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A Comparative Study of Requests amongst Second Language Speakers of English

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ABSTRACT This paper is based on the findings from a study that investigated the analysis of requests produced by second language (L2) speakers (that is, 15 Afrikaans-speaking (L1) and 17 Sesotho-speaking (L1) learners) of English and how these requests are received by English first language (L1) speakers. The aim of this study is to compare the manners in which Afrikaans first language (L1) and Sesotho first language (L1) speakers make requests when speaking English. The Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework of Blum-Kulka was utilized to analyze the requests made by these two groups. The outcomes revealed that Afrikaans speakers used fewer politeness and alert markers as compared to Sesotho speakers who utilized more. The implications of these findings are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

It is universally acknowledged that communication is much more than putting some words in a linear order to form a set of items. According to Cho and Lee (2016: 33), language does not 'exist in isolation'. This means that one cannot separate a language from the culture of its speakers. On the other side, people cannot be separated from their native culture norms of interaction (Salami 2004; Akindele 2008 and Ganchi 2012). Thus, according to Jiang (2015), Fazeli and Shafiee (2015), Shahbaz et al. (2016) and Tulgar (2016), regardless of L2 learners' linguistics proficiency, they might experience difficulties in formulating and interpreting messages in their L2. The conditions under which speech acts occur are to some extent dependent on culture-specific social constraints (Al-Issa 2003; Huwari and Al-shboul 2015). This determines what the speaker chooses to say to whom and in what circumstances (Al-Issa 2003, as cited in Ghanchi 2012: 55). Therefore, when people from different backgrounds converse, they bring to the conversation certain culturally inherited elements, which influence the interaction (Kasper and Rose 2002; Afzali 2011). Dissimilar communication styles, expectations and interpretations are some of the elements, which affect their communication (Dorcheh and Baharlooie 2016: 152). In the following section, four main issues concerning literature review will be discussed. They are interlanguage pragmatics, requests, transfer and power.

Current Issues

Interlanguage Pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics studies learner-specific pragmatic performance and its relationship to learners' L1 and L2. These studies show that advanced learners' communicative behavior may often move away from L2 conversations and thus cause many cross-cultural misunderstandings (Kwon 2003; Ghavamnia et al. 2012; Dorcheh and Baharlooie 2016). Research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that English second language learners' performance of speech acts is often different from that of native speakers because of limited knowledge of L2's sociolinguistic rules (Norouzian and Eslami 2016).

Requests

According to Alemi and Khanlarzadeh (2016), the speech act of request is a directive in which the speaker wants to make the hearer do something. In addition, requests are face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Ivanovska et al. 2016), which are required both culturally and linguistically. Therefore, a speech act made in one culture using linguistic cues suitable for that particular context might be perceived as inappropriate in another situation.

A successful request requires some degree of linguistic perception that often varies across

languages, thus the transfer of strategies from one language to another may result in inappropriate or non-conventional speech. Most cross-cultural studies have indicated that variation exists in the speech act performance of different speech communities, especially in relation to the level of directness of their request realization. For example, many investigations (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Garcia 1989; Pinto and Raschio 2007) found that English speakers show a preference for a higher number of indirect strategies, which contain wider variety and higher frequency of downgrading.

Transfer

Regarding the transfer of pragmatics, Loutfi (2016: 16) mentions two different types of pragmatic transfer, that is, principally pragmatic linguistic transfer and socio-pragmatic transfer. In this context, the study will be looking at the extent to which variables such as social status, social distance and degree of imposition affect the choice of linguistic realization of particular communicative acts or strategies (that is to say, socio-pragmatic transfer).

On the other side, Yu (2011) makes a distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' transfer. When a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with native form, function and distribution because of influence from the L1, this is a positive transfer from the L1. However, when a learner uses an L2 pragmatic feature with non-native form, function or distribution because of L1 influence, this is negative transfer (Yu 2011: 1128).

