

Variations of Making a Request in Context

“On the Case of Making a Request at a Library Counter”

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コンテキストの中での様々な依頼の仕方 —— 依頼場面における表現に関する考察 ——

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概 要

人は日常の中で、程度の差はあれ必ず他の人に何かを依頼する。その依頼の仕方は実に様々である。英語教員として、丁寧な依頼の仕方を教えてはいるが、同時に実際の英語話者はどのように依頼をするのかを教えることは非常に大切である。この論文では、英語話者がどのように依頼をするのかデータを収集し、その依頼の際のコンテキストとの関係を分析した。アメリカのある大学の図書館で人々の依頼のやり取りを観察し、発せられた依頼の表現を丁寧さの程度で① could/would を伴った疑問形② can もしくは丁寧語を伴った疑問形③意思表明形④目標物の名称のみの表現、以上の4類にまとめた。その結果、第②類の依頼表現がもっとも使用された。被観察者はこのコンテキストにおいては第①類の表現を使うほど丁寧さを強調しなかった。また、この研究を通して、彼らの依頼の仕方は実に様々であることが明らかになった。更に、女性は男性より丁寧に依頼し、年長者はより丁寧でなくなることも確認された。この研究の結果より、依頼の仕方は様々存在するが、話者がどんな表現を使うかは背後にあるコンテキストが支配していることが推測された。

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Language Use Variation, Context

キーワード: 社会言語学, 言語使用の変化, コンテキスト

We, in general, meet a great number of people each day in our lives. We have contacts and communicate with each other in so appropriate a way that a society functions and sustains itself. Communication, namely, is an essential medium for human beings to live in a society. Being good at communicating makes our lives very easy and comfortable in a society.

In society, people depend on each other. It cannot be imagined that someone is totally independent and able to be well off by him/herself without directly or indirectly asking for others' help. We surely have some opportunity to ask others for more or less help. When we ask someone for help, it is crucial to make them understand what we want them to do without displeasing them. For this purpose, people acquire some expressions suitable to certain situations

that would make an addressee feel comfortable enough to do a favor.

One of the reasons why I am curious about this issue is that I am not perfectly certain about teaching how to make a request. As you know, there are several ways of making a request ranging from formal to casual. Such expressions as “Could you ~?,” “Would you mind ~?” are very polite in requesting someone to do a favor. When we make a request, however, we don’t always have to be that polite enough to use these expressions. We make a choice on what to say in accordance with respective contexts. As a language teacher, I try to teach polite ways of making a request to my students. At the same time I also want to teach what native speakers of English really say in their daily life.

Here is an incident that has led me to do research on this topic. One day, my friend received a letter from a library that demanded the return of some books. Since she had already returned the books, she was surprised and immediately went to the library in order to ask for another check. At the library service counter, she was told by a receptionist that her way of requesting was very rude and she should use more polite expressions when making a request. The remark shocked her a lot because she didn’t expect such a response from the receptionist at all. The incident surprised me a bit, too. This may be partly because we Japanese, who are accustomed to living in a society chockfull of quality service, hardly ever have such an experience as to be talked back to when we go to complain about poor service.

I cannot imagine that she spoke too harshly to the receptionist at the library counter although I don’t know exactly what she said. In any case, she ended up with a twofold bitter experience. Taking the incident into account, I started to feel that it must be quite important for me, as a language teacher, to get more familiar with making a request so that I can teach correct expressions in the right contexts to my students.

Therefore, in this paper I investigate how native speakers of English make requests to others in order to accomplish their requests successfully. This study will provide us with evidence of some variables of request forms native speakers adopt in a certain situation and examine the relationships between request expressions and gender and age. Furthermore, I discuss whether there is any relationship between the request expressions, and gender and age respectively.

Procedure

When I first pondered over where I could encounter a lot of opportunities for people to make

requests, I came up with a library service counter. My friend's bitter experience at a library mentioned earlier also led me to collect data there. So I started to observe people's interactions at the counter in a university library in California.

Behind the counter were big bookcases in which many books and boxes containing copies of articles and research papers on reserve were placed. The reason why they are there is for students to easily find what they need for their courses. Of the thirty-one entries collected in the study, twenty-seven were the expressions employed in requesting those books or boxes, the remaining three were used when a subject wished to borrow something like a big stapler at the counter.

At first, I stood a little far from the counter and tried to collect data, pretending to read something there. However, I was a little too far to hear clearly enough what they said. Then I asked a librarian in charge of the service counter for permission to stand right beside the counter and conduct the research. I transcribed the core part of the expressions spoken by them and put the sign of “~” for the rest such as author's name. I noted their gender, approximate age (I guessed only from their appearances) and race as well.

