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## POLITENESS MARKERS IN FRENCH AND DUTCH REQUESTS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes a difference in social norms which results in a differing distribution of politeness markers in the Dutch and French speech communities. The use of politeness strategies is compared on the basis of a corpus of parallel Dutch and French requests. The differences in use can be explained by a different conception of the need for repair strategies.

### KEYWORDS

Requests - French - Dutch - Speech Acts - Face Threatening Acts - Politeness Markers

### INTRODUCTION

"Beware of the Dutch: they are direct and to the point and sometimes a bit rude in their behaviour", "Netherlanders are straightforward and pragmatic", "The Dutch are reserved and blunt, bordering on rude": stereotypes like these are numerous in popular business manuals for Dutch negotiators in which the Dutch are made aware of their 'bad reputation' (Altany, 1989:20; Merk & Browaeys, 1992:58; Merk, 1987; Freriks, 1995:36). Although businessmen may benefit from this kind of simplification (however unlikely this may seem), it is preferable to investigate intercultural differences in language perception and to determine whether these generalisations are justified.

The concept of politeness would appear to be an appropriate tool to analyze these differences. Since Goffman, Lakoff and Brown & Levinson, the notion of face has been introduced to account for certain phenomena of interpersonal interaction.

Politeness is considered a communication strategy whose function is to maintain good relationships between interlocutors. Brown and Levinson (1987) introduced the notions of face and intrinsically impolite speech acts in the field of pragmatics. Some speech acts are intrinsically impolite because the threat to the hearer's face is inherent in these acts.

Requests are seen as threatening the hearer's freedom of action and his wish not to be imposed upon, i.e. the 'negative face'.

The main topic of this paper is to investigate how Dutch and French speakers try to avoid threatening the other's face by minimizing the face threatening act and using politeness strategies. The focal question in my analysis is: how do French and Dutch native speakers realize a request? I will also try to explain why they see the politeness conventions of the other as different. A second point of interest is the testing of the classification methods suggested by previous research: to what extent is the request taxonomy universal?

First, I will briefly discuss the research design and method that has been used for data collection, then I go on to present the method of classification and the results of my data analysis.

### DATA COLLECTION

This analysis is inspired by the research project developed by the CCSARP group (Blum-Kulka, 1989), which consisted of a cross-cultural comparison of the realization of speech acts by controlling possible sociopragmatic variables as much as possible. The method devised by the members of this project consisted of the elicitation of written speech acts by submitting scripted situations to subjects by means of a Discourse Completion Test (henceforth: DCT). Variables which may determine the weight(iness) of the request, such as Social Distance, Status (or Power or Hierarchical Relation) and the Ranking of the Imposition were integrated.

This method has been slightly amended by the members of the Department of Business Communication at the University of Nijmegen. Le Pair (1994) proposes focusing on the role of the business setting as a variable that may influence the choices a speaker makes when formulating a communication act. Furthermore, the data collection in itself has been slightly modified in comparison to the CCSARP: instead of written responses, oral responses to the DCTs have been recorded and transcribed in the way suggested by Rintell & Mitchell (1989:250). The line of dialogue given after the blank line in the original version of the DCT has been eliminated and the scripted situations are more detailed and extensive in order to allow the subject to have a better representation of the setting and thus respond as spontaneously as possible to the DCT.

The design choices proposed by Le Pair for their English and Spanish corpus have been copied in my pilot study and their DCTs have been translated into French and Dutch. Eventually, we will have at our disposal a large corpus of comparable data in English, Spanish, French and Dutch.

Dutch and French native subjects were asked to respond to a description and were elicited to produce a request. The functionvolumeing of a DCT is best illustrated by an example (Figure 1):

Figure 1.

