
Desperately Seeking Reassurance: Analysing Requestive Hint Miscommunication in an Email Exchange

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Abstract

This article seeks to determine reasons for the miscommunication of a requestive hint within an authentic email exchange between two native speakers. It includes the analysis of the interaction from the perspectives of i) speech act theory, ii) implicature, relevance, and prior email history between the two interlocutors, and iii) politeness.

1. Introduction

By providing a quick, cheap and efficient means of communicating with family, friends, contacts and colleagues regardless of geographical boundaries and time constraints, email has transformed the way we communicate (Suler, 2003; Rainey, 2004; Waldvogel, 2002). As an asynchronous medium, composers can take the time to carefully craft a message which contains most if not all of the features of traditional snail mail text. More often than not, however, to facilitate “speed of transmission email writers think in speech-mode” (Grosvenor, 1998), utilizing more informal, immediate, unplanned and fragmented syntactic and semantic choices to encode their messages and produce written texts which share many of the characteristics of spoken language. Email communication can also support near-synchronous interaction in situations where senders become aware of the online presence of recipients via almost-instant responses to sent-messages resulting in the likely increase of speed, brevity, informality and spontaneity of language used in the immediate reply. Despite being fast and convenient, email is devoid of the many nonverbal cues (tone, pitch, prosody, gaze, facial expressions and gesture) which can aid communication between interlocutors and email often reduces interaction to the exchange of “minimalist” (Waldvogel, 2002, p.51) messages which may assume a great deal from the recipient in the decoding process. Thus, there is a great potential for miscommunication between the intention of the sender and the understanding of an email message by its recipient (Kruger, Epley, Parker & Ng, 2005; Rainey, 2004; Waldvogel, 2002).

This article seeks to determine reasons for the miscommunication of a requestive hint within

an authentic email exchange between two native speakers. It includes the analysis of the interaction from the perspectives of i) speech act theory, ii) implicature, relevance, and prior email history between the interlocutors, and iii) politeness.

2. Background context

2.1 The interlocutors:

John (a pseudonym), a new distance doctoral student at 'B' university, has been in regular email contact with his friend, Steve (a pseudonym) who is a second-year student on the same Applied Linguistics course. The interlocutors met while undertaking a distance learning Master's degree with 'A' university. Whilst John was 'senior' to Steve at the first time of meeting in the respect of having nearly completed the Master's degree, the new course at 'B' university has reversed this situation with John now being his 'junior'.

2.2 The email exchange:

The email thread has continued between the interlocutors over a number of exchanges with regards to the 'B' university course. Being a common practice amongst course participants at 'A' university, Steve has agreed to an earlier request and sent John his assignment to help him gain a perspective on the requirements of essay writing for the particular course module. John has then requested to know the grade Steve received for the piece of work:

Email 1:

From: Steve

Date: Thursday, August 17, 2006 6:48 AM

To: John

- 1] Hi John,
- 2] I think that was my best scoring assignment actually -
- 3] 85 (distinction).
- 4] I remember reading somewhere that we need an average
- 5] of credit to advance — you'll be able to do that OK. I
- 6] got lower grades than you with A university (Bs) but had
- 7] mainly distinctions with B university. This might change
- 8] soon though — assignments are getting harder!
- 9] I'm writing one now — can I send it to you sometime
- 10] early next week? The deadline is ages away - but I

11] want to knock one on the head during the holidays.

12] all the best

13] Steve

(Steve, personal communication, August 17, 2006)

Email 2:

From: John

Date: Thursday, August 17, 2006 6:51 AM

To: Steve

1] Steve,

2] Thanks for the info!!

3] Sure — I also have one due in 2 weeks which I haven't started yet!!

4] John.

(John, personal communication, August 17, 2006)

Email 3:

From: Steve

Date: Thursday, August 17, 2006 6:52 AM

To: John

1] yep - send it over.

(Steve, personal communication, August 17, 2006)

2.3 The miscommunication:

In email 2 (line 3), John uses a requestive hint with the intention of seeking reassurance from the more experienced Steve that two weeks is indeed enough time in which to complete an assignment. However, in the second-pair part of the request-acceptance adjacency pair (email 3 - line 1), it becomes clear that Steve has misinterpreted the hint as being the same request he himself has made in email 1 (lines 9-11), namely that of having the completed assignment read through and commented on by a fellow course participant.