Studies have shown that communication breakdown occurs because learners of second language need to pay close attention to its pragmatic aspects, and not only to its formal aspects, such as grammar and vocabulary. However, it is the former aspect that learners frequently seem to ignore in their L2 acquisition (Yu 2011).

Power

Power, in this case, would refer to the power relationship between two interlocutors. One will typically find himself/herself in a number of different types of power relationships. In the first instance, you would have equal power with the person you are talking to (for example, a friend or colleague). In the other two, you would either have more power (for example, as boss, instructor) or less power (for example, employee, student, patient) than the person you were talking

to (Akindele 2008; Salami 2004). According to Azin and Afghari (2015: 439), the bigger the face threat (distance, power, and imposition) the higher the number of the strategies to be used in the use of different speech acts.

Concerning this study, student-lecturer relationship is clearly one of unequal power. In this relationship, the lecturer has power of control (Salami 2004) over the student and the justifiable right to use influence. In other words, one of the members of the dyad has power over the other. Thus, in this type of relationship, the interactants are not equal in status.

Aim of the Paper

The aim of this paper is to investigate whether there are differences in the manner in which requests are made in English by L1 Afrikaans and L1 Sesotho speakers, and whether the speech act of request performed in English by L1 Afrikaans and L1 Sesotho speakers is judged as appropriate by L1 speakers of English.

Research Questions

1. What are the differences in the manner in which L1 Sesotho and L1 Afrikaans speakers make requests when speaking English?
2. How apparent are these differences of the English language requests made by the L1 Sesotho and L1 Afrikaans speakers, as judged by L1 speakers of English?

METHODOLOGY

Participants (Requesters and Raters)

The participants consisted of volunteer, third-year, communication students, who were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, at one of the two universities situated in Motheo district in Free State province. The students were either L1 Afrikaans speakers or L1 Sesotho speakers and both groups speak English as L2. Fifteen Afrikaans speakers and seventeen Sesotho speakers participated in this study. Ten L1 English South African raters were also selected from Free State Province.

Method

The written scenario completion task was produced by the researcher in English for L1 Afrikaans and L1 Sesotho requests. The re-

sponses of the two groups were then judged in terms of formalness, clarity, grammaticality, appropriateness and politeness by L1 English speakers (that is to say, raters). The requests were also analyzed according to CCSARP. The number of times certain categories were used by the two L2 groups as well as the ratings that each group received from the L1 judges were then compared and discussed.

Data Collection

One university campus in the Free State province was used as a source of data collection. A written consent for participation in the study was obtained from all L2 volunteers who meet the requirements. All the volunteers were requested to complete a language background questionnaire. With the aid of three sketched scenarios, two requiring requests and one requiring a denial, the researcher elicited written speech acts. Three specific scenarios were used as follows.

Scenario 1

Most of the third year Communication English class failed their second semester test hopelessly. The implication is that they will never be able to qualify to write a semester examination. It is within the lecturer's discretion to give them an extra activity (that is to say, seminar presentation or assignment). To avoid this problem, students need to approach their lecturer individually.

Scenario 2

The student is enrolled for a third course in communication. A student is unable to attend the following class because he/she has to accompany his/her grandparent to a pension centre. But due to a power failure in their region for the past three days, they are supposed to queue to a nearby mobile pay point. The grandparent cannot walk by himself and stand for long. The student has to request to the lecturer if they could be excused from upcoming class. This is a kind of an emergency problem.

Scenario 3

This scenario also involves the same students in third year communication class. The students have the chance to deny to an instruc-

tion to come to the campus on Sunday to assist the lecturer with allocating the first year marked scripts (that is to say, arrange alphabetically and assist in recording of them).