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 Speaker > Addressee (P(s) > P(a)), Social Distance = 0, Rank = 0, Context=Business

Au bureau du personnel

Vous êtes en charge du bureau du personnel et vous avez un premier entretien avec un nouvel employé, Roger Damoiseau. Vous venez de constater qu'il a fixé ses vacances à la fin du mois d'octobre, l'un des mois les plus exigeants de l'année. Ceci implique que Roger devra changer ses projets.

\* Que dites-vous à l'employé?

The personnel department

You are head of the personnel department and are in a first meeting with a new employee, Roger Townsend. You have just found out that he has booked a holiday at the end of October, which is one of the busiest times of the year for your company. This means that Roger will have to reschedule his holiday.

\* What do you say to your new employee?

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Many drawbacks have been put forward against this technique of response elicitation (Rose, 1994; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989; Kasper & Dahl, 1994; Trosborg, 1995). It is true that authentic material is by far preferable to elicited responses, since it remains questionable whether the responses are entirely representative of spontaneous 'realistic' conversation. Moreover, the description may influence the lexical choices of the subject. The number of turns and the depth of emotion usually involved in a request cannot be examined either. And, last but not least, a serious objection is surely that the option not to perform the face threatening act is biased (although in my corpus 6 subjects stated that they would say nothing in a certain particular situation). The validity of this data elicitation technique is certainly to be questioned. Nevertheless, it does have many advantages: the collection of data from a large sample of subjects is relatively easy and this method is especially effective for comparing strategies in different languages: it allows one to focus on identifiable appropriate contexts and on specific areas of language use.

## SUBJECTS

For a pilot study 20 French native speakers and 16 Dutch native speakers were asked to participate. In both groups, 75% of the subjects are female. The French subjects are generally older than the Dutch subjects. Every subject responded to at least 20 descriptions (DCTs) which provided about 750 reactions.

The variables Power, Social Distance and Rank of Imposition were distributed equally over the DCTs to which the subjects had to respond.

## CODING SCHEME

For the codification and classification of my corpus, I have tried to follow the Coding

Manual of the CCSARP project. This is a purely heuristic and deductive codification, and certainly not an uncontroversial taxonomy. This Coding Manual was composed on the basis of the written responses to the DCTs used for the CCSARP project. The main problem with this kind of heuristic taxonomy is that its predicting value is highly restricted. A combination of heterogeneous taxons is listed to cover the extreme diversity of request answers in the CCSARP corpus. This implies that incomparable classification criteria such as syntactic or semantic characteristics, notions such as 'conventional usage', and highly interpretative notions such as hints are combined in one scheme.

The authors of the Coding Manual claim that this scheme was guided by the level of indirectness of the requests. The criteria for indirectness however, remain implicit or seem to emerge from the imposed hierarchy of the listed classes. This way of proceeding runs the risk of resulting in circular reasoning. A second motivation for the hierarchy in the classification of head acts is the length of the inferential process needed to identify the utterance as a request (Blum-Kulka, 1989:18). Again, the notion of 'inferential process' remains nebulous.

Even in classes which are determined by relatively homogeneous criteria, for instance 'linguistic indicators', the distinction between these classes is not unequivocal. For instance, the head act strategies distinguish 'performative verbs' and 'hedged performative verbs': there is no inherent reason for not considering the occurrence of these hedges as an internal modification of the performative verb.

In short, the classification criteria in the Coding Manual present a highly hybrid composition. It will therefore come as no surprise that other researchers have invented their own taxonomy (Rose, 1994; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992; Trosborg, 1995). Unfortunately, it seems that any corpus constructed for pragmalinguistic purposes triggers this kind of ambiguous classification. If the taxonomy criteria do not stem from a fundamental and transcendent theory, the universal and predicting value of these language analyses remains questionable. Until such a theory, free from normative judgements is developed, researchers who wish to describe cross-cultural pragmatic features have to make the best of it. In the absence of such a 'delivering' theory, I also had to modify the classification scheme in order to cover all the occurring formulations of requests in my corpus.

