

# **LANGUAGE IN INDIA**

**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**

**Volume 8 : 8 August 2008**

**ISSN 1930-2940**

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## **The Effect of Transfer on Requesting in English - A Study on ESL Speakers of Hindustani**

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# **The Effect of Transfer on Requesting in English: A Study on ESL Speakers of Hindustani**

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## **Abstract**

A quantitative case study comprising thirty undergraduates ESL students of Aligarh Muslim University with a Hindi/Urdu background was conducted to investigate the role of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic transfer on the speech act of requesting. The study revealed that Indian ESL students mostly make use of direct requests in speech as well as in writing. This makes their speech appear abrupt and rude in speech. However, in writing, the requests are softened by some formulaic terms transferred from the L1 socio-linguistic background, but which result in making the requests appear overly formal or artificial and strange according to native-speaker standards. The pedagogical implication of the study is that students need to be taught native speaker request forms in order to avoid embarrassment and offence when communicating in an L2 setting.

## **Introduction**

Pragmatic competence or the ability to use speech acts appropriately and correctly according to the context is an essential component of communicative competence. Requesting is an important speech act which initiates a large number of interactions in our daily lives and needs to be taught to ESL students. Indian ESL students are found lacking in making their requests appropriately and often expressions such as “I want to take this book”, which apparently seem to be an effect of transfer from their mother tongue, are heard from them and result in offending the hearer. An improper request may also result in the very failure of a transaction. Thus, it is important to understand the

differences and similarities between requesting in English and in the students' mother tongue, in order to remedy the ills which are the results of transfer.

A number of studies have been conducted on the speech act of requesting in the past. Similarities and differences in the judgement made by native and non-native speakers have been studied by Carrell & Konneker (1981), Tanaka & Kawade (1982) & Kitao (1990). Some other studies have focused on transfer from L1 in requesting (Takahashi 1996; Kobayashi & Rinnert 2003). Others have related successful use of requests to proficiency level in the target language (Rinnert 1999 & Cook & Liddicoat 2002). Most of these studies are however on Japanese ESL speakers, and sometimes on speakers from other Asian countries. Studies on Indian speakers are conspicuous by their absence. The present empirical piece of research was conducted on the Hindi/Urdu speaking Indian ESL students investigating the role of transfer from L1 in their requests in English. The study clearly has a pedagogical orientation and is based on the premise that an understanding of corresponding speech acts in L1 and L2 will be extremely helpful in the teaching of speech acts efficiently in the classroom, and making our students more able and successful communicators.

### **Aim of the study**

Investigating the role of transfer in the speech act of requesting by ESL learners with a Hindi/Urdu linguistic background through a quantitative case study, the study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

1. Does transfer have a role in the speech act of request made by ESL speakers of Hindustani?
2. If transfer does have a role, what are its positive and negative effects in the performance of ESL learners?
3. Should speech acts be made the focus of teaching in ESL pedagogy?

## **Subjects**

The subjects were 30 undergraduate students of A. M. U. coming from different streams such as science, arts, commerce and computer science, and belonged to the age group of 17-21. Their mother tongue was either Hindi or Urdu, which is regarded here as a single language named Hindustani. Both languages have the same grammatical structure to a large extent and differ only in their lexicality, and the different lexical items become obvious only in formal styles. Thus, both the languages can be considered as two dialects of the single language Hindustani.

## **Instruments**

For collecting the data, the students were required to produce appropriate request forms in two formal situations and two informal situations, both in writing and in speech. While the written task on requests consisted of four questions to be answered in writing in the given sheets; the spoken task was in the form of an interview in which the students were asked to respond orally to the four situational questions with respect to the speech act of requesting.

## **Procedure**

For collecting data on the written task, undergraduate students from the classes of different disciplines were engaged. The sheets containing the questions were distributed to the students after some introductory remarks in which a brief explanation was given about the nature of the task at hand. The students were asked to write their responses in the given sheets.

For the spoken task, undergraduate students were interviewed and asked the predetermined questions on requests. These interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. Fortunately, the students participated keenly both in the written task and the interview.

## **Theoretical background**

A request is a speech act which functions as an imposition on the freedom of the receiver and it appears to the recipient as sometimes demanding and sometimes intrusive. The recipient might not like to lose face by refusing the request, or s/he might not like to do the thing asked for. On the other hand, the requester may also feel insecure about exposing a need and facing refusal. Thus, a request is face-threatening for both the requester and the receiver of the request.

The theoretical background for the present research has been derived mainly from Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. (1989) who have studied the different parameters which can serve to influence the imposition inherent in requests. These parameters have been discussed below.