The second language participants were told that they were some of the specific students, in each scenario and that they got to write down their responses. Each participant then received a code, after which the responses of the L2 participants were compiled into two typed documents, one containing both the L1 Afrikaans-speaking and L1 Sesotho-speaking participant response to scenario 1 and the other likewise for scenario 2. Codes were given in order to maintain participant anonymity, to be free from bias (whether responses were from L1 Afrikaans or L1 Sesotho participants), but still allowing the researcher to trace each request back to the relevant L2 participant later. The responses were then presented to the L1 English raters. The L1 English raters were asked to assess each request by answering five questions of each request made by each L2 participant. The answer for each question should be a *NO* or *YES* response. The requests are rated in terms of their formalness, appropriateness and grammaticality as well as in terms of requesters' politeness. The five questions are as followed:

1. *Is the student formal?*
2. *Is the student polite?*
3. *Is the students' way of requesting appropriate for the situation?*
4. *In terms of grammar, does the student express his/her request clearly?*
5. *Is it clear what the student is intending to request?*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the English requests produced by L1 Afrikaans speaking and L1 Sesotho-speaking students were compared to the first scenario completion task, as well as between the responses of the two groups to the second scenario completion task. Again, comparisons were drawn between each group's responses to the two respective scenarios. Table 1 represents the comparison between Afrikaans L1 requests and L1 Sesotho requests in English in scenario 1 (assignment/seminar presentation).

As it has been observed by Akindele (2008) when she compared the Sesotho address forms in showing respect, in all respects, the L1 Se-

Table 1: Scenario 1 (Extra work request) - Afrikaans L1 requests vs. Sesotho L1 requests in English

<i>Coding category</i>	<i>Coding subcategory</i>	<i>L1 Afrikaans</i>	<i>L1 Sesotho</i>
<i>Alerters</i>	Title	8.5	16
	First name	0	1
	Endearment term	1.1	0
	Total: Number of alerters	9.6	17
<i>Request Perspective</i>	Hearer dominance	9.6	16
	Speaker dominance	6.4	12
<i>Request Strategies</i>	Mood derivable	3.2	0
	Explicit performative	0	3
	Want statement	2.1	1
	Preparatory	6.4	12
	Strong hint	3.2	0
	Mild hint	2.1	1
<i>Syntactic Downgraders</i>	Interrogative	6.4	9
	Negation of a preparatory condition	0	2
	Aspect	1.1	0
	Tense	1.1	1
	Total: Downgraders	8.6	12
<i>Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders</i>	Politeness marker	8.5	15
	Understate	1.1	2
	Downtoner	1.1	0
	Total: Downgraders	10.7	17
<i>Upgraders</i>	Determination marker	1.1	0
	Repetition of request	0	2
	Total: Upgraders	1.1	2
<i>Supportive Moves</i>	Mitigating Supportive Moves	0	0
	Grounder	11.7	5
	Disarmer	0	1
	Promise of reward	1.1	2
	Imposition minimizer	0	1
	Total: Supportive moves	12.8	9

sotho respondents used twice as many alerts, especially titles alerts, compared to L1 Afrikaans respondents (16 vs. 8.5). This view is also shared by Azin and Afghari (2015). For the request view point, although both groups of respondents were assessed as preferring to use hearer dominance, the L1 Sesotho respondents used request with hearer dominance almost twice as often as the L1 Afrikaans participants (16 vs. 9.6). Regarding the type of request strategy used, both groups showed a preference for preparatory request strategies, although the Sesotho respondents used twice as many compared to the Afrikaans respondents used politeness markers, the Sesotho notably used almost twice the number that the Afrikaans respondents used (15 vs. 8.5). Again, Tulgar (2016) and Akindele (2008) shared this result when coming to the use of supportive moves, the Afrikaans respondents (11.7 vs. 5). Table 2 represents a comparison between Sesotho responses to the Afrikaans responses to scenario 2 (absence from class).

