

Requests in Akan Discourse

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Abstract. This article explores the linguistic and sequential structure of Akan requests, which are either direct or indirect. It is shown that direct requests are made as commands and may be preceded by an address form relating to the "requestee" and followed by a sentence justifying the request, whereas indirect requests are either conventional (i.e., expressed by hedging devices, acknowledgment of an imposition, and pronoun switching) or nonconventional (i.e., expressed by hints, proverbs, and metaphors). In both direct and indirect request events, the request-offer or request-refusal sequence may be interspersed with insertion sequences. Because of the collective nature of Akan society, requests are generally considered neither impositions nor a face-threat to the recipient, unless the requestee ignores the sociocultural and communicative contexts of the interaction.

1. Introduction. The primary aim of this article is to explore the various request strategies, and responses to such strategies, employed by Akan conversational participants in natural settings. In addition to exploring the linguistic and sequential structure of requests, it makes the following claims:

- Requests in Akan may be direct or indirect.
- Akan direct requests have a core structure comprised of a noun phrase, as an address form, followed by a verb in the imperative mood, and another noun for a requested item or service, all of which might be followed by an optional justification of the request.
- Akan indirect requests are either conventional, i.e., expressed through hedging devices, acknowledgment of an imposition, and pronoun switching, or nonconventional, i.e., made through hints, proverbs, tales, riddles, etc.
- The response to a request (either an offer or a denial) should be considered part of a request event.
- "Insertion sequences" (Schegloff 1972; Levinson 1983) can be interspersed between request-offer or request-denial sequences.

Moreover, it is shown that requests in Akan society are usually not considered impositions on recipients, because of that society's collective culture and social interdependence, and that direct requests may not be construed as harsh or impolite, unless the interpersonal relationship between the requesters and the recipients is ignored. The article begins with a discussion of how the Akan conceptualize requests, how their conceptualization differs from that of Westerners, such as Americans, and how it might influence the request event.

2. Making a request in Akan. In 1993, an American friend of mine (a political scientist from the University of California, Los Angeles) and I drove to my village, Asuom, Ghana. When we got to *Abodom* (two villages away from my village), we stopped to have some refreshments, and Yaw, a man in his forties, walked up to us and said *Masta, momfa me nsi Abaam* 'Sir, give me a ride to Abaam'. My friend initially hesitated, but I convinced him that it would be inappropriate to refuse the request, so we gave him the ride. After Yaw got out of the vehicle, my friend asked me what I thought of Yaw. He said that he felt that Yaw was rude, and that we allowed him to impose his wish on us. I tried to explain to him that Yaw was not rude, and that I would have done a similar thing if I were in need. In effect, I explained that Yaw would not have felt that he was imposing his wish on us because Akan culture demands that members help each other. I explained further that, if we had had a problem with our vehicle, anybody, including Yaw, would have come to our aid, even if we had not made any request.

This encounter has implications for the Akan conceptualization of requests and for politeness theory. Thus, among the Akan, and in other societies such as those of the Igbo (Nwoye 1992) and the Greeks (Sifianou 1992), there is a high degree of interdependence among members, so requests are not seen as impositions and therefore do not threaten the face of a "requestee." The way in which the Akan think about and categorize each other's acts, and the forms in which Akan interactions proceed (especially if the speaker pays attention to interpersonal context), may not render certain forms of requests (which are considered impositions in societies that emphasize individual responsibility) an imposition.

As in other societies (such as that of the Igbo [Nwoye 1992:316]), although requests in Akan society may cause discomfort or inconvenience to a requestee, they are tolerated in the interest of group or societal cohesion. Thus, if an Akan request involves an imposition on a requestee, the imposition will not be imposed by the "requester," but by the society as a whole.

The relationship between a "requester" and a "requestee" is also a key variable in structuring the request. Thus, personal context plays a significant role in determining the linguistic form to be selected or used, how such a form is used, and how it is interpreted by the requestee. Requests for certain items or services can be made (directly or indirectly) by certain people without such people being considered impolite or without the requestee's face being threatened. For example, and especially in formal situations, superiors can, directly or indirectly, request subordinates to do certain things for them, and the subordinates will not feel imposed upon. In a village chief's palace, for example, subordinates may even feel honored to undertake the requested action or to provide the requested item (if they have it). For their part, superiors have a social obligation to help subordinates, so a subordinate who refuses a request by a superior may be seen as disrespectful. Thus, in Akan society, social structure, cooperation among members, and prestige are closely linked with speech act patterns (in this case

with requests). This may very well explain why even direct requests are not construed as harsh or impolite. Specifically, as in Ilongot society, a directive in Akan society may be seen as "having less to do with actor-based prerogatives and wants than with relationships affirmed and challenged in an ongoing social life" (Rosaldo 1982:216).

The above claims do not in any way suggest that Akan speakers do not exhibit freedom of action or that they may not accede to a request with resentment. The point being made here relates to the norm. As will be seen later in this article, there are occasions when requestees openly show resentment and turn down requests. For example, as noted earlier, if a requester ignores the personal context of the interaction (i.e., his or her relationship with the requestee) or uses an inappropriate speech form, the request may be turned down.

Furthermore, a request may be turned down when a requester is perceived as being unkind to other members of the group. In such cases, one of two things can happen: (1) absolute refusal, usually with justification, or (2) an offer, with or without a piece of advice on proper group behavior. A true story, which later became a common joke in my research area, was about an "unkind" man who, in 1983, brought a Nissan Urvan minibus from Nigeria, following a mass deportation of Ghanaians from Nigeria.¹ It so happened that this man refused to help his neighbors and charged passengers exorbitant fares. One day, his minibus caught fire, and he shouted for volunteers to help him to put the fire out. His request was ignored because, when life was good for him, he never helped anyone. Not only did he lose his livelihood (the minibus), he also lost respect and dignity among the people.