I intend to follow as closely as possible the suggestions of the Coding Manual in order to allow eventual comparison of the results. Since the oral responses in my corpus present features that have not yet been listed in the Coding Manual, I have been obliged to add them to the inventory.

The Coding Manual of the CCSARP project suggests that we should distinguish between 'alerters'(e.g. titles or nick names), 'head acts' (the central requests) and 'supportive moves'( e.g. cajolers, disarmers or promises of reward). Each of these classes may be subdivided into several subcategories and these subcategories may in their turn contain a number of elements. It is possible that a clause has received several labels when it corresponds with more than one category. Figure 2 and 3 present an illustration of this coding method.

Figure 2.

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 Illustration of coding scheme, first level

(Aahhh, bonjour monsieur Dupont. Comment allez-vous?)-ALERTER

(Vous n'avez pas trop de travail, j'espère, parce que j'aimerais vous demander ehh de me rendre un petit service.)-PRECOMMITMENT

(Si vous pouviez lire ehh le résumé du rapport ce soir, ça me ferait énormément de plaisir)-HEADACT

(parce que j'en ai ABSOLUMENT besoin demain matin)-GROUNDER (est-ce que ehh vous auriez la gentillesse de bien vouloir le lire ce soir?)-APPEALER

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Figure 3.

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 Illustration of coding scheme, second level

(Ah Bonjour)-ATTENTION GETTER, (Monsieur Dupont)-TITLE+SURNAME (Comment allez-vous?)-PRE-PREPARATORY.

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Apart from the main categorization, which encompasses all clause external modifications, clause internal modifiers, perspective and also mode constitute taxonomies which can be accounted for. In this paper I will not, however, discuss alerters, perspective or mode.

I will now present my analysis in an attempt to apply the classification scheme provided by the CCSARP project to my data. First, I will discuss the results for the head acts, then I go on to present the results for the supportive moves and the internal modifiers.

## ANALYSIS

The first observation to be made is that the French are by far much more voluble than the Dutch. On average, the French requests were 38.7 words longer than the Dutch responses (63.6 vs 24.9). One reason for the relative length of the French responses may be the fact that these subjects were less used to this kind of experiences and were more anxious to give what they considered the 'norm-oriented' answer. These averages include (abundant) hesitations and recyclings.

The claims about the notorious French eloquence (the international reproach that they love to hear themselves talk) appear to be true.

### *Head Acts*

The head act is the smallest unit which can realize a request: it is the core of the request sequence. The Coding Manual of the CCSARP project distinguishes 9 request strategies represented on a scale of increasing indirectness, with level 9 being the most indirect. The directness level is to be seen as a measure of the transparency of an utterance: the more indirect an utterance, the longer the inferential analysis implied. Indirectness does not equal politeness, but is generally assumed to be a tool to avoid impoliteness. Hints, however, can be interpreted as an indirect but very impolite strategy

and this implies that the answers in the strategies 8 and 9 should be considered carefully. I have added a tenth category: 'do not do the FTA', which concurs with the fifth strategy of Brown & Levinson and can also be seen as the maximum of indirectness. Although I do not agree with the authors of the Coding Manual on the distinction between hedged performatives and explicit performatives, I maintained it for the sake of comparability.

As I have stated above, scholars disagree on the exact number of head act strategies (cf. House & Kasper, 1989:163; Rose, 1994:3; Le Pair 1994:9), but generally three main levels are distinguished:

1. direct strategies (mood derivable, explicit and hedged performative, the obligation and want statements) (e.g. 'Je voudrais que tu fasses cela');
2. conventional indirect strategies (suggestory formulas and query preparatory strategies): the interpretation relies on conventional use (e.g. 'Et si on faisait la vaisselle ensemble?');
3. non-conventional indirect strategies (strong and mild hints): the illocutionary force of the strategies is ambiguous. The interpretation of the utterance as a request relies entirely on the inferential capacities of the addressee (e.g. 'Qui se chargera des frais?').