Regarding the alerts, differences were observed between the number of Sesotho respon-

dents and the number of Afrikaans respondents who used title alerts. Sesotho respondents used almost five times more titles alerts than Afrikaans respondents (15 vs. 3.6). This observation is supported by Ganchi (2012) and Loutfi (2016) when they find that titles are commonly used in address forms by Sesotho speakers when speaking English, more so than by Afrikaans speakers. This performance pattern was repeated when Sesotho respondents' score was again almost double that of the Afrikaans respondents for the use of hearer dominance as a request perspective (17 vs. 8.7). In the request strategy category, only the Sesotho respondents used explicit performatives, and Afrikaans respondents used neither explicit performatives nor want statements. The Afrikaans L1 respondents did however use more (strong) hints than did the Sesotho L1 respondents (5.3 vs. 1). With regard to the lexical and phrasal upgraders, the Sesotho respondents used politeness markers three times more than the Afrikaans respondents did (12 vs. 3.6). Finally, the Sesotho respondents used double the number of grounders in supportive moves

Table 2: Scenario 2 (Absent from class) - Afrikaans L1 requests vs. Sesotho L1 requests in English

<i>Coding category</i>	<i>Coding subcategory</i>	<i>L1 Afrikaans</i>	<i>L1 Sesotho</i>
<i>Alerters</i>	Title	3.6	15
	First name	0	1
	Endearment term	0	0
	Total: Number of alerters	3.6	16
<i>Request Perspective</i>	Hearer dominance	8.7	17
	Speaker dominance	4.9	1
<i>Request Strategies</i>	Mood derivable	0	1
	Explicit performative	0	5
	Want statement	0	1
	Preparatory	7.1	9
	Strong hint	5.3	1
	Mild hint	0	0
<i>Syntactic Downgraders</i>	Interrogative	7.3	9
	Negation of a preparatory condition	0	0
	Aspect	0	0
	Tense	0	0
	Total: Downgraders	7.3	9
<i>Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders</i>	Politeness marker	3.6	12
	Understate	0	0
	Downtoner	0	0
	Total: Downgraders	3.6	12
<i>Upgraders</i>	Determination marker	0	0
	Repetition of request	0	1
	Total: Upgraders	0	1
<i>Supportive Moves</i>	Mitigating Supportive Moves	0	0
	Grounders	8.5	17
	Disarmer	0	0
	Promise of reward	0	2
	Imposition minimizer	0	0
	Total: Supportive moves	8.5	19

than Afrikaans respondents (17 vs. 8.5). A possible reason for the high incidence of use of politeness markers by Sesotho speakers could be an attempt to reduce the threat in the request, even in low imposition situations. Table 3 shows the intragroup comparison of the responses to the two scenarios (that is to say, the scores provided in both Tables 1 and 2 are collated in order to allow easy comparison across language groups as well as across imposition level).

The Sesotho speakers used notably more alerts (specifically titles when addressing the lecturer) than Afrikaans respondents did, in both scenarios 1 and 2. The Sesotho respondents used slightly more politeness markers in the first scenario (the one of high imposition) than in the second scenario (of low imposition). The Afrikaans respondents, by contrast, used almost double the number of politeness markers in response in to scenario 1 compared to scenario 2, which could mean that Afrikaans respondents felt the need to be more polite in high imposition situations. But for the two scenarios combined,

the Sesotho respondents still used more than double the number of politeness markers than the Afrikaans speakers did. The similarity noted between the two groups is that both the Sesotho and the Afrikaans respondents used more politeness markers in scenario 1 (which involved a high imposition situation) than in scenario 2 (which was a low imposition scenario).

With regards to the grounders, more than triple of the grounders were used by Sesotho respondents in response to the second scenario. This shows that they felt the need to use more excuses in the low imposition scenario in comparison to scenario 1, which involved a high imposition situation. By contrast, Afrikaans respondents used a high number of grounders in response to scenario 1 compared to scenario 2. This implies that Afrikaans respondents felt the need to offer more excuses in the high imposition situations than in the low imposition situations.