Similar norms of cooperation and interdependence are reported for Malagasy society by Keenan (1975). However, unlike in Malagasy society, where speakers avoid direct requests at all costs, in Akan society, speakers make both direct and indirect requests. Thus, although both Akan and Malagasy societies have seemingly similar norms of cooperation and interdependence, they exhibit opposing strategies regarding directness and threat to face.

In Akan society, the kind of item requested and the communicative strategy through which the request is made is significant to the request event. If the item requested is considered so common that everyone in the community must have it and that only an "irresponsible" person might request it from a neighbor, or if the item is thought of as possessing spiritual powers and therefore potentially harmful, then requesting such an item is face-threatening. In such a situation, the expression *ammɔdin* 'unmentionable' or *ammisa* 'that-which-should-not-be-requested' are used to refer to the requested item. Such items would include a wooden mortar and pestle for pounding *fufuo*, a staple dish made from pounded cassava, plantain, or cocoyam, or a *prae* 'broom'. It would be difficult for an Akan to understand how an individual who calls himself an Akan could say that he does not have a wooden mortar and pestle for pounding *fufuo*, because if he does not have these items, it would suggest that the person is starving (and if an

Akan eats any food other than *fufuo*, he is said to be starving himself). Not having a broom is equated with lack of adequate hygiene, because brooms are seen as signs of cleanliness. It is therefore face-threatening to request the above items, and people will have to explain at length why they are requesting them. They may also embark on an action that, in certain societies, would be termed theft. In particular, they may take a neighbor's mortar, pestle, or broom, use it, and return it without first asking for it, and the neighbor will not consider it an act of theft because the society allows that. If one has to ask for any of the above-mentioned items, we might expect to hear such utterances as *Mede wo ammisa yi rewɔ me fufuo bi* 'I'm using your that-which-should-not-be-requested to pound my *fufuo*' or *Merefem na akyire yi mede aba* 'I'm borrowing them and will return them later'. In the above examples, the expressions "that-which-should-not-be-requested" and the object marker "them," which is implied, refer to the mortar and the pestle (Obeng 1993).

From the discussion so far, the following points could be made about the speech act of making a request among the Akan:

- The purposes and consequences of speech are significant in the interpretation of requests.
- The relationship between interactants is an important variable in structuring their interaction.
- Whether or not a request poses a "face-threat" to the requester depends, in part, on how he or she handles himself or herself in the society—that is, whether or not he or she conforms to societal norms of behavior—and on the kind of item being requested.
- The requester is not seen as personally imposing upon the requestee.
- The response to a request may be compliance (if the requestee has the requested item) or a refusal (either if the requestee has the item, but is unwilling to offer it due to the requester's previous antisocial behavior, or if the requestee does not have the item requested).

3. Akan requests. In this section, I discuss requests, paying attention to such matters as speaker-hearer protocol, the consequences of speech, and the softening effect of address forms and other linguistic mechanisms. I also consider factors determining whether or not a specific request was successful (i.e., whether the response to the request was or was not favorable), the grammatical structure of the request, and the sequential structure of the request event. I begin with direct requests.

3.1. Direct requests. An examination of my transcripts establishes that all the direct requests are in the form of command sentences.² In particular, they "tell" the requestee to do the requested action or provide the requested item.

The verbs used are in the imperative mood. Usually, direct requests begin with an overt subject (an address form) followed by a verb and then the requested item or service. The syntactic structure of the direct requests is as follows:

NP_(+ address) + V_(+ imperative mood) + N_(+ requested item/service) + (S'_(+ justification))

The NP may be a proper noun (e.g., *Ama*, *Kwadwo*, etc.) or a pronoun (e.g., *mo* 'you (pl.)'). I examine four excerpts under this category of request.

Excerpt 1

[Context: AA (age 40), is sitting at one end of a table. He asks his wife Ama (age 39), to pass him a book that is at the other end of the table.]

AA: *Ama, pagya nwoma no ma me.*
Ama lift.up book the to me
'Ama, give me the book.'

Ama: *Eni.*
it-here
'Here it is.'

AA: *Mo.*
thanks
'Thanks.'

In excerpt 1, AA's request involves "ordering" Ama to give him a book. Use of the address form *Ama* expresses rapport and closeness.³ Because this interaction is between intimates, the address form has a mitigating effect on the request. Use of such day names is also for positive politeness. In Obeng (1995), I state that the use of day names is the most common address form between Akan couples. One might think that AA is impolite or that his request is an imposition on Ama and therefore a threat to Ama's face, since his request is direct and is neither preceded nor followed by a strong politeness marker. However, because the conversation is between intimates—husband and wife—little social negotiation or attention to linguistic marking of politeness is needed (see Wolfson 1988). The relationship between the requester and the requestee therefore plays a significant role in determining which linguistic form is selected, how it is used, and how it is interpreted by the hearer. In excerpt 1, there is no evidence in the reply of the hearer, Ama, that AA is imposing anything on her.

Excerpt 1 also lends a measure of support to the point made in section 1 that requests for certain items can be made directly by certain people without such people being considered impolite or without the requestee's face being threatened. Asking one's spouse to hand one a book is neither face-threatening to oneself nor to the spouse, even if the request is made in command form.

Sequentially, excerpt 1 has the following structure:⁴

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Response (offer)

Turn 3: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (expression of gratitude)

Here, position 3 is made part of the request event because it is possible for a requester, having been offered the requested item, to have a change of heart and refuse the offer. Therefore, approaching the request event, I examine the request act, the response (offer or denial), and the acceptance or rejection.

