

Table 1
Chi-Square Test Results of the Use of Request Speech Acts

Category		CNS (N)	ENS (N)	x^2
Request strategies	Direct strategies	62	29	x^2=0.101,
	Indirect strategies	418	211	p=0.751
Alerts	Use of terms/pronoun	82	53	x^2=4.744,
	Attention getter	141	23	
	Combination	168	68	p=0.000**
Internal modifications	Syntactic downgraders	428	226	x^2=1.109,
	Lexical downgraders	124	78	p=0.292
External modifications	Preparator, grounder and disarmer	124	89	x^2=15.612,
	Thanking	56	10	p=0.000**

Note: N refers to the valid cases in the chi-square tests. CNS stands for Chinese native speakers and ENS stands for English native speakers. *p < .05 **p < .01

As indicated in the chi-square test results in Table 2, in the situations where interlocutors are in higher social status, the significant differences were found in Chinese and English native speakers' use of internal (x^2 (1, N = 285) = 6.129, p = 0.013) and external modifications (x^2 (1, N = 80) = 5.037, p = 0.025). There were no significant differences found in their use of request strategies (x^2 (1, N = 236) = 0.40, p = 0.523) and alerts (x^2 (2, N = 170) = 0.248, p = 0.883). In addition, in the situations where interlocutors are in equal social status, significant differences between Chinese and English native speakers were found in their performances of request strategies (x^2 (1, N = 224) = 4.119, p = 0.042), alerts (x^2 (2, N = 254) = 19.942, p = 0.000) and external modifications (x^2 (1, N =

110) = 8.208, p = 0.004). No significant differences were found in their use of internal modifications (x^2 (1, N = 268) = 0.885, p = 0.347). At last, when the interlocutors are in lower social status, significant differences between these two groups were only found in their use of alerts (x^2 (2, N = 159) = 16.920, p = 0.000). No significant differences were found in their performances of request strategies (x^2 (1, N = 260) = 1.210, p = 0.271), internal modifications (x^2 (1, N = 303) = 0.335, p = 0.551) and external modifications (x^2 (1, N = 89) = 1.404, p = 0.236).

Table 2
Chi-Square Test Results of the Use of Request Speech Acts Based on Social Status

Category	S+		S=		S-	
	CNS(N)	ENS (N)	CNS (N)	ENS (N)	CNS (N)	ENS (N)
Direct strategies	12	4	20	3	30	22
indirect strategies	148	72	133	68	137	71
x^2	x^2 = 0.408, p = 0. 523		x^2 = 4.119, p = 0. 042**		x^2 = 1. 210, p = 0. 271	
Use of terms/ pronoun	26	12	38	33	18	8
Attention getter	33	14	50	6	58	3
Combination	84	32	36	12	48	24
x^2	x^2 = 0. 248, p = 0. 883		x^2 = 19.942, p = 0.000**		x^2 = 16.920, p = 0.000**	
Syntactic downgraders	153	78	130	64	145	84
Lexical downgraders	26	28	54	20	44	30
x^2	x^2 = 6. 129, p = 0.013*		x^2 = 0. 885, p = 0.347		x^2 = 0. 355, p = 0. 551	
Preparator, grounder and disarmer	35	36	46	34	43	19
Thanking	8	1	26	4	22	5
x^2	x^2 = 5.037, p = 0.025*		x^2 = 8. 208, p = 0.004**		x^2 = 1. 404, p = 0. 236	

Note: S+/–/= stands for the interlocutor of higher/lower/equal social status. *p < .05 ** p < .01

Table 3 shows the chi-square analyses of how Chinese and English native speakers used English request speech acts when the interlocutors are familiar or unfamiliar to the speaker. When the interlocutors are familiar to the speaker, significant differences were found in Chinese and English native speakers' use of alerts (x^2 (2, N = 265) = 12.623, p = 0.002) and external modifications(x^2 (1, N = 128) = 7.506, p = 0.006). No significant differences were found in their performances of request strategies (x^2(1, N = 352) = 0.001, p = 0.979), and internal modifications (x^2(1, N = 411) = 0.192, p = 0.661). In the situations where the interlocutors are not familiar to the speaker, the significant differences between the two groups were also found in their use of alerts (x^2 (2, N = 270) = 20.254, p = 0.000) and external modifications (x^2 (1, N = 151) = 8.150, p = 0.004). Both groups showed no significant different usages of request strategies (x^2 (1, N = 368) = 0.297, p = 0.586), and internal modifications (x^2 (1, N = 445) = 1.038, p = 0.308).

As also presented in Table 3, the results of chi-square tests indicated significant differences in using alerts between these the high and the low proficiency groups (x^2 (2, N = 391) = 13.973, p = 0.001). No significant differences were found in their use of request strategies(x^2 (1, N = 480) = 0.074, p = 0.785), internal modifications (x^2 (1, N = 552) = 2.3624, p = 0.124) and external modifications (x^2 (1, N = 180) = 3.425, p = 0.064). The statistic analyses in Table 3 showed that both Chinese native speakers with high and low proficiency levels were reported to performed more indirect strategies (CNS-high: 87%, CNS-low: 88%) than direct strategies (CNS-high: 13%, CNS-low: 12%). About the use of internal modifications, both groups performed more syntactic downgraders (CNS-high: 75%, CNS-low: 80%) than lexical downgraders (CNS-high: 25% CNS-low: 20%). Concerning the analyses of external modifications, both groups tended to use more strategies in preparator, grounder and disarmer (CNS-high: 74%, CNS-low: 61%) than thankings (CNS-high: 26%, CNS-low: 39%). In addition, as to the use of alerts, high proficiency group used more terms/pronoun (CNS-high: 27%, CNS-low: 15%) and combination of above (CNS-high: 44%, CNS-low: 41%) than low proficiency group. Low proficiency group preferred to use attention getters (CNS-high: 28%, CNS-low: 44%).