### **Directness**

One parameter against which the above-mentioned researchers have studied requests is that of directness. A request may be either i) direct ii) conventionally indirect or iii) non-conventionally indirect.

#### ***Direct requests***

In a direct request the requester directly asks the recipient to perform a given action usually through an imperative or a declarative sentence. For example,

Please, clean the blackboard.

I'd like you all to participate in this game.

Such requests are seen usually as imposing and face-threatening for the recipient.

#### ***Conventionally indirect requests***

Conventionally indirect requests are usually in the form of questions and considered to be more polite and less face-threatening for the recipient. For example,

Would you mind turning the volume down a little?

Could you help me a bit in shifting this box?

### ***Non-conventionally indirect requests***

Non-conventionally indirect requests are in the form of hints rather than explicit and transparent requests and thus, the least face-threatening both for the requester and the recipient. Because of the ambiguity of the request, the requester does not lose face by the recipient's refusal nor is the recipient placed in a straitjacket, that is, s/he can assume that the request is made and at the same time it is not. For example,

Have you seen my specs? (An indirect request for searching for the specs)

Oh, it is so hot in here. (An indirect request for turning on the fan)

Such requests can take various syntactic forms; declarative, imperative or interrogative.

### **Perspectives**

Yet another parameter used by Blum-Kulka et al (1989) in the classification of requests is that of perspective. With reference to perspective, a request may be of the following types:

***Hearer-oriented*** (with emphasis on the hearer's role):

Would you mind joining me at dinner tonight?

***Speaker-oriented*** (with emphasis on the speaker's role):

Can I borrow your camera for a day?

***Speaker- and hearer-oriented*** (including both the hearer and speaker):

Lets both finish the task before he returns.

***Impersonal***

The plants need watering.

(An impersonal request might sometimes look like a non-conventional indirect request.)

## **Face features/downgraders and upgraders**

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) have also introduced the idea of downgraders and upgraders in the study of requests. By downgrading themselves, the requester can minimize the imposition, and the face-threatening effect of the request. Downgrading is achieved by being hesitant or pessimistic about compliance with the request. This can be achieved through the use of negatives, interrogatives, past tense, or modals especially in the past tense. For example,

Would you mind if I take your umbrella to go out?

I wonder if you could help me with my maths.

I wanted to ask you for a hike.

On the other hand, upgrading is achieved by making the requesters' role dominant. An upgraded request might sometimes look like a command such as,

Close the door.

You still haven't closed the door.

## **Supportive moves**

Supportive moves are expressions which come before or after the request proper, and help to explain, complement, modify or soften the request. For example,

I lost my umbrella today. Can I take yours for a while?

## **Analysis and discussion**

By way of exemplification, questions from both the written task and the spoken task have been reproduced below with some of the students' responses. The students' errors have been retained in their responses. The analysis of the data was done on the basis of the above four parameters mentioned by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) and Blum-Kulka et al (1989): **directness**, **perspective**, **face features (downgraders and upgraders)** and **supportive moves**. (See tables 1 & 2) In order to compare and contrast

the differences between requesting in the students' L1 and L2, two separate lists of possible L2 request forms and possible L1 request forms have been provided in the Appendix.

### **Responses from the written task**

#### ***A. Informal situations***

How would you make a request in writing-

**Q. a.** to a friend for accompanying you on an educational tour?

**R.** You have to go with me.

**R.** Dear friend, please accompany me on an educational tour, we will have fun.

**Q. b.** to your parents for allowing you to go on a tour?

**R.** Please allow me to go on a college tour. All my friends are going and teachers are also accompanying us.

**R.** Papa, I want to go on college tour.

#### ***B. Formal situations***

How would you make a request in writing-

**Q. a.** to your provost for concession in hostel fee?

**R.** Madam kindly give me concession in hostel fee.

**R.** Respected madam, please consider my financial problem. Please grant me concession.

**Q. b.** to a publisher for some textbooks?

**R.** Respected sir, would you send some textbooks related to my course?

**R.** Respected sir, please post the books whose names are enclosed in letter.

### **Responses from the spoken task**

#### ***A. Informal situations***

How would you ask-

**Q. a.** your friend to lend you his/her pen?

**R.** Dear friend, would you give your pen?



- R. Please, give me your pen.
- Q. b. to your parents for money for going on a college tour?
- R. Papa I need money for college tour.
- R. Papa, I want to go on college tour. Can you give me some money?

### *Formal situations*

How would you request-

- Q. a. your teacher for reference materials on a topic?
- R. Sir, I want some material.
- R. Sir, can you please provide me some reference material?
- Q. b. a stranger at the railway station for giving you direction to reach the university?
- R. Please give me information about the university way.
- R. Will you tell me the way to university?

