Book review

Flöck, Ilka. 2016. *Requests in American and British English. A contrastive multi-method analysis*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 264.

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This innovative study is divided into six chapters, where Ilka Flöck focuses on a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the realization of requests (and their responses) in what she terms "the two national varieties of English" – *i.e.* British and American. Furthermore, this quantitative-qualitative comparison relies on two different methodological tools: discourse completion tests (DCTs henceforth) and naturally occurring informal conversations. The contrast between these two data-gathering methods will also allow the author to find out whether the same speech act differs or not depending on the methodology employed to collect the data. By approaching the issue from this perspective, the author thus establishes three clear niches in the literature concerning requests, even if this speech act has been one of the most frequently studied (if not the most). The author starts by stating that she intends to look into requests and also their answers. Whilst it is true that research on requests has mostly focused on the initiating act and largely neglected its corresponding response move, this might have been motivated by the fact that responses to requests are not necessarily verbal and can often be realised by non-verbal means – *i.e.* simply by carrying out the requested action. Secondly, she intends to contrast two variables of the same language rather than comparing English and other languages. This, however, raises a crucial question. What exactly can be defined as the British or the American varieties? Furthermore, do these varieties differ in comparison with other dialectal or regional ones in the realization of requests and their responses? Finally, her study will contribute to test the validity of different data-gathering methods. This is probably the most helpful contribution given than, as the author claims herself on pages 2–3 of the book, there are but a handful of studies comparing the results in speech act realization obtained by different methodologies. The chapter ends by outlining the rest of the book, which is clearly structured and follows a smooth line of argumentation.

Chapter 2 is divided into four main sections. In the first subsection, the author revises the speech act of requests from three interrelated approaches: pragmatics theories, politeness and conversation analysis. She departs from the well-known perspective that there are two main paradigms in pragmatics: speaker-created meaning (followed by hearer's

inferring such a meaning) versus the co-construction of meaning both by speakers and listeners. This second view seems to have become increasingly accepted in more recent years, as supported by Edda Weigand (2010), who even describes interaction as a dialogic game where both players (speaker and listener) play a crucial role. She then moves on to revising Austin's classic approach to speech acts but confronting it with more recent criticism such as that Sbisà (2013), who fine-grains the definition of the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts before comprehensively revising Searle's re-elaboration of Austin's theories, with a clear focus on the speaker's intention (or illocutionary act). Interestingly, the author agrees with Sbisà's (2002, 2006) argument that Searle's approach mainly serves to limiting Austin's initial claims by equating speech acts with just the illocutionary force and hence dispatching with the hearer's role in the equation by diminishing the importance of the perlocutionary effect together with basing his well-known taxonomy on rigid categories rather than on a prototype-approach (as Austin intuitively suggested). Furthermore, her comprehensive review includes other less known (but useful) speech act taxonomies such as Hindelang's (1978) and his distinction between binding and non-binding directive speech acts or Walker's (2013) revision of requests and their linguistic realizations. In the same vein, Flöck revises in the second section both Grice's cooperative principle and the major classic politeness theories; namely, Lakoff (1973); Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983), together with the main critiques directed at them (*e.g.* Chen 1993; Fraser 1990; Locher & Watts 2005; Watts 2003, amongst others) and illustrated with clear examples from her own datasets before moving on to the revision of classic conversation analysis, with special emphasis on the notion of pre-request, as crucial for the current study. All in all, the first subsection in this second chapter provides an extremely comprehensive overview of classic speech act theory (and its drawbacks) extremely useful for, say, students of pragmatics or pragmaticians "on the make" as well as scholars researching the specific speech act of requests.

In the second sub-section of chapter 2, the author focuses on a wide range of data-gathering methods in speech act research, by clearly describing each of them together with its advantages and drawbacks, as well as their possible influence on the type of results obtained, in a similar vein to Golato (2005). Despite its clarity and doubtless usefulness, it would have seemed more preferable if this section had preceded the third chapter, where the author describes her own methodology in detail since it would have contributed to justify her choices regarding the gathering of her own datasets. Further, on page 34, the author offers a preliminary description of requests, which would justify for the author to carry on to the last section of the chapter (2.4), where Flöck proceeds to define requests. Given that the focus of the whole book is on requests, a seemingly more feasible option might have been to start by defining this speech act before actually

providing a detailed overview of the vast amount of research that has previously focused upon it.

Responses to requests are then dealt with. This is probably one of the most interesting sections in the chapter, since responses to requests have often been neglected (despite a few exceptions). Particularly interesting is the claim, following Clark and Schunk (1980), that responses that attend to both literal and intended meaning are consistently perceived by other interlocutors as being more polite. However, Flöck rightly points out to the fact that these studies failed to consider contextual constraints and their results should hence be cautiously considered. Another thought-provoking perspective is regarding non-compliance responses and the different strategies used to signal it together with the emphasis on interrelating discourse and pragmatics rather than distancing both as independent fields of study. The second chapter closes with a detailed definition of requests and their prototypical features. While it is understandable that the author exposes prior considerations before reaching this working definition, the reader would have welcomed a prior (even if sketchy) definition of requests at the beginning of the chapter.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in the current study. The data collection has been carefully designed to ensure comparability amongst the four datasets under scrutiny. Thus, the author resorts to four different corpora: two pre-existing conversational corpora (the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English and the British component of the International Corpus of English) and two collections of DCTs (for American and British English) compiled by herself. The author also outlines the problems pragmatics researchers may encounter when using ready-made corpora (*e.g.* lack of demographic information on the speakers or the difficulties to automatically search for particular forms that are susceptible of realizing a determined illocutionary act), justifying her choice of these data sets over others available. She also points out that she has only considered those requests that were followed by the hearer's uptake of the initiating move as a request, in a conversation analysis approach. In this respect, however, it might be interesting for future research to go back to those "deviant" cases where interlocutors have seemingly failed to correctly interpret the illocutionary force of the request so as to ascertain what might have triggered such a failure. A second methodological weakness to consider is the difference in age, since the DCT informants are reported to be between 18 and 25 years old while the non-elicited datasets include two age spans, one of which does not coincide with that of the DCTs (*i.e.* 17–25 and 26–45 versus 18–25). This difference might also have influenced the results, since two different generations are represented as opposed to only one in the DCTs, as the author admits herself while acknowledging the discrepancy is moderate and that age has not been investigated as