3. Analysis

3.1 The utterance is successfully understood as being an indirect request

Along with the literal meaning or locutionary force, the utterance in email 2 (line 3) performs

a number of different illocutionary acts. Firstly, the item “*sure*” functions as a commissive that pledges compliance to Steve’s prior implied request to read and provide feedback on his assignment (Email 1—Lines 9-10). The second part of the utterance, “*I also have one due in 2 weeks,*” functions to assert the fact that the writer is in a similar situation to Steve of having to write an assignment within a certain timeframe and “*I haven’t started yet!!*” that this assignment is yet to be started. More importantly, however, the assertive is intended by the writer and understood by the recipient to perform the function of a non-conventional indirect request (Blum-Kulka, 1987). The recipient’s understanding of this illocutionary intent occurs even though the requestive hint itself is opaque containing neither reference to Steve (for example: *Could you. . .?*) nor statement of a future act which is desired of him (John’s intention —*Tell me whether two weeks is long enough to complete an assignment / Steve’s interpretation - Read and provide feedback on my assignment as well*). Asher and Lascarides (2001) argue that indirect speech acts: “must be understood relationally, because successfully performing them is logically dependent on the content of an antecedent utterance (p.188). In email 2 (line 3) the use of the additive particle “*also*” by John anaphorically links to the parallel situation of assignment writing asserted by Steve as his pre-request move in email 1 (line 9) — “*I’m writing one now*” and the pronoun “*one*” (email 2 — line 3) repeats Steve’s anaphoric reference (line 9) to the continued topic of “*assignments*” (email 1 — line 8). In this respect, the position of the utterance (email 2 - line 3) within the ongoing email exchange (*Indirect request* → *Acceptance* → ***Hint / Implied Counter Request*** → *Acceptance*) helps to constrain Steve’s understanding of it functioning as a request.

3.2 The intended perlocutionary effect of the requestive hint is unsuccessful

Although understood as an indirect request, the hint achieves a different perlocutionary effect than intended by the writer which is signalled in the completion of the request-acceptance adjacency pair in email 3 (line 1) in which Steve accepts the request “*yep*”, but then directs John to send “*it*” (the implied completed assignment) to him rather than providing the sought reassurance:

Conventionally Indirect Request

(Steve wants and attempts to get John to do x):

Steve: *can I send it to you sometime early next week?*

Acceptance

(John intends and places himself under obligation to do x):

John: *Sure —*

Hint / Implied Counter Request

(Although under obligation to do x, John now desires Steve to do y):

I also have one due in 2 weeks which I haven't started yet!!

Acceptance

(Steve intends and places himself under obligation to do x not y):

Steve: yep — send it over

There are a number of possible reasons for Steve's interpretation of the requestive hint:

1] Assuming that the interlocutors are operating under the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), that the utterance in email 2 (line 3) is optimally relevant (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), and recognising that the maxim of quantity is being flouted by John, in terms of being less informative than required in order to indirectly request a future action of the recipient (a flout which Steve has already made use of in email 1 — lines 9-10), Steve seeks to infer John's intent in generating the implicature. However, as the request in email 2 (line 3) is framed non-conventionally, it creates a range of different plausible interpretations of its relevance in the ongoing email exchange (Blum-Kulka, 1987). It can be interpreted as an assertion (literal meaning), an assertion being used as a directive to request feedback from the recipient on the writer's assignment (implied meaning) or reassurance from the recipient (implied meaning), or even as an expressive to complain about the strictness of the deadline (implied meaning). Since the indirectness of the utterance increases the cost of processing for the recipient as outweighed to the benefit of its successful decoding, Steve seeks to find the quickest route to its implicit relevance. Thus, both contextually and co-textually, the interpretation which requires the least amount of processing is that the writer wishes the reciprocal action of the request Steve has made in email 1:

Background knowledge context: On the Master's degree, both interlocutors have the experience of providing assignment feedback to course participants.

Co-textual context:

- a) Steve's implied request — "*Can I send it to you sometime early next week?*"
- b) Anaphoric links to prior request — "*also*", "*one*" seem to imply a similar request is being made of the recipient.

Most relevant interpretation: “*I also have one due in 2 weeks*” — If John has agreed to check Steve’s assignment, reciprocation of the act is to be expected.

2] Weigand (1999) states: “any difference in the communicative worlds of the interlocutors may bring about divergent understandings” (p.766). In a later email (Appendix 1) explaining his interpretation of the requestive hint, Steve stated that he had approached the decoding process with the overriding assumption of interlocutor mutual concern for providing assignment feedback and due to having greater experience on the course had “filtered out” (Steve, Personal communication, August 19, 2006) the time management concerns of the new student, John.

3] The speed of the email exchange (Email 2 — 6:51 AM / Email 3 — 6.52 AM) contributed to a further reduction in processing time and selection of the interpretation requiring the least effort (Appendix 1).

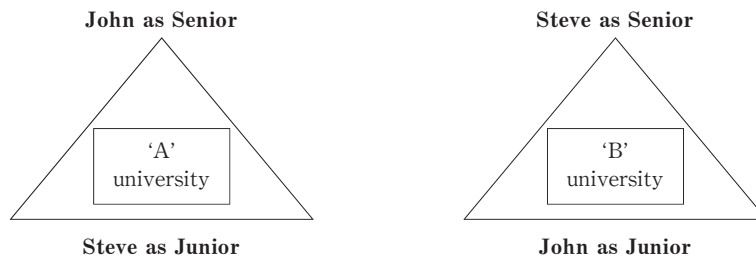
4] High frequency usage of requestive hints between regular interlocutors can facilitate their interpretation (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999; Zagura, 2006). However, in previous emails between John and Steve, John has tended to choose more conventionally indirect (6 examples) or direct forms (1 example) when making requests (Appendix 2).

