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GENDER AND POLITENESS: Spanish and British Undergraduates' Perceptions of Appropriate Requests

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1. Introduction

The cross-cultural pragmatics literature has paid considerable attention to the various strategies that speakers deploy when performing the speech act of requesting. This is because the degree of imposition that making a request places upon one's interlocutor(s) has been seen to be subject to cross-gender and cross-linguistic/cultural variation in terms of use and interpretation. To our knowledge, however, there are virtually no contrastive studies on Peninsular Spanish and British English within this field. Wanting to address this, and whilst acknowledging the limitations of discourse completion tests (DCTs), we employed one such test as a suitable tool for obtaining a large amount of data from male and female Spanish and British undergraduates (aged 19-25). The data was analyzed and treated not as authentic speech/discourse but as reflecting informants' perceptions and beliefs about appropriate linguistic behaviour in the performance of requests in different situations controlled for power and social distance. Thus, ours is a pragmatic approach that attempts to account for these perceptions and beliefs, which are included in the "assumptions about social roles, positions, rights and obligations [that] are part of the (usually unstated) background knowledge that is routinely brought to bear on the interpretation of utterances" (Cameron 1998: 445)¹.

2. Requests, politeness and gender

¹ We must bear in mind that 'interpretation' precedes and follows utterance production in interaction. (Sperber 1996)

A multitude of studies on language and gender have been devoted to identifying, and trying to explain, differences in the speech styles of men and women (see Talbot 1998 for a useful survey). One of the main differences has been found in the area of linguistic politeness. In one of the most comprehensive bodies of evidence to date, Holmes (1995) characterises women's speech as more polite than men's. Such a characterisation stems from her own and others' work (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975; Fishman 1978, 1980; Tannen 1984, 1990) on language and gender over the past three decades, according to which women are more likely than men to express positive politeness and to use mitigating strategies to avoid or minimise threatening their interlocutors' face. For example, women tend to interrupt less in conversation and "to be more attentive listeners, concerned to ensure others get a chance to contribute" than men (Holmes 1995: 67). They also interpret and use certain speech acts differently to men. For instance, not only do women use more apologies than men but their apologies serve more often than men's "as remedies for space and talk offences – areas of interaction where women are particularly vulnerable and where they may have developed a greater sensitivity" (Holmes 1995: 185).

While not necessarily disagreeing with the above type of findings, we do not support the essentialist view behind them. Instead, and in line with recent social constructionist research on gender (e.g. Cameron 1998; Bucholtz 1999; Mills 2002), we acknowledge the benefits of a more flexible approach to the study of gender and linguistic politeness. Such an approach both avoids oversimplifications resulting from viewing men and women as dichotomous and homogenous groups and regards gender and linguistic politeness as constructs that interact in complex ways with factors such as culture, age, race, and specific communities of practice (CofP).

Subsequently, our study of requesting behaviour by British and Spanish male and female undergraduates accounts for the role of situational context, power relations and social distance between interlocutors, as well as their age and public identities as members of a specific CofP (university undergraduates)². Our goals are therefore to describe the whole range of requesting patterns that arise in our data, and to point to connections between these and

² Cf. for example García Gómez' (2000) British – Spanish contrastive study of conflict talk and politeness in talk shows, where women were seen to adopt discourse patterns associated to men such as constant interruptions, challenges or disputes to men's utterances and direct declaration of facts / opinions.

particular facets of individuals' identities, with gender being just one of these facets.

In our opinion, requesting behaviour offers a particularly fertile ground for the study of any potential connections between linguistic politeness and gender. This is mainly because, together with orders, requests are possibly the clearest examples of "rapport-sensitive speech acts" (Spencer-Oatey 2000:18). Accordingly, they can be perceived and produced as face-threatening *or* face-enhancing depending on specific cultural, contextual and personal factors. For example, a request like *would you mind giving me your opinion on my draft chapter?*, uttered to a work colleague who the requester knows to be very busy at the time of requesting, is likely to threaten this colleague's negative face. Alternatively, it may be a face-enhancing device in as much as the request implies that the person making it values this colleague's opinion. Needless to say, the selection of specific rapport strategies (or politeness strategies, in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms) to formulate this request is crucial in its being interpreted as face-threatening or face-enhancing.