an independent variable. Once again, looking into the possible effects of age on the production of requests (and their corresponding responses) might open up an interesting avenue for future research. The chapter ends with an overview of the coding categories used in the analysis. Flöck rightly argues against the distinction between pre-requests and requests 'proper' and in favour of distinguishing between head acts and modification strategies, in line with the classic study by Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989). Flöck's taxonomy provides a systematic and comprehensive ready-made set of categories, very useful for analysing requests, not only in English and its varieties but also in other languages. Likewise, her categorization of modification strategies is quite innovative thanks to the inclusion not only of mitigating strategies but also of aggravating ones, more in line with recent approaches to relational work (*cf.* Watts 2003; Locher & Watts 2005), illustrating all of them with examples. However, an isolated few of such examples seem not to reflect exactly the strategy under discussion, as in the case of internal emphatic addition (*cf.* page 112).

In the fourth chapter, the author offers a very comprehensive quantitative analysis of both varieties in informal conversations, pointing out to slight – albeit statistically non-significant – differences between both. Some of the most interesting and unexpected results are related to the preference of the imperative as a sentence type, against the expectation of the interrogative mood; the high level of directness, which also contradicts prior studies; the frequent use of positive face-work strategies to mitigate the request, thus contradicting Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that, as acts threatening the hearer's negative face, requests are expected to be modified by negative face-work strategies; and the relatively high use of aggravating modification strategies, with negative face aggravation slightly more preferred in American English. She concludes that, despite the absence of statistically significant differences, British speakers still seem more prone to indirectness.

One of the most interesting sections in this chapter is section 4.5, devoted to responses to requests. Flöck's findings (even if the difference is significant to a low point) show an unexpected preference for verbal responses over non-verbal ones, especially amongst British speakers, which she argues to be an indication of more face-work in their request-response pairs. She then provides a very complete taxonomy of both compliance and non-compliance response strategies. In general terms, no big differences can be observed between the two varieties under scrutiny but, as the author argues, they are not wholly identical either, which might be pointing to deeper cultural patterns. One of the assets is table 31 (p. 167), where the author lists the main differences between both varieties. However, this poses the question of why carry out a statistical analysis to eventually argue that the boundaries are arbitrary. In a sense, it gives the impression that

the author is slightly forcing results to prove her hypothesis that both varieties would behave differently.

Chapter 5 is probably the most appealing in the book and largely contributes to the debate on how different methods of data collection may bias results. Flöck analyses over 1,000 cases to find out whether or not naturally occurring requests resemble elicited ones, both structurally and cross-culturally. As clearly and systematically shown by her results, DCTs render very different results from those actually occurring in natural conversations. Just to give a few examples, while the imperative is the most frequently employed sentence type in natural conversation, the DCT informants mainly opt for the interrogative type; the DCT results present over simplistic realizations in contrast with those occurring in natural conversations, with strategies that are either overrepresented or even absent from natural language. This serves to clearly advocate in favour of using naturally produced language rather than DCTs in pragmatics research, even if the latter are more practical to gather large amounts of data in shorter periods of time. Furthermore, DCTs reflect more pronounced cross-cultural differences that those really existing, reinforcing the argument that "DCTs do not mirror authentic language use reliably" (Flöck 2016, 209) and should hence be abandoned in pragmatics research.

In this respect, the author raises two thought-provoking questions. If DCTs have been shown to reflect authentic language use so poorly, why are they still overwhelmingly used? And, in my opinion, and still even more interestingly, why does participants' actual language use differ so drastically from what they think they (should) do? I agree with the author that DCTs cannot be considered even in metapragmatic research since "this knowledge does not correspond to actual language use which has brought it into existence in the first place [which makes] this assumption unintuitive" (*ibid.*, 221). The chapter closes with an insightful set of well-supported reasons why DCTs are unreliable and should be either substituted by other data-gathering instruments. In my opinion, this section (5.5) is extremely advisable reading for researchers on pragmatics.

Finally, Chapter 6 recapitulates in a clear and comprehensive way the most central findings. Furthermore, the author suggests some future perspectives for speech act-based research, pointing to the need to develop large-scale corpora suitable for the study of speech acts and other pragmatic phenomena. As a pragmatics researcher, I fully subscribe to her claim.

Overall, Flöck's book is a thought-provoking, well-structured and systematic work, highly recommendable to all researchers interested in requests, cross-cultural pragmatics and data gathering instruments. Her study will surely contribute to a deeper understanding of these three aspects by offering new insights to all of them.

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