In Table 1, I present the distribution of the head acts in the French and Dutch corpus.

Table 1.

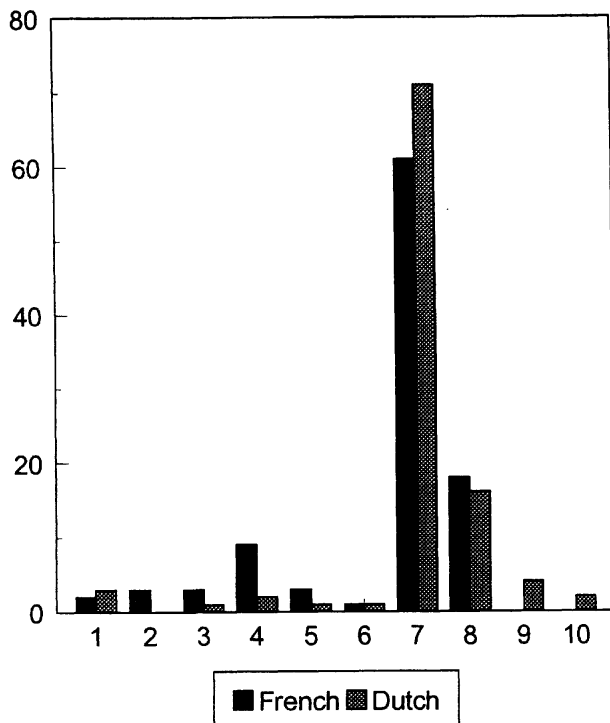
<i>Head Acts Strategy</i>	<i>French</i>		<i>Dutch</i>		
	n	%	n	%	
1 imperative	13	3	9	3	
2 expl. perform	8	2	1	-	linguistic indicators
3 hedged perform	9	2	3	1	
4 obligation	34	9	6	2	
5 want	13	3	2	1	locution derivable
6 suggestory	3	1	4	1	
7 query preparatory	241	61	221	71	conventional usage
8 strong hint	70	18	50	16	
9 mild hint	-	-	11	4	context dependent
10 do not FTA	1	-	5	2	
total	392	99	312	101	

With 61% for the French subjects and 71% for the Dutch subjects, the query preparatory strategy is the most frequently used head act type. Since this is such a frequent strategy, it deserves to be analyzed in greater detail. Apart from this strategy, the strong hint (nr. 8) is the only type that exceeds the 10% threshold, with 18% and 16%, respectively.

These findings confirm broadly what could be expected on the basis of previous research (Van de Wijst and Meijers, 1990:253; Van de Wijst, 1993 and Le Pair, 1994:9), namely that the conventional indirect request strategy i.c. the query preparatory strategy is by far the most frequently used head act.

So, if the French and Dutch disagree on the perception of each other's politeness, this is

Table 1. Headact Strategy types



certainly not due to an underlying difference in formulating the head act of the requests. Both cultures show a distinct preference for the use of conventional indirect strategies. However, the request data may shed some light on the eventual differences when supportive moves and internal modifiers are examined.

I will now go on to present the results for the supportive moves and the internal modifiers.

### *Supportive moves*

Supportive moves are acts that may precede or follow head act strategies and may serve as downgraders to check on availability, they may serve as attempts to obtain a precommitment or they may provide a reason for the request. Supportive moves are always independent and autonomous clauses.

The classification of supportive moves suffers from the same lack of consistency in taxonomy criteria as that of the head acts. Again, I have adapted the suggestions contained in the Coding Manual to my data.

The distribution of the supportive moves is presented in Table 2.

Insults, threats or moralizing acts do not occur in my corpus. Three subjects used the figure of irony (but not in a head act strategy) and since irony comes close to an insult, I have listed these responses in this class. I have also added the so-called pre-prestrategy



(introductory remarks to introductory questions: e.g. "Il fait beau, n'est-ce pas?"), as well as apologies ("je regrette de devoir te déranger"), anticipatory compliments ("Ce serait chouette de ta part") and anticipatory acknowledgements ("cela m'aiderait beaucoup").