Excerpt 2

[Context: VAG (age 40), a visiting professor, asks KO (age 37), also a professor, for a ride.]

VAG: *Wofa Kwadwo, bema me raed nko fie. Snoo no ama*
Uncle Kwadwo come-give me ride go home snow the has-made
fam aye toro.
ground become slippery
'Uncle Kwadwo, come and give me a ride home. The snow has made the ground slippery.'

KO: *Taem ben na wope se mebafa wo ko fie no?*
time what EMPH you-want that I-come-pick you go home the
'What time do you want me to give you the ride home?'

VAG: *Bra beye siks teti.*
come by six thirty
'Come at 6:30.'

KO: *Okee, meba.*
O.K. I'll-come
'O.K., I'll come.'

VAG: *Yoo, meda wo ase.*
O.K. I-lie-down you beneath
'O.K., Thank you.'

In excerpt 2, VAG requests a ride because the fallen snow has made the road slippery to walk on. Unlike excerpt 1, the requester, VAG, uses a strong politeness marker by prefacing the requestee's day name with the deferential address form *wofa* 'uncle'. In Obeng (1997a), I note that, in communicative events involving pleas, use of deferential titles as address forms helps to persuade the recipient to comply to the plea because it portrays him or her as respected and cultured. Thus, although VAG's request is issued as a command, use of the deferential address form serves to tone down its force. Under normal circum-

stances, if VAG had addressed KO by his day name without the deferential address form, she would not have been seen as impolite because she is older than KO, and the relative age of the interactants is a very important factor in Akan polite speech. However, use of the deferential address form is motivated by lack of familiarity. VAG had not known KO for very long, so addressing him with a day name alone in the above context would have been inappropriate.

Further examination of excerpt 2 reveals that the offer 'What time would you want me to give you the ride home?' includes implicit as well as explicit content. KO's question, which explicitly asks when the ride is needed, is an implicit way of offering to provide the ride to VAG. The implicit offer is, however, contingent upon a time agreeable to both interactants. KO's initial turn could be said to function in two different "adjacency pair systems" (Levinson 1983): thus as the second part of the first pair, request-offer, and as the first part of the second pair, question-answer. VAG's second turn, 'Come at 6:30', is a response to KO's question about when the ride is needed, and therefore the second part of that adjacency pair. KO's second turn, 'O.K., I'll come', is an explicit offer. One could also argue that the actual offer is made in KO's second turn, in which case KO's initial turn, 'What time would you want me to give you the ride home?', and VAG's second turn, 'Come at 6:30', could be labeled "insertion sequences" (Schegloff 1972; Levinson 1983)—that is, they come between the members of the request-offer adjacency pair. VAG's last turn is an acceptance of the offer and an expression of gratitude. Therefore, KO's and VAG's respective last turns form sequentially an offer-acceptance adjacency pair.

From the above discussion, the sequential structure of excerpt 2 could be either (i) or (ii) below.

- (i) Turn 1: (position 1) Request
 Turn 2: (position 2a) Offer implicit
 Turn 3: Insertion sequence
 Turn 4: (position 2b) Offer explicit
 Turn 5: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (expression of gratitude)
- (ii) Turn 1: (position 1) Request
 Turn 2: Insertion sequence
 Turn 3: Insertion sequence
 Turn 4: (position 2) Offer
 Turn 5: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (expression of gratitude)

Whether one prefers (i) or (ii) depends on how one characterizes turn 2. The most important lesson one could draw from the above discussion is that, in a request event, it is possible for a request and its response (offer or denial) to be either adjacent (i.e., follow each other directly) or to be several turns apart.

In excerpt 3, because of a close relationship between the requester and the

requestee (both live in the same household and belong to the same lineage), the requester does not embark on elaborate social negotiation. Although she mitigates her request, given the nature of the requested item and the requester's age, the degree of mitigation is minimal.

Excerpt 3

[Context: An old woman, OD (age 71), asks a young woman, AT (age 43), for money to enable her (OD) to pay her funeral donation. AT grants OD the requested money.]

OD: *Me dehyee ma me fite nkɔbo nsoa.*
 my royal-personage give me fifty go-pay funeral-donation
 'My relative, give me fifty (cedis) so I can pay the funeral donation.'

AT: *Nana OD dec da bi ara wo sere sika.*
 Nana OD as-for day some any you beg-for money
 'Nana OD, you always request money from people.'

OD: *Ei, na se mewɔ bi a, anka merensre. Ma me bi*
ei EMPH if I-has some if would-have I'll-not-beg give me some
na me dee ara ne wo.
 because my possessive EMPH be you
 'Come on! If I had money, I wouldn't have asked for money. Give me some (money) because you are mine (i.e., I'm your relative).'

AT: *Nana, wose fite; okee gye tuu hundred yi.*
 Nana you-said fifty; O.K. get two hundred this
 'Nana, you said fifty (cedis); O.K., here you are with two hundred.'

OD: *Mo Asona.*
 thanks Asona
 'Thanks, you who belong to the Asona lineage.'