Halfway through the process of collecting the data, I noticed that there were a number of variations in the interactions between a subject and a receptionist at the counter. For example, a receptionist at the counter first addressed a person who came there to ask for help before the person said something, such as “Hi, are you looking for something?” In this case, the subject didn't really bother to mention that he/she was looking for something. Just stating the author's name was sufficient as in “Dr. Brown's box, please.” Another variation is the case in which a subject first spoke to the receptionist at the counter. Such an incident seemed to influence the following interaction. Furthermore, there were some cases in which a subject and a receptionist already knew each other. It can be clearly claimed that the contexts in which the participants were acquainted with each other are unequivocally different from those in which they are not. To sum up, not all subjects made requests under the same conditions.

Results & Analysis

Considering the degree of politeness carried in each expression, I grouped all thirty-one entries collected into four major categories (Finegan, 1999): 1) an expression as an interrogative with a modal verb such as “could” or “would,” such as “Could you pass me ~?” (henceforth referred to as expression A); 2) a expression either as an interrogative with can, or with politeness marker,

such as “Can I see ~?,” or “Please, ~.” (henceforth expression B); 3) an expression as a declarative sentence, like “I need ~.” (henceforth expression C); and 4) an expression with only the name of an object, like in “Smith’s box” (henceforth expression D). Expression A at the left end of the table below is considered to be the most polite, and the level of politeness goes down as the table go to the right direction. Namely, Expression D is regarded as the least polite.

Table 1: The Four Variants (N=31)

A. Could/would you~?	B. Can I~?/Please~.	C. I need (to see)~./I would like to Do you have~?	D. Professor S’s book
10% (3 /31)	45% (14/31)	39% (13/31)	3% (1 /31)

Table 1 obviously shows that there were two majorities, Expression B (45%) and C (39%), in the four variants. Expression B was slightly more frequent than C. Of the expression B variants (14/31), an expression as an interrogative with “can” was the most frequently preferred to use (13/31=39%). The least frequently was an expression with only the name of book or box (3%). Expression A generally considered as the most polite rarely occurred in this certain case (10%).

Table 2: Genders of Speaker

	Could/would you~?	Can I ~?/Please~.	I need (to see)~./I would like to Do you have~?	Professor S’s book
Male (N = 8)	13% (1 / 8)	25% (2 / 8)	63% (5 / 8)	0% (0 / 8)
Female (N = 23)	9% (2 / 23)	52% (12/23)	35% (8 / 23)	4 % (1 / 23)

Of all the entries collected, males occupied only about a quarter (8/31), whereas females over three quarters (23/31). Given the unequal number of the two sexes, it is apparent that comparing both sexes would be less fruitful and give no legitimate conclusion. I, however, tried comparing the genders here in order to observe something significant.

As the two major variants, B and C were favorably used by both sexes more frequently than the others, the significant difference which was not revealed from the general perspective above rose to the surface here. Males more frequently used Expression C than B. On the other hand, females more frequently preferred Expression B. The results infer that women tend to prefer more polite expressions than men.

Judging from Table 2, no other prominent difference between genders was found except for the

one mentioned above. Males and females alike seldom used Expression A and D ; as in Expression A, male 13% (1/8) and female 9% (2/23) ; in Expression D, male 0% (0/4) and female 4% (1/23). Yet I have one thing that I would like to mention before discussing the next topic. It is observed that only one female out of twenty-three used the least polite expression in this study. That means that not a male subject but a female uttered the request that is considered the least polite.

Table 3: Age of Speaker

	Could/would you~?	Can I~?/Please~.	I need (to see)~/I would like to Do you have~?	Professor S's book
20s (N=23)	4 % (1 / 23)	48% (11/23)	48% (11/23)	0 % (0/23)
30s~50s (N = 8)	25% (2 / 8)	38% (3 / 8)	25% (2 / 8)	13% (1 / 8)

I separated the data into two groups with respect to age, such as Group 20s and Group 30s through 50s. As I mentioned in the section of Procedure, I did not ask their age directly, but I guessed it from their appearance. So I would like to emphasize beforehand that my guess was heavily subjective and might be wrong.

Here again, two groups were much different from one another in terms of number : Group 20 s consisting of 23 people, Group 30s through 50s consisting of 8. Apart from number, Table 3 seems to give no notable difference between them. Nevertheless, upon close scrutiny, it suggests that Group 30s through 50s leaned slightly in the more polite direction, as compared to their counterpart. Although the percentage of the second and the third most polite category declined a little, the percent of the most polite was high at 25 as compared to 4 of the other group.

One more thing I should refer to here is that the movement seems to go not only in the more polite direction but also in the less polite direction. The least polite variant was not used at all by Group 20s, but one from Group 30s through 50s adopted it.

Discussion

The results of this study show that Expression B is the most preferable in the certain situation of the library service counter. It was found that people were not too polite in this specific context. In other words, polite expressions with a modal verb such as “could” or “would” can be too polite and they tend to avoid those expressions. It is assumed that polite expressions are not always the best choices in all contexts. The results indicate that less polite requests sound more natural in

some contexts. As a pedagogical implication, therefore, teachers need to acknowledge that polite requests are not always necessary. In other words, language use depends heavily on context and it is very important to remind their students to speak appropriate expressions in each context. It goes without saying that for students to get familiar with polite requests is definitely requisite.