One of the characteristics of the recorded requests is that the subjects, forced to enact the scripted situation without the help provided by the presence of an antagonist, tend to repeat or reinforce the initial request by a reformulation of the head act strategy. Thus one response may consist of several head act strategies. I have decided to count the second (or even third) head act utterance as a 'confirmation' strategy, in other words, as a supportive move, and not as a 'repetition of request' as the Coding Manual proposes, because in all cases the repetition takes a complete clause.

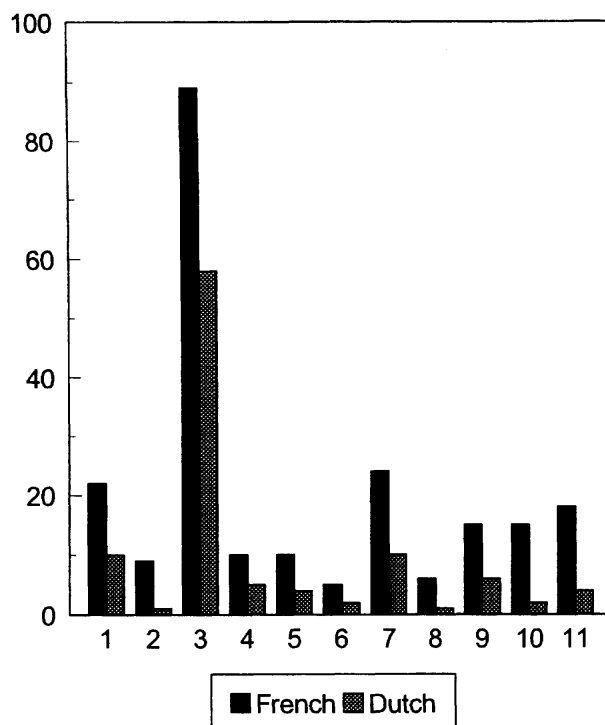
We see, then, that the French subjects used 2.24 (877/392) supportive moves per head act, whereas the Dutch restricted themselves to 1.05 (329/312). In other words: the French subjects used more than twice as many supportive moves per request.

For both groups, the grounder (the reason for the request) is the most frequently occurring supportive move: in both groups almost 50% of all supportive acts are grounders. It is interesting to see that the French subjects introduce their requests more often by pre-prestrategies and preparators and tend to close their request more often by means of a confirmation, anticipated compliments or acknowledgements. They also apologize more often for the fact that they are imposing on the other party.

Table 2.

<i>Supportive Move</i>	<i>French</i>		<i>Dutch</i>		example
	n	?/392	n	?/312	
1 preparator	86	0.22	33	0.10	"j'ai une petite chose à vous demander"
2 getting precommitment	35	0.09	4	0.01	"ce n'est pas un grand problème"
3 grounder	350	0.89	181	0.58	"parce qu'il me faudra partir"
4 disarmers	39	0.10	18	0.05	"je sais que je demande trop"
5 promise of reward	39	0.10	15	0.04	"c'est de revanche"
6 imposition minimizer	19	0.05	6	0.02	"je sais que je suis tard"
7 insult (irony)	2	-	2	-	"vous êtes la victime idéale"
8 threat	-	-	-	-	
9 moralizing	-	-	-	-	
10 pre-prestrat.	95	0.24	31	0.10	"Qu'est-ce qui se passe?"
11 ant. compliments	25	0.06	3	0.01	"C'est très gentil"
12 apologies	58	0.15	19	0.06	"Désolé que je demande ça"
13 ant. acknowledg.	59	0.15	5	0.02	"ça me plairait beaucoup"
14 confirmation	70	0.18	12	0.04	"Alors, je vous demande de m'assister ce soir"
total	877	2.24	329	1.05	

Table 2. Supportive Moves



### *Internal Modifications*

The internal modifications (downgraders and upgraders) have also been investigated. An internal modifier is always part of another clause (head act or supportive move).