In our study, we examine a range of requests used by university undergraduates from two European universities in a variety of situational contexts. In doing so, we aim to capture (some of) the factors that may play a role in their being labelled as polite or otherwise. In the next section, we provide relevant background information about our data and methodology.

3. Data and methodology

Following the cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research tradition (Blum-Kulka et al 1989; Kasper & Blum-Kulka 1993), our study uses a DCT as its data elicitation procedure. Although the deployment of DCTs has been subject to criticism (Kasper & Dahl 1991, for review), we still believe DCTs constitute important starting points for further research since they facilitate the collection of large amounts of data. In fact, our findings are based on the analysis of 793 requests. The data, however, must not be treated as pieces of authentic discourse but as informants' perceptions and beliefs of appropriate discourse across different situations.

Our DCT consisted of six situations where the variables power (P) and social distance (SD) (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987) were

controlled. In including these two variables, we attempted to avoid biased analyses that set the finding of gender-related differences as part of the analyst's agenda (Stokoe 1998). The instructions of the DCT aimed at eliciting the first pair part of a request in situations with which our Spanish and British university undergraduate subjects could identify themselves easily³.

Sit 1: BOOKSHOP (+P, +SD). You want to ask the shop assistant in a bookshop to show you where the science fiction section is.

Sit 2. PUB (+P, -SD). At the pub you usually go to, you want to ask a barman you know very well for a coke.

Sit 3. BORROWING A PEN (=P, +SD). It's enrolment week and you are queuing to hand in your last set of forms. You've forgotten to sign one of the forms and haven't got a pen with you. You want to ask a student you don't know, who is also queuing, to lend you a pen.

Sit 4. BORROWING NOTES (=P, -SD). You want to ask a good friend of yours to let you borrow their notes from a class that you have missed.

Sit 5. DAD'S CAR (-P, -SD). You want to ask your father for permission to use his car.

Sit 6. LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION (-P,+SD). You want to ask your English lecturer to write a letter of recommendation for your application for a course in a British University.

Requests were analysed mainly following Blum-Kulka et al's (1989) methodology. These authors divide requests into three main parts: alerters, head acts and supportive moves, with the head act being the only core part. As an illustration:

<i>Alerters</i>	<i>Head Act</i>	<i>Supportive Move</i>
<i>Por favor,</i>	<i>me puedes indicar dónde está la sección de ciencia ficción.</i>	<i>Es que llevo un rato buscándola y no la</i>

³ N = 134. Of these, 62 were Spanish undergraduates (40 female and 22 male) and 72 were British undergraduates (40 female and 32 male). Although only the English version is presented here due to space limitations, the DCT was administered in the native language of the participants, that is, in Spanish or English.

5 Gender and politeness

		<i>encuentro.</i> <i>Gracias</i> <i>(SFO1)</i>
<i>Excuse me,</i>	<i>could you tell me</i> <i>where the science</i> <i>fiction section is</i>	<i>please?</i> <i>(BM07)</i>

In the remainder of this chapter we examine the use of alerters in the Peninsular Spanish and the British English corpora (Section 4) and then provide an overview of significant gender and / or cultural patterns for request strategies in our data, focusing – due to space limitations – on one or two situations (Section 5).

4. Politeness, gender and requesting behaviour

4.1. Alerters

The first optional category of requests is known as the *alerter*. This includes (in)formal attention getters and greetings, naming strategies and terms of endearment. Alerters constitute the opening move of the request sequence and, besides gaining the hearer's attention, they mark the transition from a state of non-talk to a state of talk. Consequently, they may constitute the first contact between co-participants and this makes them a rich site for interpersonal work.

On the whole, our findings showed no significant differences in female and male use of alerters in the two language groups although several gender-related similarities and differences can be highlighted in relation to particular situations.

4.1.1. The Peninsular Spanish corpus

Taking all six situations into consideration the data showed cross-gender similarity in the preference to use, in order of frequency:

- (1) no alerters at all,
- (2) formal attention getters and;
- (3) terms of endearment.

On closer inspection, however, various cross-gender differences could be observed. One of these was that men (36%) were found to make more requests with no alerters than women (29.66%). This greater lack of opening elements in the male data or, put it

differently, the fact that women used more alerters, can be interpreted in line with previous psychological research which shows that men are generally more direct and more concerned with autonomy and seeking independence than women. Women, for their part, have been seen to be more concerned with making connections and seeking involvement (Holmes 1995: 7), and this may well explain why in our corpus they made more use of these interpersonally loaded devices.