Regarding the raters' rating of the requests made by the two groups, a summary of raters' ratings for each criterion will be presented sepa-

Table 3: Scenario 1, 2 and 1&2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

Coding category	Coding subcategory	Afrikaans L1			Sesotho L1		
		Scenario 1 (n= 15)	Scenario 1 (n= 15)	Scenarios 1 and 2 combined (n= 30)	Scenario 1 (n= 17)	Scenario 1 (n= 17)	Scenarios 1 and 2 combined (n= 34)
<i>Alerters</i>	Title	8.5	3.6	12.1	16	15	31
	First name	0	0	0	1	1	2
	Endearment term	1.1	0	1.1	0	0	0
	Total: Number of alerters	9.6	3.6	13.2	17	16	33
<i>Request Perspective</i>	Hearer dominance	9.6	8.7	18.3	16	17	33
<i>Request</i>	Speaker dominance	6.4	4.9	11.3	12	1	13
<i>Strategies</i>	Mood derivable	3.2	0	3.2	0	1	1
	Explicit performative	0	0	0	3	5	8
	Want statement	2.1	0	2.1	1	1	2
	Preparatory	6.4	7.3	13.7	12	9	21
	Strong hint	3.2	5.3	8.5	0	1	1
	Mild hint	2.1	0	2.1	1	0	1
	Interrogative	6.4	7.3	13.7	9	9	18
<i>Syntactic Downgraders</i>	Negation of a preparatory condition	0	0	0	2	0	2
	Aspect	1.1	0	1.1	0	0	0
	Tense	1.1	0	1.1	1	0	1
	Total: Downgraders	8.6	7.3	15.9	12	9	21
<i>Lexical and Phrasal Downgraders</i>	Politeness marker	8.5	3.6	12.1	15	12	27
	Understate	1.1	0	1.1	2	0	2
<i>Upgraders</i>	Total: Syntactic Downgraders	10.7	3.6	14.3	17	12	29
	Determination marker	1.1	0	1.1	0	0	0
	Repetition of request	0	0	0	2	1	3
<i>Supportive Moves</i>	Total: Upgraders	1.1	0	1.1	2	1	3
	Mitigating Supportive Moves	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Grounder	11.7	8.5	20.2	5	17	22
	Disarmer	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Promise of reward	1.1	0	1.1	2	2	4
	Imposition minimizer	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total: Supportive moves	12.8	8.5	21.3	9	19	28	

rately in the Table 4. The scores given reflect the answers of the raters to the above YES or NO questions. A 'yes' answer was awarded '1' and a 'no' answer was awarded '0'. The rating was basically dependent on the five 'yes' or 'no' questions for each request made by each L2 respondents. Table 4 represents the ratings of politeness for both scenarios 1 and 2, and both combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English.

Table 4 shows that the Sesotho speakers' requests on the whole were not considered more polite by the raters than the Afrikaans speakers' requests (239.7 vs. 232.4), even though the Sesotho respondents used more politeness markers for both requests as compared to the Afrikaans respondents. Nevertheless, the Afrikaans

respondents were considered less polite in higher imposition situations than in low imposition situations, while the opposite held for the Se-

Table 4: Adjusted ratings of POLITENESS for Scenario 1, 2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

	Scenario 1 (high imposition)	Scenario 2 (low imposition)	Total (for scenario 1 and 2 combined)
Afrikaans L1 respondents	112.2	120.2	232.4
Sesotho L1 respondents	127.5	122.0	239.7

sotho speakers. However, the use of extra politeness markers may be deemed by L1 speakers of English to comprise an overuse of politeness markers, and that may be why Sesotho requests were rated slightly more polite but less appropriate than the Afrikaans requests. Table 5 represent the ratings for formality for both scenario 1,2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English.

Table 5: Adjusted ratings of FORMALNESS for Scenario 1, 2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

	<i>Scenario 1 (high imposition)</i>	<i>Scenario 2 (low imposition)</i>	<i>Total (for scenario 1 and 2 combined)</i>
Afrikaans L1 respondents	68	93.5	161.5
Sesotho L1 respondents	58.5	80	138.5

The Afrikaans respondents were rated as more formal than the Sesotho respondents (161.5 vs. 138.5). Afrikaans speakers were rated as more formal than Sesotho speakers. Both language groups were judged to be less formal in their formulations of high imposition requests than in their formulations of low imposition requests. The reason for this latter finding is not clear.