5] Emoticons or exaggerated punctuation marks are often used in email discourse to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues. Exclamation marks, for example, can be used for emphasis or to lighten the mood of the message (Suler, 2003). Although the double exclamation marks in email 2 (line 3) were used to subtly imply a sense of concern regarding the assignment deadline (“*I haven’t started yet!!*”), they were too individualistic and ambiguous to affect the dominant interpretation.

3.3 The requestive hint is framed to maintain face at the expense of clarity

As potential face-threatening acts (FTAs), requests are often framed indirectly to increase politeness, help maintain interlocutor ‘face’ and minimize the imposition of the action desired of the recipient. In email 1 (lines 9-10), Steve uses the conventionally indirect “*Can I..?*” form to make his request “on record, with redressive action” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.69) to attend to and preserve the negative ‘face’ of John (and his desire to be free from any imposition — Brown & Levinson, 1987) by seeking permission to perform the act of sending the assignment with the fairly clear implication that by doing so, John will read through it and provide him with feedback.

However, by choosing to go “off record” (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and use a hint in email 2 (line 3), John risks the danger of a request which may lack pragmatic clarity (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999). Why not then strive for a greater balance between clarity and politeness when making a request? Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) state: “the more the speaker risks loss of face by performing a request, the more indirect the strategy he or she will use” (p. 1174). In the social role of university course participant, the asymmetric relationship or ‘relative power’ between John and Steve has been reversed:



Thus, John’s request for reassurance from Steve and its implied admittance of lack of confidence is an act which threatens John’s positive ‘face’ (the need to be respected as a fellow academic) and influences the choice of ‘off-record’ strategy when performing the FTA (Fraser, 1990). By using a requestive hint, John not only generates an implicature and places a greater onus on Steve to arrive at a relevant interpretation but creates a situation whereby the implied meaning can be denied, if needed, and the writer’s ‘face’ saved. For example:

1. Hint:

I also have one due in 2 weeks which I haven’t started yet!!

2. Possible face-threatening response:

Stop worrying, you idiot!

3. Cancellability of implicature:

I didn’t mean that, I meant. . .

Conclusion

Mimicking the more spontaneous features of spoken language and yet lacking important nonverbal cues and the ability to gain immediate feedback on whether the decoding process has been successful (Rainey, 2000), the potential for interlocutor miscommunication when performing non-conventional indirect speech acts via email is greatly enhanced. The use of a more conventional indirect request or interrogative in email 2 (line 3) by the writer:

I also have one due in 2 weeks which I haven’t started yet!! Do you think I have enough time?

may not have “lengthened the inferential path beyond reasonable limits” (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 141) and may have resulted in reassurance being given by the recipient. Thus, it is important for writers to consider more carefully the cost to ‘face’ versus the benefit of having a request understood when composing emails. Alternatively, if miscommunication prevails, they can always resort to using the telephone.

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Appendix one

From: Steve

Date: Saturday, August 19, 2006 10:37 AM

To: John

- 1] Hi John,
- 2] I think it's because I read your email very quickly,
- 3] and I'd been thinking how good it will be to give
- 4] feedback to each other on assignments.

- 5] Also, on the discussion threads with 'B' university I've read
- 6] people writing many times that they have two
- 7] assignments due in only 1 week etc - so it might have
- 8] just got filtered out - I didn't see any need to reply
- 9] to it.
- 10] So I was just focused really on the idea of us helping
- 11] each other on feedback content rather than any thought
- 12] to how you'll do time-management. I know that you'll
- 13] have no problems getting the essay done in time -
- 14] especially because you're on holiday.

(Steve, personal communication, August 19, 2006)

Appendix 2

Examples of previous email requests made by John to Steve:

1. Conventionally indirect requests:

- 1] "Can I be cheeky and ask what you got for it?"
(John, personal communication, August 16, 2006)
- 2] "I was wondering if I could take a peek at what you wrote for the module assignment."
(John, personal communication, August 10, 2006)
- 3] "Can you give me some more info about Nagano?"
(John, personal communication, January 17, 2006)
- 4] "Can you send a ref. & page no. when it is published so I can update the old CV?"
(John, personal communication, October 22, 2005)
- 5] "Can I just check that we're meeting at the station?"
(John, personal communication, August 26, 2005)
- 6] "Can you remind me of the dates again for the meeting?"
(John, personal communication, July 4, 2005)

2. Direct requests:

- 1] "Keep me in the loop and if I don't make it, I'll see you at the conference"
(John, personal communication, June 6, 2005)