Table 3
Chi-Square Test Results of the Use of Request Speech Acts Based on Familiarity and Proficiency

Category	F+		F-		Proficiency (CNS)	
	CNS(N)	ENS (N)	CNS (N)	ENS (N)	High	Low
Direct strategies	35	18	27	11	32	30
Indirect strategies	198	101	220	110	208	210
x^2	x^2=0. 001, p=0. 979		x^2=0. 297, p=0. 586		x^2=0. 074, p=0. 785	
Use of terms/ pronoun	60	30	22	23	54	28
Attention getter	50	5	91	18	57	84
Combination	80	40	88	28	90	78
x^2	x^2=12. 623, p=0. 002**		x^2=20.254, p=0.000**		x^2=13. 973, p=0.001**	
Syntactic downgraders	209	110	219	116	215	213
Lexical downgraders	58	34	66	44	72	52
x^2	x^2=0. 192, p=0.661		x^2=1. 038, p=0. 308		x^2=2. 362, p=0. 124	
Preparator, grounder and disarmer	58	41	66	48	78	46
Thanking	25	4	31	6	27	29
x^2	x^2=7. 506, p=0.006**		x^2=8.150, p=0.004**		x^2=3.425, p=0. 064	

Note: F+/– stands for the interlocutor familiar or not familiar with the speaker.*p < .05 ** p < .01

4. DISCUSSIONS

In the current study, Chinese and English native speakers did not show significantly different performances in request strategies and internal modifications. This finding was not consistent with the studies done by Song (1994), Li (2001) and Chen (2003) in which the Chinese native speakers were revealed to be more direct than English native speakers in performing request strategies and using more internal modifications. It is assumed that such inconsistency may be probably caused by different data collection methods by this research, i.e. the use of ODCT, a different data collection method from the one commonly used by researchers. Both groups frequently used conventional indirect strategies in most of the situations and performed more syntactic downgraders than lexical downgraders.

Some cross-cultural differences were also found in their use of alerts and external modifications in the current study. First, in the use of alerts, Chinese native speakers used more attention getters (e.g., excuse me) than English native speakers. English native speakers preferred to use terms and pronoun (e.g., first names). This may be explained that the Chinese given name is used by the intimate relatives or friends, but English first name is a public address term, that can be used by people outside the family. Chinese native speakers used more thankings than English native speakers, while English native speakers preferred to use preparator,grounder and disarmer in most of the situations. This was consistent with the results in the studies by Sangpil Byon (2004).

The results indicated that Chinese and English native speakers' use of internal and external modifications differed when the interlocutor was in higher social status. Chinese native speakers used more syntactic downgraders (e.g., Can I borrow your book?) (CNS: 85%, ENS: 74%) and fewer lexical downgraders (e.g., a little bit) (CNS: 15%, ENS: 26%) than English native speakers. As to the use of external modifications, English native speakers almost rarely used thankings and Chinese native speakers used more thankings (e.g., thank you) to express their politeness and respect to interlocutors in higher social status (CNS: 19%, ENS: 3%). To interlocutor in equal social status, Chinese and English native speakers showed significantly different usages of alerts, request strategies, and external modifications. Chinese native speakers tended to use more attention getters (CNS: 40%, ENS: 12%) and English native speakers used more terms/ pronoun (CNS: 31%, ENS: 65%) in the situation. On the other hand, as to the use of request strategies, the results indicated that Chinese native speakers were significantly more direct than English native speakers to interlocutors in equal social status (CNS: 13%, ENS: 4%), though both groups heavily used indirect request strategies (CNS: 87%, ENS: 96%). This finding is consistent with Gao's (1999) study that the frequent use of direct strategies or imperatives is the most significant feature of Chinese requests. To interlocutor in lower social status, Chinese native speakers used more attention getters (CNS: 47%, ENS: 9%) and English native speakers used more combination of above (CNS: 39%, ENS: 69%) in the situation. This may be in accordance with the claims by Yang (2008) that Chinese speakers are most imposing in communication with interlocutors in the lower status.

According to the results of the current study, it was noted that to both familiar and not familiar interlocutors, Chinese and English native speakers' performances of both alerts and external modifications differed significantly. Chinese native speakers used more attention getters than English native speakers. English native speakers on the other hand preferred to use more combination of above. Moreover, Chinese speakers' comparatively high percentage use of thankings contributed to their differences in utilizing external modifications. The reason was suggested to be that many of the Chinese native speakers followed the way in the textbook to make a request. Concerning the requesting behavior differences between the high proficiency and low proficiency groups, the results indicated overwhelming preferences for indirect strategies, a finding not unlike that for virtually every similar study. But they differed significantly in using alerts, and the mean frequency of internal and external modifications increased with proficiency level. This findings is also disclosed in Rose's (2000; 2009) cross-sectional study of pragmatic development among three groups of secondary school students in Hong Kong in spite of the participants' different educational backgrounds and English proficiency levels.

CONLUSION

According to the aforementioned results, there are some pedagogical implications for the English teaching in China. First, language proficiency and target culture awareness are the essential parts of abilities to perform English request speech acts appropriately. Chinese native speakers' difficulties in performing request speech acts can be traced back to the linguistic and cultural aspects. Besides, it is also vital to understand how English native speakers perform English request speech acts and the issue of politeness in western culture. Chinese native speakers can achieve successful cross-cultural communication only if they know the appropriateness and politeness of language expressions.

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