In the Asuom area, funeral costs are shared by all of the adults in the town, and failure to pay one's funeral donation may invite sanctions (e.g., members of one's lineage may not be given a decent burial or funeral—an act that brings shame to the entire lineage). Therefore, the reason behind the request in excerpt 3—to avert shame—is very compelling to OD, the requester, and to the entire Asona lineage. If OD fails to pay the funeral donation and there is a dispute or a quarrel between any member of the community and a member of the Asona lineage, OD's default could be cited to shame the member of the Asona lineage and, indeed, the entire lineage. AT's initial response, *Nana OD, dec da bi ara wosere sika* 'Nana OD, you always request money from people', suggests that OD is probably a habitual requester. In Western societies this response to OD's request would certainly be seen as face-threatening to OD. However, based on my own intuitions about the Akan, as well as a close analysis of OD's response

(her second turn), it is clear that OD does not in any way feel that her face is threatened. Because of the collective culture of Akan society, if OD does not have money and another member of her lineage does, she has the "right" to ask for help. Her expression *Ma me bi na me dec ara ne wo* 'Give me some (money) because you are mine' supports the claim being made. AT is OD's relative, and she should know better. In fact, if any one should be ashamed, it is AT, not OD, since, from what I know about the interactants, OD depends solely on members of the lineage for her livelihood, so AT's response, 'you always request money from people', would be seen as irresponsible in the eyes of lineage members. To make up for her "mistake," AT offers two hundred cedis (\$0.12) instead of fifty (\$0.03). OD's final turn is an acceptance of the offer and an expression of gratitude, after which the lineage name is given as an expression of closeness. OD appears to tell AT that she has fulfilled her obligation—helping a lineage member in need, as a true Asona surely would do.

Throughout excerpt 3, the requester, OD, draws on linguistic resources, such as *me dehyee* 'my relative', a lineage address form, and *me dec ara ne wo* 'you're mine (i.e., I'm your relative)', to negotiate her relationship with AT and to strategically place herself and AT in a favorable communicative context. Use of expressions emphasizing the personal relationship between the requester and the requestee help to reduce or eliminate the communicative difficulty involved.

Sequentially, OD's request and AT's offer are separated by two turns, as shown by the following structural illustration of the request event:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: Insertion sequence

Turn 3: Insertion sequence

Turn 4: (position 2) Offer

Turn 5: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (expression of gratitude)

Excerpt 4, however, has only two turns, a request and a refusal, in its request event:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Refusal.

Excerpt 4

[Context: A bus conductor tells passengers to move closer so that another passenger may have a seat. A passenger draws the bus conductor's attention to the fact that the vehicle is already fully loaded.]

M: *Montwe nko na sista yi ntena ase bi.*
 you-should-push go so-that sister this sits down some
 'Push a little so that this "sister" can also come on the bus.'

P: *Enye na moatwere kaa no ho se efa tweef no?*
 it-not-be focus you-write car the on that it-takes twelve EMPH
 'Isn't there a sign on the bus that says that it must carry only twelve persons?'

It differs from the other excerpts of direct requests because, unlike the others, the requestees are not addressed with polite address forms. Besides being direct, it is explicit. The bus conductor, M, issues the directive *Montwe nko na sista yi ntena ase bi* 'Push a little so that this "sister" (i.e., a young, probably educated, woman) can also come on the bus.' He shows deference to the person whom he wants to get seated by referring to her as "sister." Obeng (1997c) indicates that English kinship terms such as *brother*, *sister*, and *uncle* may be used as polite address forms in Akan. But it is interesting that M does not show any deference to the passengers already seated. The failure of the request could be attributed to the fact that, although the requester does not know the requestees intimately or personally, he neglects to engage in social negotiation. Thus, he fails to consider the expected speaker-hearer protocol by not making any social or interpersonal negotiation with the passengers already seated. He employs a request form normally used when the interactants are intimates. If the requestees had been acquaintances, his inattention to the norms of interpersonal relations and to decorum might have been overlooked by the passengers. Even in such a circumstance, he should have at least used either a polite address form, such as *me nuanom* 'my siblings' (i.e., 'Pals!'), or a deferential address form, such as *mpaninfo* 'elders'.

Another reason for the refusal of the request is the requestees' perception of the requester. In discussion afterwards, a requestee said (and this observation was supported by the other passengers on the bus) that the requester was aggressive, uncouth, and impolite, and that he often overloads his vehicle. The response *Enye na moatwere kaa no ho se efa tweef no?* 'Isn't there a sign on the bus that (says that) it must carry only twelve persons?' is not only a refusal of the request, but, among the Akan, it could also be interpreted as an insult. If there is a sign on the bus that it should carry only twelve persons, and the bus conductor wants to take more than twelve persons, then he either does not know how to read, or he is not interested in the comfort of his passengers, or he does not respect them. Thus, it is probable that the bus conductor's request may have been rejected because of the general "public image" of bus conductors.

From the discussion above, and from additional data in my transcripts, the following conclusions can be made about direct requests in Akan:

- Direct requests are made in the form of commands, and the verbs involved are in the imperative mood.
- The command may be preceded by an address form relating to the requestee.
- The response to the request may be an offer or a refusal, with the response explainable in terms of the requestee's attention or inattention to the social

context of the discourse (that is, to the norms of relation and expectations that define the discourse world).

- The offer may be adjacent to the request or may be separated from it by insertion sequences.
- The offer may be implicit or explicit.
- If an offer is made, there is an acceptance or an expression of gratitude for the offer or both.
- If the offer is refused, as in excerpt 4, then the discourse may be terminated.
- Often (as in excerpts 2, 3, and 4), the requesters provide justifications for the request.

3.2. Indirect requests. In this section, I discuss both conventional and non-conventional indirect requests, beginning with an examination of some excerpts involving conventional indirectness.