It is also implied that women relatively use more polite expressions than men. The results support the idea that women try to be more linguistically polite than men (Lakoff, 1975; Mesthrie et al, 2000). That is to say, women are more apt to speak expressions of “concern for the feelings of the people they are talking to more often and more explicitly” than men do (Holmes, 1995, p.6). As mentioned earlier, however, it was also a woman who made the least polite request in this study. This data contradicts the inference above that women tend to prefer to make more polite requests than their counterpart. Yet this is only one incident done by only one woman. It is impossible and too dangerous to deduce any theory behind this incident and generalize. So I leave this for further research.

As for age, the data indicates that people tend to use more polite expressions, as their age advances. This phenomenon is a little surprising because Japanese people in general are apt to use less polite expressions as they grow old. It is assumed that people in Japan grow old to gain a high social status as well as that there is a code of ethics that people show respect to their seniors. These factors that affect Japanese society don't seem to be in place in America. I'm sure there are reasons for this phenomenon. This matter also should be investigated further in the next research.

These conclusions, however, should be thought to be provisional and not applicable for generalization. One major reason is that the number of subjects, 31, is very small. In addition to that, as mentioned above, gender is not equally represented in the subject groups. Similarly, the age of the subject groups is also not fully typical of the society, too.

In addition, the receptionists at the counter were different from time to time. Some graduate students worked part-time there in turn. In general, people have a tendency to change their way of speaking according to their addressee, taking their age and social status into account. Most peoples working at the counter were women in their 20s, some in their 40s. It is likely that different data could be collected if one common receptionist responded to all the participants.

Lastly, the criteria that measure politeness may be somewhat different from person to person, from male to female, and across age. I set up the yardstick in terms of politeness from a linguistic point of view. The criteria I adopted in this study were supposed to be general and objective. My

judgment, however, is still subjective since I was the only person involved in this study and I set up the criteria.

Although I collected data on the participant's race as well, I did not investigate its impact on making polite requests in this study. The reason why I did not was the shortage of the sample data. Besides, there was an imbalance in terms of number per race. I collected the data mostly from white Americans. I could not collect enough data from the other races to delve into this issue and come to a conclusion. As mentioned earlier, however, Japanese people would generally show a different attitude towards their seniors. This means that people from different cultural backgrounds such as Japanese, though living in America at the moment, might well make requests differently. Culture can play a significant role in influencing people's behavior.

Conclusion

The study proves that native speakers of English use a variety of request expressions in a certain context. It also found that they tended not to be awfully polite in making a request in the certain context. These findings lead to the following inferences: 1) people are familiar with a variety of requests expressions and 2) they use a different expression in accordance with context. Taking these findings into consideration, teachers not only must teach various linguistic forms regarding making requests but also must teach them with a specific context. By so doing, students will presumably end up realizing that language is spoken in context and that learning language in/with context is crucial.

Further research is needed to reduce the threats to the validity of the study noted earlier in this paper and reach more reliable conclusions of the relationships between making requests and gender and age. It was found that women tended to make more polite requests than men, which confirmed findings from previous studies. It was also found that the participants became polite as they grew older. These two findings are quite intriguing and will surely lead further research to be conducted later on. Hopefully, further research will discover factors working behind these findings. Lastly, regarding my friend's incident at the library counter, I have a hunch that her collision with the receptionist at the library counter might have had to do with something other than how to make a request.

References

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Appendix A :

No.	Tokens	Age	Gender	Race
1	Can I have a box of ~?	20s	F	White
2	Do you have ~?	20s	M	White
3	I need a box of ~.	20s	F	White
4	Can I return ~?	30s	F	White
5	I need to see ~.	20s	F	Asian
6	Can I use ~?	20s	F	Asian
7	Can I borrow ~?	20s	F	Asian
8	Can I ask a question?	20s	F	White
9	I need a box of ~.	20s	M	White
10	I just need to see ~.	20s	M	White
11	Please take me ~.	20s	F	African
12	Would you please take ~?	20s	M	Asian
13	Can I borrow ~, please?	20s	F	White
14	Can I borrow ~, please?	20s	F	White
15	I would like to borrow ~.	20s	M	White
16	Can I see ~?	20s	F	White
17	Can I have ~?	30s	F	White
18	I just wanna look at ~.	30s	F	White
19	I'd like to see ~.	40s	M	Asian
20	I need ~	20s	F	African
21	Do you have ~?	20s	F	Asian
22	Professor M's book	30s	F	Asian
23	Can I have ~?	20s	F	Asian
24	I need ~.	20s	F	White
25	Could you have me ~?	50s	F	White
26	Can I look at ~?	40s	M	White
27	I am just looking for ~.	20s	F	White
28	I need ~.	20s	F	White
29	Can I see ~?	20s	M	White
30	Can I see ~?	20s	F	White
31	Could you pass me ~?	40s	F	White

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