Male and female participants also avoided frequently one particular type of alerter: naming strategies. This coincides with the results for the British corpus and, generally, with the view that “[m]any British people have adopted the strategy of not using names at all in certain circumstances to avoid the difficulty of finding the appropriate form of address” (Bargiela et al 2002: 12). For example, in Sit. 6, despite the fact that participants could be reasonably expected to know the full name of their interlocutor (one of their lecturers), naming avoidance was the most frequent strategy in the Peninsular Spanish (and the British English) data.

A further gender difference in the Spanish corpus was found in relation to the second favourite type of alerter, i.e., formal attention getters. Overall, men used these formal attention getters more frequently than women. However, gender differences became evident vis-à-vis the type of formal attention getter favoured in individual situations. As an example, in Sit. 1 (+P + SD) nearly 50 % of the attention getters used by men were of the apologizing type (*disculpe, perdone*), whilst women only used apologizing formulas in 10% of the total number of formal attention getters. Their preferred formal attention getter was the deference showing formula *por favor*.

Interestingly, although in Sit 1 both gender groups showed an overall preference for V forms (+ deferent), women used T forms more frequently (20%) than men. A possible explanation may be that participants thought of the shop assistant as being female. In fact, a female subject even used the title *señorita (miss)* in addressing the potential interlocutor. If this were the case, then men could be showing deference in their V choice while women could be said to be showing solidarity and in-groupness through their choice of T forms, and therefore more variation than men as regards discernment politeness.

In choosing positively polite attention getters, the data again showed a gender difference with regard to the selection of type of

alerter. Informal attention getters, such as *eh*, *oye* and nicknames, were present in the male corpus but were absent in the female corpus. Female subjects favoured the use of first names, endearment terms and informal greetings. The two examples below are illustrative of this:

Male: *hey nano, dame una coca! (SM22, Sit 2 PUB)*

Female: *Jose, ponme una cocacola (SF07, Sit 2 PUB)*

In conclusion, a global assessment of the use of alerters in the Peninsular Spanish corpus revealed that, irrespective of gender, participants frequently used involvement strategies, possibly confirming that Spanish is a positively politeness-oriented culture. Different types of alerters were preferred by male and female speakers depending on the specific situation but, in general, women used both more alerters and more alerters of the informal type than men did.

4.1.2. The British English corpus

Overall gender similarities outweighed differences in the use of alerters for the British English corpus. As in the Peninsular Spanish corpus, however, men and women differed with regard to choice of attention getter for certain situations. Specifically, in Sits 1, 3 and 6, where there was social distance between speaker and hearer, women used formal attention getters, such as *excuse me*, three times as often as they used informal ones like *hi* and *hello*. Men, for their part, exhibited a more even distribution pattern, with formal attention getters accounting for 60 % and informal ones for 40% of the total.

Also within the general category of alerters, men used terms of endearment more frequently than women in +P situations (Sits. 1 and 2):

Use of terms of endearment ⁴	men	women
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⁴ The gender distribution of endearment terms was as follows:

	men	women
Mate	42.05	10%
Beautiful / byt (beautiful young thing)	5.05%	0%
Dude /chief	10.30%	0%
Sweetie	0%	5%
Babes	0%	7.5%

Sit.1 (THE BOOKSHOP)	6.45%	0%
Sit. 2 (THE PUB)	59.40 %	22.5%

According to research on other Anglo cultures (e.g. New Zealand, Holmes (1995)), men tend to use more endearment terms than women. in mixed-sex interactions, and irrespective of whether or not there is social distance between the interlocutors. In those cases where *there is* social distance, this aspect of men's behaviour has been interpreted as an example of their tendency to assert power over, even patronise, women. Although the results of our British corpus certainly showed that men used more endearment terms than women, particularly in Sit. 2, we interpret this behaviour as neither power-asserting nor patronising. This was because in Sit. 2, not only were the interlocutors well-known to one another (-SD) but the context of interaction was relaxed and notably informal (a pub). We therefore argue that the use of terms of endearment here was a positive politeness strategy. A term of endearment like 'mate', or 'sweetie', shifts the focus of the request away from its imposition on the hearer's negative face (asking someone to do something for you), and towards the camaraderie existing between interlocutors.