3.2.1. Conventional indirect requests. Weizman (1989:74) notes that, with conventional indirect requests, the hearer is guided by some grammatical or semantic device used conventionally for that purpose. In such cases, the speaker exploits (a) the grammatical structure of questions with modals such as *can* or *could* (as in *Could you please give me your pen?*, considered polite and indirect as opposed to an impolite request such as *Give me your pen*); or (b) the semantic meaning of an apologetic expression such as *please*, conventionally used to signal indirect requests, and as a clue for requestive interpretation. As stated in section 2, in view of the interdependent nature of Akan society, the request 'Give me your pen', used in an equal-equal or superior-subordinate interaction, would not be seen as impolite. It could also be used in a subordinate-superordinate interaction, if the requestee is addressed deferentially. Thus, the string "Uncle Sammy, give me a pen" would not be termed impolite in Akan. Conventions regarding indirectness differ from one culture to the other. Such an indirect strategy as circumlocution, which is classified as nonconventional in Western societies, is considered to be conventional in Akan society (Obeng 1997b, 1997d).

An examination of my transcripts shows that, in conventional indirect requests, requesters use hedges, acknowledge imposition, and embark on pronoun switching.⁵ Such words and expressions as *se erenha wo a* 'if it won't be too much of a bother to you', *wobetumi* 'could you' or 'is it possible for you', *mepa wo kyew* 'please/I beg you', and *mesre wo* 'I beg you' are used as hedging devices. These hedging strings denote nonimposition, and therefore perform a politeness function. Thus, while direct requests are not viewed as creating imposition, an overt statement of nonimposition is viewed as being even more polite. With pronoun switching, the requester shifts attention from himself. Three excerpts are examined below.

Excerpt 5

[Context: A woman asks her cousin to let her son spend the holidays with him.]

JP: *Braa Kwadwo, mesere wo ara se erenha wo a,*
Brother Kwadwo I-beg you very-much if it-will-not-trouble you if,

mepa wo kyew; wobetumi ama Kwasi abedi nna kakra wo
I-beg your hat you-can let Kwasi come-spend days few at

wo nkyen wo Nkran akwamma yi?
your side in Accra vacation this

'Brother Kwadwo, I appeal to you; if it will not be too much of a bother to you, please, could Kwasi spend some days with you in Accra during this vacation, please?'

KW: *O, se mereko a, metumi de no ako.*
o if I'm-going if I-can with him will-go

'Never mind, when I'm going, I'll take him with me.'

JP: *Meda wo ase. Meka akyere no na wasiesie ne ho.*
I-lie-down you beneath I'll-tell show him so-that he-prepares him self

'Thank you. I'll tell him so that he prepares for the journey.'

In excerpt 5, the respect address title *braa* 'brother' before the requestee's name has several communicative functions. It helps to establish a personal relationship with the requestee and, as a result, aids in mitigating the difficulty inherent in the request. It is also an expression of politeness. Although the interactants are of the same age, the nature of the request places some difficulty on the requester, JP. What is being requested involves a fairly large expense—the cost of traveling from the village to Accra, the cost of feeding the boy, and, probably, the cost of buying him a few essential items that he might take to school. Bearing these expenses becomes an obligation if KW agrees to take the boy with him. It is therefore no surprise that JP uses several "hedges," such as 'I appeal to you', 'please', and 'could you'. The expression 'if it will not be too much of a bother to you' denotes an acknowledgment of an imposition. Thus, although there is interdependence in Akan society, if what is being requested involves significant expense, the requester uses devices to soften the force behind the request. Such devices, to some extent, give the requestee the opportunity to act contrary to the proposition inherent in the speaker's utterance. Thus, the requestee has an option of turning down the request, though in reality, and especially in the context of excerpt 5, it is unlikely to be refused.

Use of the requestee's day name, *Kwadwo*, denotes rapport and is, therefore, a politeness strategy. Here, the requester reminds the requestee of their close relationship, since only close friends or relatives can address each other by their day names. Although use of both a reverential title, *braa* 'brother', and a solidarity address form, *Kwadwo*, in the same context might sound contradictory, it is not. With both forms, the requester appears to suggest something like "although my request is a difficult one, remember, you're my cousin."

The requestor's nonspecification of the number of days in the request is also a form of nonimposition and, therefore, represents a "negative" politeness strategy, since it allows the requestee to decide the number of days in which JP's son can stay with him. KW's response, 'Never mind, when I'm going, I'll take him with me', is an offer to the request. Thus, this request-offer sequence has the structure:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Offer

Turn 3: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (+ expression of gratitude)

This request, unlike those examined in section 3.1, is in the form of a question—in particular, a yes-no question.

In excerpt 6 below, the response to the request is a refusal, with the following sequential structure:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Refusal

Turn 3: (position 3) Insult

Excerpt 6

[Context: A man (about 40 years old) begs a woman (also about 40 years old) for money, and the woman refuses.]

A: *Sista, mepa wo kyew, wobetumi ama me wan fite na mede afa*
Sister I-move your hat can-you give me one fifty so-that I-with take

trɔtrɔ akɔ fie?
bus go home

'Sister (deferential), I beg you; could you give me a bus fee of 150 cedis (\$0.07)?'

B: *Wofiri fie reba no na wonnim se worekɔ a,*
you-from home coming when FOC you-not-know that you're-going if

wobefa trɔtrɔ? ɔkorɔmfɔ!
you'll-take bus thief

'When you were coming from home, didn't you know that you'd need money to ride the bus? Thief!'

A: *Go wee yuu! Aden se woremma me a, na woreye me!*
go way you why if you-won't-give me if then you're-insulting me

Me ne wo, hwan na ɔye ɔkorɔmfɔ?
me and you who FOC he-be thief

'Get out of my sight! If you won't give the money, how dare you insult me. Who is the thief among us?'