### **Use of directness in the responses**

The study revealed that the Indian ESL speakers mostly tend to prefer direct request forms to conventionally indirect interrogative requests especially in their writing, both in the formal and informal situations. According to the calculated data, the students used 50% direct requests in the interviews but 90% direct requests in writing, which appears to be puzzling.

Native speakers mostly tend to make their requests indirect through the use of interrogative forms especially in formal situations and in writing such as,

Could you please close the window?

Will it be possible for you to send these books through post?

In contrast, the Indian ESL students in the study frequently used forms such as:

Papa I need money for college tour.

Respected sir, please post the books whose names are enclosed in the letter.

Please give me your pen.

Madam, kindly give me concession in hostel fee.

### Analysis of elicited requests in interviews

( Based on Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. 1989)

S.N.	Request parameters	Total no. requests in corpus: 60	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Directness	Direct	30	50%
		Conventionally indirect	27	45%
		Non-conventionally indirect	03	5%
2.	Perspective	Hearer-oriented	47	77.33%
		Speaker-oriented	13	21.66%
		Hearer-speaker-oriented	0	0%
		Impersonal	0	0%
3.	Face features	Up graders	53	88.33%
		Down graders	07	11.66%
4.	Supportive moves		11	18.33%

**Table1**

### Analysis of elicited requests in writing

( Based on Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. 1989)

S.N.	Request parameters	Total no. requests in corpus: 60	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Directness	Direct	54	90%
		Conventionally indirect	03	05%
		Non-conventionally indirect	03	05%
2.	Perspective	Hearer-oriented	39	65%
		Speaker-oriented	11	18.33%
		Hearer-speaker-oriented	10	16.66%
		Impersonal	0	0%
3.	Face features	Up graders	10	16.66%
		Down graders	50	83.33%
4.	Supportive moves		17	28.33%

**Table 2**

However, it does not mean that Indian ESL speakers prefer to be less polite in their writing than in their speech. On the contrary, Indian ESL writers tend to be too formal and polite in their writing according to native speaker standards. They introduce

politeness and formality and minimize the imposition inherent in requests by a number of formulaic terms in their letters such as; respected sir, I beg to say that, obediently yours, this is for your kind attention...etc. These forms appears to be direct transfer from their L1: महोदय, आदरणीय गुरुजी, आपका आज्ञाकारी. Some more examples are the following:

आप से सविनय निवेदन है...

(You are being requested humbly...)

आप से विनती करता हूँ कि यह काम कर दें।

(I request you to kindly do this.)

कृप्या अपना पेन दीजिए।

(Please give me your pen.)

While conventionally indirect requests were fewer in number, that is, 45% in interviews and only 5% in writing compared to direct requests, non-conventionally indirect were even fewer: only 5% both in the interviews and in the writing tasks. It must be pointed out that non-conventionally indirect request are always infrequent even in the L2 culture, otherwise they would not be labeled “*non-conventional*”.

It must also be pointed out that ‘Please’ and ‘Kindly’ are used most frequently by Indian ESL speakers in order to soften their requests and seems to compensate for the directness of the request to some extent. ‘Please give me a pen’ is viewed generally a polite request in English by an ESL non-native speaker, while native speakers may perceive this as blunt or impolite, considering that the speaker is imposing an action on the recipient without considering his/her willingness.

### **Use of perspective in the responses**

The results show that most ESL learners have used a hearer-dominant perspective, that is, the role of hearer or the recipient is stressed in the request. The percentage of hearer-dominant requests was 77.33% in interviews and 65% in writing.

Could you provide the reference materials, sir?

Please, give me your pen.

This again, may be a case of L1 transfer since using the hearer-dominant direct request both in formal and informal situations is the norm with Hindustani speakers, while native English speakers mostly prefer the speaker-oriented perspective especially in formal situations, because it provides for the avoidance of imposition on the recipient and is considered more polite. Again, it must be reiterated that politeness in Indian requests is introduced through a number of formulaic expressions as mentioned above. Also, it must be noted that speaker-oriented requests appear polite in questions but not in declarative sentences. For example,

Sir, I want some reference material.

Sir, can you provide me some reference material?

Of the above two requests, the first is more imposing and rude in spite of being speaker-oriented. The second is hearer-oriented but more polite.