Like the Coding Manual, I have distinguished syntactic and lexical internal modifiers. I have classified the use of the conditional mode, the use of the 'polite' imperfect and negative polarity. The other syntactic modifiers did not seem relevant in our corpus, since the subjunctive is not optional in French and the omission of the interrogative has been compensated by the classification of head acts (imperatives, performatives and want statements). I have only focused on internal modification in the head acts, although supportive moves are also abundantly mitigated by internal modifiers.

The French language is not familiar with hedges as described in the Coding Manual; the Dutch subjects used the adverb 'soms' ('sometimes') as a hedge on a few occasions. As can be seen in Table 3, the number of upgraders is very low, with only the French subjects occasionally using intensifiers.

Since internal modifiers are not mutually exclusive, there is no use in presenting comparative percentages. However, I thought it might be convenient to show what part of the total head acts was affected by a particular modification (second and fourth columns).

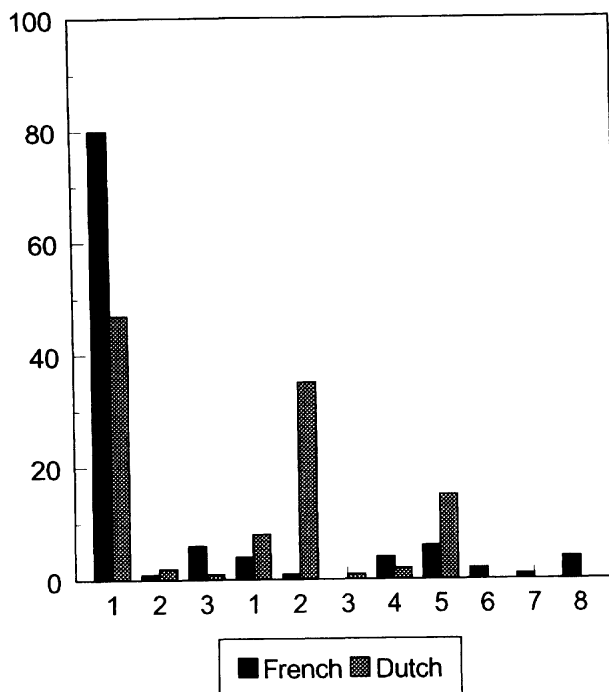
Table 3 presents the results of the Internal Modifiers.

Table 3.

<i>Internal Modifier</i>	<i>French</i>		<i>Dutch</i>		example
	n	?/392	n	?/321	
<i>syntactic downgraders</i>					
1 conditional	315	0.80	148	0.47	pourrais-tu..
2 tense	5	0.01	5	0.02	je voulais..
3 negation	23	0.06	4	0.01	vous ne pouvez pas..
subtotal	343	0.88	157	0.49	
<i>lexical downgraders</i>					
1 politeness					
marker	15	0.04	26	0.08	s'il vous plaît..
2 understater	6	0.01	111	0.35	changez ce petit transparent..
3 hedge	-	-	2	0.01	kun je me soms helpen
4 subjectivizer	16	0.04	7	0.02	je crains devoir..
5 downtoner	22	0.06	48	0.15	peut-être, éventuellement
6 cajoler	7	0.02	1	-	tu sais, ce serait mieux si
7 appealer	5	0.01	1	-	ok?
<i>lexical upgraders</i>					
8 intensifier	16	0.04	2	-	j'ai absolument besoin de ça
9 commitment in dicator	2	-	-	-	Je suis sûr que ce n'est pas un problème
10 expletive	-	-	-	-	
11 time intensif.	-	-	-	-	
12 uptoner	-	-	-	-	
13 determination					
marker	-	-	-	-	
14 emphasis	-	-	-	-	
15 pejoratives	-	-	-	-	
total	87	0.22	198	0.62	