Table 6: Adjusted ratings of APPROPRIATENESS for Scenario 1, 2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

	<i>Scenario 1 (high imposition)</i>	<i>Scenario 2 (low imposition)</i>	<i>Total (for scenario 1 and 2 combined)</i>
Afrikaans L1 respondents	54.4	96	150
Sesotho L1 respondents	41.5	87	128.5

In scenario 1, the raters (both young and old) found the Afrikaans respondents' requests to be more appropriate than those of the Sesotho respondents. However, raters found that more appropriate requests were made by both Afrikaans and Sesotho respondents (the one of

low imposition) than in the first request, which involved a high imposition situation. Generally, the Afrikaans respondents' requests were rated as being more appropriate than those of the Sesotho respondents (150.3 vs. 128.5). As the ratings for the two groups' requests were more or less the same for clarity (which could be said to be one of the necessary requirements for the fulfillment of felicity conditions; see below), it is not clear why the Sesotho speakers' requests were deemed less appropriate, but one possible reason could be a perceived overuse (compared to the Afrikaans speakers) of politeness markers, specifically in low imposition requests (Table 6).

Regarding grammaticality ratings, Table 7 shows that the Afrikaans respondents' requests were rated as slightly more grammatically correct than those of the Sesotho respondents (203.2 vs. 193.5). This could be another reason why the Sesotho speakers' requests were considered less appropriate than the Afrikaans speakers' by the judges.

Table 7: Adjusted ratings of GRAMMATICALITY for Scenario 1, 2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

	<i>Scenario 1 (high imposition)</i>	<i>Scenario 2 (low imposition)</i>	<i>Total (for scenario 1 and 2 combined)</i>
Afrikaans L1 respondents	96.4	106.8	203.2
Sesotho L1 respondents	110.5	83	193.5

Table 8 represents the ratings of clarity on intended meaning for scenarios 1 and 2, and 1

Table 8: Adjusted ratings of CLARITY OF THE INTENDED MEANING for Scenario 1, 2 and 1 and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English

	<i>Scenario 1 (high imposition)</i>	<i>Scenario 2 (low imposition)</i>	<i>Total (for scenario 1 and 2 combined)</i>
Afrikaans L1 respondents	129.2	126.3	255.5
Sesotho L1 respondents	132.8	129	261.8

and 2 combined for Afrikaans L1 requests versus Sesotho L1 requests in English.

In terms of the clarity of the intended meaning of requests, the Sesotho respondents' requests were rated rather higher than were the requests formulated by the Afrikaans respondents (261.8 vs. 255.5). Nevertheless, this difference is not notable in the case of either the first or second scenario. According to Ivanovska et al. (2016: 371), Cho and Lee (2016) proposed two rules that determine the level of "pragmatic appropriateness of utterances". They are for the idea that utterances should be clear and polite. As far as clarity is concerned, there were no significant differences between the two language groups, as the raters gave similar ratings on the question as to whether it was clear for what the student intended asking.

CONCLUSION

There are noticeable differences in the manner in which Afrikaans and Sesotho speakers do requests in English. The Sesotho speakers utilized more politeness markers and more alerts than Afrikaans speakers. Afrikaans and Sesotho speakers varied in their replies to low and high imposition circumstances. The Afrikaans speakers used few grounders in the low imposition request whereas Sesotho respondents' requests showed that they used more grounders in the low imposition request than the high imposition request.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are different norms and levels of indirectness in different cultures and societies. This simply means that L2 learners need to be taught how to code their intentions in L2. In most cases, it is incorrect to assume that categories across two languages are the same, even if no traceable studies conducted on request behaviors in Sesotho or in Afrikaans, it became difficult to assess whether the difference in culture associated with the two languages allowed for positive transfer of pragmatic rules from Afrikaans to English than from Sesotho to English. This simply implies that a comparison between a European origin based language with an African based language will have a vivid intercultural miscommunication result. This is why the L1 English raters seemed to be on the side of Afrikaans L1 respondents.

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