In the above excerpt, the requester begins his utterance with the deferential address form *sista* 'sister', followed by an apologetic expression functioning as a hedge, *mepa wo kyew* 'I beg you/please', and then with a nonimpositional polite string *wobetumi a* 'could you' or 'if it'll be possible for you'. It is interesting that, in spite of all these expressions of politeness and these persuasive devices, the request is met not only with a refusal, but also with aggression. When I asked the requestee why she was angry with the requester, her answer was even more interesting:

Braa saa kobɔɔfɔɔ no ekwan a won fa so wia sika ne no. ɔbisa wo sika na woyi wo pɔɔso pɛ a, wo tiri anye yie a, na wɔahwam kɔ. 'Brother (deferential), these aimless wanderers, that's how they steal money. If they beg for money and you pull out your purse and you're unlucky, they snatch your purse.'

The requestee's answer obviously suggests that she considered the requester to be a thief, or at least a potential thief, and that if the context (including the requester) had been different, her answer might have been different. Two other people corroborated the requestee's argument, saying that, if the requester had been a "genuine" beggar, he would not have responded to the requestee's utterance with an insult. This explanation could obviously be challenged, since one might also argue that his response was a face-saving device. After all, if he had acceded to the assertion that he was a thief, he would probably have ended up more disgraced or might even have been lynched by an angry mob. The most important observation, however, is that the context of the situation (including the interactional participants, the place, the reason for the request, etc.) is of considerable importance in the management of a request.

It could also be argued that because the requester did not in any way know the requestee, the requester should have made a more elaborate social negotiation and paid more attention to the linguistic and communicative context of the request. Begging is a very common practice in Ghanaian cities. However, begging by apparently able-bodied men, as the requester in this case (which was confirmed by my informants), is generally detested by the traveling public—especially given the large number of thefts by male beggars. My own understanding is that only those beggars who provide a public service (such as singing or reciting poetry) in Ghanaian towns and cities are viewed as genuine beggars.

In excerpt 7, the requester resorts to pronoun switching.

Excerpt 7

[Context: DB visits YA, and the latter immediately begins a conversation. YA forgets that DB has not been served water, as custom demands. DB draws YA's attention to this and is served water.]

DB: *Obi mene ase rete na mommre no nsuo nnom.*
someone throat under is-tearing so bring him water drink
'I'm thirsty, so get me some water to drink.'

YA: *Mmɔfra mommre mo papa DB nsuo.*
 children you-IMP-bring your father DB water
 'Children, bring someone (DB) some water.'

[A child brings DB some water.]

Child: *Papa nsuo no ni.*
 Papa water the this
 'Papa, here's the water.'

DB: *Me ba, mo.*
 my child thanks
 'My child, thanks.' (Obeng 1997c:214)

Here, DB employs the indefinite generic third-person pronoun *obi* 'someone' to encode the first person pronoun *me* 'I' and *no*, the definite third-person object pronoun, to encode the first-person object pronoun 'me'. Among the Akan, indirect use of these pronouns in such contexts is common among intimate friends, but rare in interactions involving nonintimates and people of unequal status. Use of pronoun switching in a network of nonintimates could result in a breakdown in communication. Here, too, the choice of linguistic form in which a request is rendered is influenced by the social identity of the interlocutors, by the item requested, and by the communicative context in which the request takes place. Finally, use of the indefinite generic third-person and the definite third-person object pronouns mitigates the face-threat (i.e., the suggestion that YA has ignored his responsibility) involved.

Excerpt 7 has the sequential structure of either (i) or (ii) below.

(i) Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: Insertion sequence

Turn 3: (position 2) Offer

Turn 4: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (+ offer of gratitude)

(ii) Turn 1: (position 1): Request

Turn 2: (position 2' + position 1') Implicit offer via a third party request

Turn 3: (position 2) Explicit offer

Turn 4: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (+ offer of gratitude)

As shown in (i), it is possible to take turn 2 as an insertion sequence. However, in (ii), I have labeled turn 2 as "position 2'" and described it as an "implicit offer via a "third party request." Specifically, turn 2 functions in two adjacency pair systems, acting as a second part (an implicit offer) to turn 1 and as a first part to the next adjacency pair, the request-offer (in which the offer is nonverbally made, i.e., through the fetching of the water). The implicit offer is thus made by requesting that a third party, the child, provide DB with the water. The next ad-

jacency pair (turns 3 and 4) involves an offer and an acceptance; therefore, one could characterize excerpt 7 as having either a simple or a complex structure.

3.2.2. Nonconventional indirect requests. In Akan, nonconventional in direct requests involve ambiguity, obscurity, and prolixity (Grice 1975) in the requester's utterance, whereby the requester specifically and intentionally employs ambiguous and vague strategies to convey meanings that differ, in some way, from that of the utterance. In such cases, the pragmatic competence of a hearer is very important in determining the true significance of the utterance meaning. Specifically, an indirect request may be identified by a hearer as a request if he or she can detect the fact that the requester intends to convey a meaning other than or more than the utterance meaning.

In excerpt 8, the requester uses a hint. According to Weizman (1989:73), a hint is an utterance that, under certain circumstances, may be interpreted as an indirect request, but which, being inherently opaque, leaves the hearer uncertain as to the speaker's intentions and leaves the speaker the possibility of opting out. Hints are not accompanied by a conventional request. An example of a requestive hint would be an utterance such as *It's cold in here*, stated when the speaker wants the hearer to close a door or a window. Akan conversational participants resort to hints in managing a wide range of communicatively difficult encounters, including requests, conveying bad news, rebukes, and apologies.

Excerpt 8

[Context: PY wants his uncle, KO, to give him a pair of canvas shoes.]

PY: *Papa Kwadwo, wo mpaboa yei dee eye faen paa ara oo.*
 Father Kwadwo your shoes this as-for it-be fine very well oo

Eye kama paa ara. Wode si abonten seesei ara a, obi ara
 it-be nice very well you-with enter street now FOC if everyone well

behu se wode fi hom na ebae. Yei dee meye hyoo
 will-see that you-with-it from home FOC it-came this as-for I-be sure

se se woreko baake a wode beko.
 that if you're-going back if you-with-it will-go

'Father Kwadwo, these shoes of yours are very nice. They are very beautiful. If you wear them and anybody sees them, they'll say that you brought them from abroad. I'm sure that if you're going back, you'll take them back with you.'