What appears, then, is that the French subjects seem to have a quite different preference for internal modifiers than the Dutch do. The French have a distinct preference for syntactic downgraders: 88% of the head acts is mitigated by a conditional mode or by negative polarity. The Dutch subjects, however, seem to prefer lexical downgraders: 62% of all head acts are softened by lexical modification. So, when the French subjects modified their requests they mainly did so by opting for the conditional mode, whereas the Dutch made more frequent use of other strategies at their disposal: not only by using the conditional, but also by using politeness markers (e.g. the particle 'graag' (please)), downtoners (diminutives) and, most of all, understaters. In more than one third of the head acts, the Dutch subjects used an understater. The typically Dutch particle 'even' (a short while) is responsible for almost 90% of this group, and is used on almost any occasion by Dutch speakers.

Table 3. Internal Modification



The literal meaning of the Dutch word 'even' is 'a short while', but it has become such a convenient modal particle that it seems to have lost its original meaning. However, the word is accompanied by words as 'snel' or 'gauw' (both meaning 'quickly') so often that it seems as if the Dutch soften the request by insisting on the short length of the imposition. Perhaps this tendency is an indication that the notion of time is considered more important in Dutch than in French society, for the Dutch are known to have a 'monochronous' conception of time, whereas the French form a 'polychronous' society - which may also explain their relative volubility (cf. Hall, 1983).

In fact, in comparison to the Dutch subjects, the French seem less inclined to use internal modifiers (apart from the almost obligatory conditional mode).

### *Query preparatory act*

As the query preparatory head act strategy proved to be the most preferred strategy in both groups and since this strategy is so over-represented, I decided to subdivide this category into several subclasses (cf. Trosborg, 1995:197-201). A query preparatory strategy refers to a precondition that must be fulfilled by the hearer in order to comply with the request.

I have distinguished 'requests for permission' ("puis-je..."), which is an essentially speaker-oriented strategy, 'questions about willingness' ("veux-tu ..."), 'conditional questions' ("si tu faisais ceci, je serais capable de..."), 'questions about possibility' (impersonal perspective) ("serait-il possible que..."), 'questions about ability' ("pourriez-vous ..."), 'questions about availability' ("avez-vous le temps de..."), and 'questions

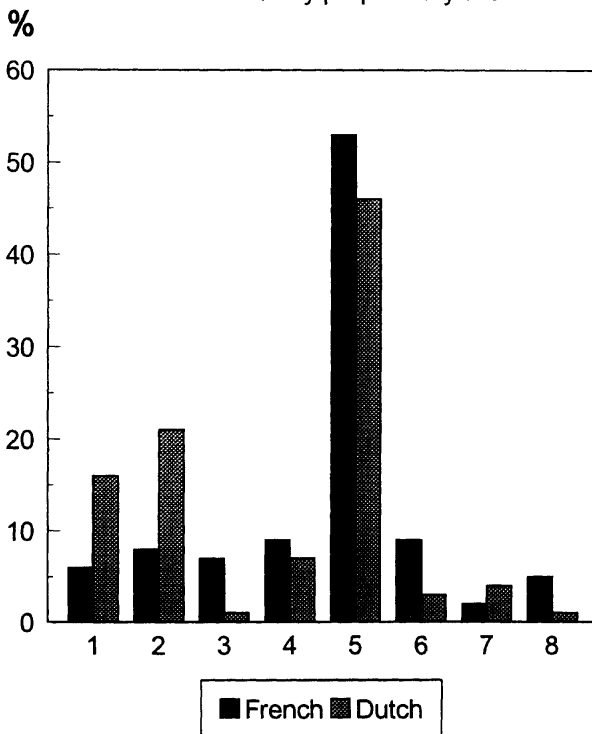
about convenience' ("ça vous dérange de ..."). Again, this classification is corpus-based and can therefore, by no means, be considered exhaustive or universal.