Given the relatively low frequency of terms of endearment in the female corpus for this situation, were the women in our British English corpus insensitive to their interlocutors' positive face needs? Were this to be the case, it would contradict mainstream research for Anglo cultures that has found women to be more sensitive than men to the face needs of their interlocutors. In order to understand better this apparently contradictory finding in our British English corpus, we examined in detail how each of the terms of endearment was embedded in its respective request and considered also those requests in which no term of endearment had been used. In doing so, we noticed that women's requests used more frequently the politeness marker *please* (80.5%) than men's (60%). In fact, the use of terms of endearment was one of a series of other 'less conventionally polite', or more informal, devices for which men in this situation opted, instead of the conventionally polite formula *please*. Consider the following two examples:

- *a coke, cheers mate (BM18)*: where both an endearment term (*mate*) and an informal thanking formula (*cheers*) are used
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- *give us a coke (BM25)*: where the use of *us* makes the request perspective to be “speaker *and* hearer dominance” (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and hence one where solidarity is sought.

The data suggests that more women than men applied a transactional frame to the interaction presented in Sit.2. Consequently, they chose mainly to index politeness through socioculturally sanctioned formulas in customer service contexts (*please*). In contrast, men seemed to have approached this request context mainly from within an affective / social frame in which politeness could be linguistically indexed through more informal, personal devices (for example, the use of endearment terms). These devices were most likely geared towards maximising familiarity (-SD), hence fostering in-groupness, whilst simultaneously minimising that of power.

In sum, the results of the British corpus showed that men and women used a similar number of alerters in their requests across the six situations but that there were differences with regard to the type of alerters being used in particular in +P, +SD situations.

4.2. Request strategies

In analysing the data the request categories identified by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) were used⁵. According to these authors, request strategies can be grouped into three levels of directness which have been “empirically shown to be valid across several languages” (ibid.: 1989: 18). These three levels are (i) *direct strategies* such as “mood derivable” and “hedged performatives”; (ii) *conventionally indirect strategies*, such as “suggestory formula” and “query preparatory” ; and (iii) *non-conventionally indirect strategies*, such as hints.

4.2.1. The Peninsular Spanish corpus

Taking all six situations together, both men and women used mainly direct strategies in their requests, thus indicating that cultural behaviour may be a stronger factor than gender in this particular aspect of the formulation of requests. Upon examining specific patterns for individual situations, however, several gender differences were observed. We limit our discussion here to the

⁵ This, however, was not unproblematic and different difficulties arose during the coding process. For reasons of space, though, these difficulties will not be discussed in this paper.

analysis of Sit 6 (+P; +SD; hierarchy system for Scollon & Scollon 1995), since the findings for this situation are particularly relevant to our discussion of the complex ways in which gender and linguistic politeness relate to one another.

Men and women seem to have interpreted this situation as very imposing and requiring great displays of deference. This was probably due partly to politeness being used as a means to achieve other instrumental, strategic intents (Coupland et al. 1988), e.g. getting a letter of recommendation, rather than simply as a way to treat somebody properly. Accordingly, both male (84.21%) and female (69.23%) respondents favoured the use of conventional indirectness through querying preparatory conditions. Nevertheless, contrary to stereotypes that associate male behaviour with directness⁶, women (30.76%) scored twice as highly as men (15.78%) in the use of direct strategies such as hedged performatives and want statements.

But level of directness in the choice of specific request strategies must be assessed in combination with the remaining parts of the request. All alerters in Sit. 6 were of the formal type, thereby excluding gender as an issue in this discernment aspect of linguistic politeness perceptions in Spanish. As regards supportive moves, cross-gender differences were found in the volitional aspect of politeness (Sachiko 1989). These moves abounded in both groups with use of grounders (giving reasons) being favoured by both non-dominant and non-familiar (Sit. 6 →-P, +SD) gender groups. Furthermore, women again scored double in preference for no supportive move at all but when they did use supportive moves, they tended to use more than one per request. This nevertheless should not be taken to imply in its own right that because some individuals may use more supportive moves they are, therefore, more polite. We believe politeness assessments cannot be produced exclusively in quantitative terms but that they also need to integrate qualitative considerations that include, amongst other things, judgements of social appropriateness.