### **Use of face features in the responses**

Since ESL learners in the study mostly used direct and hearer-oriented requests, the burden on the recipient is inevitable, as is the threat to the face. But it must be noted that face-threatening features are more prominent in the spoken mode and informal situations rather than in the written mode and formal situations. In the interviews most of the requests were upgraded (88.33%) while in writing upgraded requests were only 16.66%. As pointed out above, in writing, Indian ESL learners tend to be overly formal and polite according to native-speaker standards and downgrade themselves through some formulaic expressions rather than through conventionally indirect, question-based requests. Some of these formulaic expressions for downgrading the request in Indian English are the following:

Respected sir...

I will be highly obliged if...

I beg to say that...

Yours obediently.

The underlined portions in the above-mentioned requests may be viewed as unusual and queer according to native speakers' usage. Some examples from the data in the study are the following:

Respected sir, would you send some textbooks related to my course?

Respected madam, please consider my financial problem. Please grant me concession.

### **Use of supportive moves in the responses**

It was found that Hindustani speakers often use supportive moves to fortify or modify their requests. It seems to be a common tendency in all communities to encourage the recipient or to explain their own need in making a request. Some examples from the study are the following:

Please allow me to go on a college tour. All my friends are going and teachers are also accompanying us.

Dear friend, please accompany me on an educational tour, we will have fun.

In the elicited data, 18.33% requests in the interviews and 28.33% in writing employed supportive moves.

### **Conclusion and pedagogical implications**

To conclude, as far as the questions posed at the beginning of the study are concerned, the first question about the existence of L1 transfer in the speech act of request produced by ESL students is answered in the affirmative. The study reveals that transfer has a significant role in the speech act of requesting used by ESL learners, and this transfer often manifests itself as negative. Because of direct transfer from their own socio-linguistic and socio-cultural background, the Indian ESL students mostly use direct requests both in speech and in writing which tends to make their requests blunt and abrupt especially in speech. However, in writing the requests are softened by some formulaic terms transferred from the L1 socio-cultural background, but which result in

making the requests appear overly formal or strange and artificial according to native-speaker standards.

This discrepancy needs to be brought to the notice of the students and remedial measures need to be taken in this direction. Of course, cultures differ in their socio-linguistic etiquette, and speech communities have a right to preserve their cultural identities. However, with the reference to the globalization of communication, there is also a heightened need to understand the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural norms of usage of other societies too; especially of the users of the English language which is the international language now. In a nutshell, there is an obvious need to teach speech acts explicitly in the classroom.

In the end, the researchers wish to point out some of the limitations of the study. One of them was the limited number of corpus. With a larger corpus, the picture regarding the use of the speech act of request might have emerged as clearer. For example, non-conventionally indirect requests were not in the corpus. Further, the study did not separate the use of requests in formal and informal situations in its analysis. This might have been an improvement, had it been implemented.

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## Appendix

### List of possible L2 request forms

A list of possible L2 request forms has been provided here for ready reference from the following four native speaker sources:

1. Grant Taylor's *'English Conversation Practice'* (1975)
2. Kate Schrago-Lorden's *'English for Hotel Staff'* (1979)
3. Jeremy Harmer and John Arnold's *'Advanced Speaking Skills'* (1978)
4. J. A. Rimmer and J. Scott's *'English for Commercial Practice'* (1983)

S. N.	Grant Taylor	Kate Schrago-Lorden	Jeremy Harmer and John Arnold	J. A. Rimmer and J. Scott
1.	Would you please get me a bag of sugar?	Could you fill in this form, please?	Do you mind if I ask you one or two questions?	Can you work for me?
2.	Could/can you tell me where the library is?	You will have to register individually, please.	Could I let you know in a few minutes?	Shall I get a copy of the invoice?
3.	Please write down John's address.	Please book a room for two days.	May I introduce Mr. Donald Cromer?	Will you ask him to telephone me, please?
4.	Press the starter button.	What's your address, please?		I want to buy a typewriter, please.
5.		I would like to book a room.		I would like to buy a car.
6.		Hold on a moment, please, sir.		



### List of possible L1 request forms

A list of possible L1 request forms has also been provided below on the basis of the researchers' knowledge of Hindi/Urdu as their L1.

S. N.	Their observation
1.	आपसे सविनय निवेदन है कि यह काम कर दें।
2.	आपसे विनती करता हूँ कि यह काम कर दें।
3.	क्या आप मुझे एक पेन देंगे ?
4.	क्या मैं आपका पेन ले सकता हूँ ?
5.	कृप्या अपना पेन दे दीजिए।
6.	मैं आपका पेन ले लूँ ?
7.	मुझे आपका पेन चाहिए।
8.	मुझे अपना पेन दे दीजिए।
9.	बराय मेहरबानी यह काम कर दें।
10.	आपको तकलीफ तो होगी मगर जरा यह काम कर दें।

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