KO: *Ae don tenk se mede beko. Se wope a, fa.*
 I don't think that I-with-it will-go if you-like if take

'I don't think that I'll take them with me. If you like them, you can take them.'

PY: *Wao! Meda wo ase paa ara.*
 wow I-lie-down you beneath very well

'Wow! Thanks very much.'

In excerpt 8, the requester PY hints first by complementing the quality of KO's shoes—that they are beautiful and the fact that everyone will recognize that they are from abroad—and, second, by asking if KO will take the shoes back to the United States. Interestingly, PY's question is couched as a statement in order to further obscure the fact that a request is being made.

KO's initial turn is in two parts. The first answers the question of whether or not he intends to take his shoes back to the United States, whereas the second makes an offer. PY accepts the offer and expresses his gratitude for the offer.

An analysis of excerpt 8 reveals that the use of the hint is motivated by the distant nature of the interactants' relationship and by the inherent difficulty of making the request. The requester PY is KO's elder brother's sister-in-law's son. He lives in another town and happened to be visiting his aunt (KO's brother's wife) at the same time when KO was visiting his brother. PY addressed KO as *papa* 'father' because, in Akan society, in the absence of one's real father, paternal uncles support their nephews and nieces. Also, maternal aunts support their sisters' children and act as "mother." Therefore, according to Akan custom, PY becomes KO's brother's son and KO's "son" as well. However, in spite of this relationship between the requester and the requestee, PY and KO were nonintimates, thus dictating the choice of an indirect request. When faced with communicative difficulty, Akan interactants resort to indirectness to save face and to gain interactional advantage (Obeng 1994:42, 1997d:49). PY's indirect approach convinces KO to make the offer. Given the distant social relationship between the interactants, a direct request in the above circumstance would have revealed PY as being pragmatically incompetent.

Thus, excerpt 8 has the following sequential structure:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Offer

Turn 3: (position 3) Acceptance of offer (+ expression of gratitude)

Further scrutiny of excerpt 8 points to the fact that it is probably too simple to categorize turn 2 as an offer. The first part, 'I don't think that I'll take them with me', provides an answer to the final part of PY's turn, while the second part, 'If you like them, you can take them', contains the offer.

Excerpt 9

[Context: AB, KO's maternal aunt, indirectly requests money from KO by accusing KO of neglecting her, although she helped KO's mother in a time of difficulty.]

AB: *KO, mosum brɔdeɛ a, na moasum kwadu nso wae.*
 KO you-support plantain if then you-support banana also O.K.

ɛnye aburo nko dɔkono nko. Ayie yi baee yi, me
 it-not-be corn different dɔkono different funeral this come since I

ne mo maame ara na yerekɔ reba.
 and your mother EMPH EMPH we're-going coming

'KO, if you support the plantain tree [with a stick to prevent it from falling], you must also support the banana tree. Corn and *dɔkono* [a kind of food made from corn dough] have a lot in common [i.e., your mother and I are closely related]. Throughout this funeral, I've never neglected your mother.'

KO: *Maame AB anka anwumire na mede mo nso mo*
 Maame AB would-have evening EMPH I-with you-PL also your

deɛ bebre mo. ɛha ye abɔnten nso gye kakra yi na
 thing come-give you-PL here is street but get small this EMPH

meba fie akyire yi.
 I'll-come home later this

'Maame AB, I would have brought you yours this evening. We're in the street (a place not fit to give an elder money), but take this small gift. I'll come to your home later.'

[KO gives AB money.]

AB: *Mo, ahenewa.*
 thanks, little-chief

'Thanks, little chief (i.e., with respect to your royal status).'

In excerpt 9, the request is made indirectly through two proverbs. In the first proverb metaphor, the requester is represented by *kwadu* 'banana', the requestee by his name and by the second-person plural pronoun *mo* 'you', and the requestee's mother by *brɔdeɛ* 'plantain'. The act of offering or giving money is suggested by the verb *sum* 'to give support to (a plant with a stick)'. AB uses a second proverb, *Corn and dɔkono* (a food made from corn dough) *have a lot in common*, to show KO that he has erred by ignoring her. If *aburoo*, representing KO's mother, and *dɔkono*, representing AB, are related, then tradition demands that they be treated equally. Supporting the plantain tree without giving similar support to the banana tree is tantamount to suggesting that corn and corn dough are unrelated, or that one is more important than the other. Uttered in isolation, the proverb is *Wosum brɔdeɛ a, sum kwadu efise ekɔm ba a, wonnim nea ebehwe wo* 'If you support the plantain tree, you must support the banana tree as well because you cannot tell right away which of the two will support you during famine'. Through these proverbs, AB requests support from KO (and his siblings), because (1) in the absence of their mother, AB will be *their* support (i.e., will perform the maternal duties currently performed by KO's mother), (2) KO's mother and AB are closely related, so they should not discriminate against AB, but rather offer her the same kind of support they would offer their mother, and (3) AB supported their mother in time of need, specifically, during a funeral when help was most needed.

The use of indirectness is motivated by the age difference between the

requester and the requestee—AB was in her late seventies, whereas KO was in his mid-thirties—by the communicative setting (the interaction took place in the street), and by the requester's wish to show respect for the addressee by attending to the latter's public image. In Akan society, talking to someone in proverbs presupposes that the addressee is pragmatically competent.