Table 4 presents the results for this subdivision.

Table 4.

<i>Query preparatory act</i>	<i>French</i>		<i>Dutch</i>	
	n	%	n	%
1 permission	14	6	36	16
2 willingness	19	8	47	21
3 condition	16	7	3	1
4 possibility	22	9	15	7
5 ability	130	53	100	46
6 convenience	22	9	7	3
7 availability	5	2	10	4
8 other	13	5	3	1
total	241	99	221	99

Table 4. Query preparatory act



The French subjects appear to allow only little variance in their formulation of a query preparatory head act. The use of the modal verb "pouvoir" is almost omnipresent. Although all perspectives are possible, it seems that the impersonal perspective is slightly

more popular in French than in Dutch. However, the verb "pouvoir" in the conditional mode with a hearer-based perspective is the most common formulation of a request in French. This preference for hearer-oriented requests may convey that the French allow the hearer the option to decide whether or not to comply with the request. Hearer-based requests are, therefore, generally considered more polite than requests formulated on speaker-based conditions. Since a request is inherently imposing, the avoidance of naming the addressee is generally considered to be a demonstration of politeness: the greater the distance from the deictic centre, the greater the degree of politeness (see, among others, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992:211; Trosborg, 1995:197). However, I believe that avoiding naming the hearer as actor reduces the form's level of coerciveness (cf. Blum-Kulka 1989:19), and, thus, I consider the requests for permission or the impersonal perspective as more polite. In order to transform a request into a request for permission, the Dutch subjects used the verb "mogen" (may), a verb that cannot be translated into French, as the French language only knows constructions like "permettez-moi" or "vous m'autorisez", which again focus on the hearer. Note that not all DCTs used allowed their transformation into a demand for permission.

In short, the Dutch subjects allowed much more variance in their conventional indirect requests: the requests for permission (together with the questions about willingness) are considerably more frequent in the Dutch answers.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that the French and Dutch subjects agreed on the use of the 'query preparatory' strategy as the clearly preferred head act strategy for the formulation of a request. We have also seen that the Dutch subjects allowed much greater variation in choosing a formulation of this strategy.

Moreover, we have seen that the French, markedly more voluble than the Dutch subjects, use supportive moves much more extensively than the Dutch. On the other hand, the Dutch use relatively more lexical downgraders. The distribution of the internal modifiers in the head acts has shown that the Dutch tend to mitigate the request with an internal modifier, whereas the French subjects modify their requests by adding a supportive move.

We have now found a possible answer to the problem raised in the first section: why do the Dutch and French perceive each other's politeness as different? The answer may be that the speakers of these speech communities tend to distribute their politeness markers in a different way. The French prefer the use of supportive moves to soften a request, the Dutch express the mitigation by means of a lexical downgrader in the head act.

Thus, if a Dutch businessman with a low proficiency in French, tries to express in the French language the same degree of politeness he is used to, he will not succeed. For, in most cases, there is no literal translation for the Dutch internal politeness markers - and instead of 'transposing' the politeness marker to a supportive move (which is in fact the best solution) he leaves the politeness marker out, as he is less inclined to use supportive moves: he only keeps the head act. It will come as no surprise that this strategy will sometimes fall flat.

In order to verify this hypothesis, further research is necessary: authentic recordings of

business exchanges should be examined and the participants should be questioned afterwards to verify whether the perception of the degree of politeness coincides with the intention of the speaker. Unfortunately, the collection of these data and the research design is so complicated that this must remain a project for the future (but cf. Stalpers, 1993).

Another interesting approach would be to submit the same DCTs used in this study to Dutch learners of French (and by preference to businessmen who have experience in negotiating with the French but who have a low proficiency in French). After having compared their results to those of both groups of native speakers (Dutch and French), their answers should be evaluated by native French speakers. It will then become clear whether the hypotheses put forward in this paper hold true.

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