KO shows that he understands the request being made by indicating that he had planned to make the offer in the evening of that same day. Thus, the offer had been planned before the request. This is then followed by a string in which he apologizes for making an offer in the street. Among the Akan, gifts for elders must be given to them in their homes, not in the street, to preserve their prestige and not to make them look like beggars. Even if an adult requests money from a younger person, the younger person must either follow the adult home and give the offer there, or if he has had to make the offer in public, he must keep it away from the public eye. AB accepts the offer and thanks KO for it.

Excerpt 9 has the following sequential structure:

Turn 1: (position 1) Request

Turn 2: (position 2) Offer

Turn 3: (position 3) Acceptance (offer of gratitude)

Moreover, it could be argued that, apart from the indirectness of the requesting act, excerpt 9 also involves an accusation of neglect or discrimination. Turn 2 is more than just an offer, since it also involves defense, as KO attempts to defend himself by saying that he has not been discriminatory. Finally, although turn 3 explicitly involves an expression of gratitude, an acceptance of the offer made in turn 2 is also implicit in it.

From a conversation-analytic point of view (Levinson 1983; Schegloff 1988), most indirect request acts, as in, for example, excerpt 8, may be classified as "prerequisites"—utterances that serve to check whether conditions for a successful request obtain. The most important point, though, is that, as Levinson notes, such indirect requests allow requesters to "check out whether a request is likely to succeed, and if not to avoid one in order to avoid its subsequent dispreferred response, namely a rejection" (Levinson 1983:357). For their part, Labov and Fanshel (1977:86–91) remark that it is those preconditions constituting the usual grounds for refusal of requests (e.g., the requestee's ability or inability to offer the requested item) that are used in such request acts. In excerpt 8, for instance, the most likely grounds for a refusal of the request, the likelihood of KO needing the shoes and thus taking them back to the United States, forms an essential part of PY's initial turn. If PY had realized that the grounds for refusal are present (i.e., if KO had said that he *would* be taking the shoes back to the United States), PY would most likely have aborted the request sequence. Using indirect request strategies helps to bring about a situation where the requestees make an offer of the requested item (see Schegloff [1979:49] and Levinson [1983:359] for further details). The above discussion points to the fact that, in

expressing difficulty, interactional participants may resort to strategies that tone down the face-threat inherent in the "difficult" string.

4. Conclusion. In this article, I have explored the linguistic and sequential structure of requests in Akan discourse. I have shown that Akan requests can be either direct or indirect, and have described their linguistic properties. Direct requests, which involve explicitness, are made in the form of commands, whereas indirect requests, which involve implicitness, are expressed either by conventional forms such as hedges, pronoun substitution, and acknowledgment of an imposition, or by nonconventional forms such as hints, proverbs, and metaphors, which involve ambiguity, obscurity and prolixity. Moreover, the analysis of requests in this study supports Schegloff's (1972) claim about the sequential structure of requests, showing that a request-offer or a request-denial adjacency pair may be separated by insertion sequences. Because it is possible for a requester who has been offered the requested item to refuse such an offer, I have suggested that the request act, the response (offer or denial), and the acceptance or rejection should all be examined as part of the request event.

Furthermore, I have discussed how requests for services are typically not seen as impositions because of the collective nature of Akan society. For this reason, direct requests may not be construed as harsh or impolite, unless interpersonal relations between the participants in the request event are ignored, in which case a direct request can lead to request failure. Thus, the level of familiarity with the requestee and the public image of the social group of the requestee are also significant in determining whether difficulty is involved in the request event and whether the request will be successful. In effect, the overall communicative context determines the level of difficulty and the outcome of the request. If any difficulty is involved, the requester may resort to hedging and use of nonliteral expressions and indirectness. However, I have also shown that, in a few situations—especially when the participants are unrelated—if the value of the requested item is high, or if a requested item is so common that it is unimaginable that a responsible Akan would not have it, then a certain amount of "difficulty" is placed on the requester.

The discussion in the core sections of this article has implications for the concepts of face and politeness, as described by Brown and Levinson (1978). It has been shown in the discussion of natural interactions that requesters may lose face if they pay no attention to the linguistic markings of politeness.

Finally, this article has demonstrated that the relationship and expectations of interactants, as well as sociocultural context, are significant in the interactional management of requests. It supports Wolfson's (1988) notion that the strategies through which interlocutors negotiate their relationship with others help to explain the behavior of requesters and requestees. In particular, it shows that, given the mutual relevance of linguistic form and social and contextual concerns in discourse, a thorough understanding of both the requesters' and

requestees' sociocultural milieu and of the total communicative context is required to fully understand request events in Akan.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and for the references that they suggested.

Abbreviations. The following abbreviations are used: EMPH = emphasis; FOC = focus; IMP = imperative; PL = plural.

1. "Urvan" is the model name of the vehicle, which is manufactured by Nissan.

2. The data used in this article consist of transcripts of eight natural conversations recorded between June 1995 and December 1996. Apart from excerpt 2, all of the conversations were recorded in Ghana, one in Accra and the others in Asuom. The entire corpus of eight conversations is about ten hours in length, but some of the conversations were of very short duration. The spontaneity and naturalness of the tokens, especially the context of the discourse, provide tremendous insight into the speech event.

3. *Ama* is the day name for a female person born on Saturday. In Obeng (1997b), I have shown that day names such as *Ama*, and the hypocoristic forms of such names, are used by intimates and therefore suggest closeness.

4. In my analysis of the sequential structure of requests, I have used *position* in the sense of Schegloff (1972a)—the response to some prior, but not necessarily adjacent, turn. Thus, the response to a request (offer, refusal, etc.) may or may not be adjacent to the request.

5. See Obeng (1997d) for further details.

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