A final significant cross-gender difference in this power-imbalanced situation was found in relation to the presence of requests that included an appreciation and/or thanking token. Females used twice as many thanking responses as their male

⁶ See Okamoto (2002) for a criticism of approaches that treat devices as indirectness as indexes of politeness and of femininity.

counterparts. Women, then, could be said to fit the stereotype of being more prone to showing deference by going on record as incurring a debt.

4.2.2. The British corpus

The results from the British corpus showed that, on the whole, men and women used the same types of request strategies in their requests. Choice of request strategies was mainly determined by the power and social distance variables in play for each situation, with Sits. 2 (+P, -SD) and 6 (-P; +SD) showing the most markedly different types of request strategies. Thus, in Sit 2 the most frequent modal verb for men and women was *can* (*Can I have...?*), whereas in Sit. 6 both groups opted in most cases for the modal *could* followed closely by the preparatory phrase *I was wondering if...*

The analysis revealed that there were significant differences vis-à-vis the total number of such strategies per request between the two groups. Here, the variable of power was a decisive factor. In situations of -P (Sit. 5 and Sit. 6), women used more strategies and supportive moves that aimed at minimising the degree of imposition of the request on the hearer than men did. And gender differences were still more noticeable in Sit. 6, where both -P and +SD coincided. In fact, as in the Peninsular Spanish corpus, both men and women used many more minimising strategies and supportive moves in Sit. 6 than in any of the other situations. However, unlike their Spanish counterparts, British women were not more direct than men. Just like Spanish females, though, they used twice as many mitigating strategies and supportive moves in their requests as their male counterparts. For example, when using the formula *I was wondering if...*, British women tended to use it together with other (often two) strategies / supportive moves, whereas men used it on its own. Below are some illustrative examples of this pattern:

<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
<p>1. <i>I was wondering if you'd write a letter of recommendation for me?</i> (BM28)</p> <p><i>I was wondering if you'd be a referee for me?</i>(BM15)</p>	<p>1.a. <i>I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to write a recommendation letter for a university application please?</i> (BF07)</p> <p>1.b. <i>I was wondering whether you would consider writing a letter of recommendation for me please?</i>(BF12)</p> <p>1.c. <i>I was wondering if I could ask you to write</i></p>

me a letter of recommendation because I'm
applying for a course?(BF30)

In *I was wondering if...*, the imposing force of the request is mitigated by the use of two syntactic downgraders. One is the past tense of the verb *to wonder* and the other is the use of a conditional clause (*if*). This means that requests like 1a, 1b and 1c above may be perceived as over-attentive to the negative face needs of the interlocutors to which they are made, especially if compared with the respective male ones in 1 above. Crucially, such perceptions derive not from the type of mitigating device being used (*I was wondering if...*) but from its being one of the many mitigating elements packed within a single, 'super-polite' request. As mentioned in relation to the Spanish corpus, we are not exclusively interested in discussing strategy / utterance ratios in our data but in the reasons that may lead one group, but not the other, to resort to super-polite formulas that may easily be interpreted as being over-deferential. One possible explanation, we believe, is that these women were ensuring that their requests were firmly grounded in the socioculturally sanctioned norms for politeness prevailing in the kind of public, university context featured in Sit. 6. This explanation is in line with research that has shown societal expectations that women must "behave nicely" do have an impact on their "frontstage" performances of their gendered identities (Coates 1999). Behaving nicely, however, does not make their speech weak or powerless. On the contrary, the women in this study may well have decided that accomplishment of the transactional goal (i.e., to get a lecturer to write a letter of recommendation for them) required complying with stereotyped values of gender and politeness for a very specific context of interaction. In other situations, for example "backstage" contexts of talk, they may have opted to linguistically "behave badly" (Coates 1999).

Conclusion

Informants' perceptions in the six situations of our DCT did not corroborate Holmes' (1992) conclusions to the effect that female interactional style is always cooperative and facilitative whereas male style is always more competitive and verbally aggressive. We therefore agree with Mills (2002) in questioning "the way that previous research on politeness has assumed a stereotypical correlation between masculinity and impoliteness and femininity and politeness". In our data, (i) both gender groups were oriented

towards politeness; and (ii) both gender groups showed similarities and differences in their perceptions regarding the expression of solidarity and deference. Consequently, although politeness devices were sometimes qualitatively and quantitatively different in our data, men and women in our study were politeness-oriented (see also Okamoto 2002).

Additionally, our study lends support to Okamoto's (2002:102) view that "gender cannot be isolated as an independent variable for determining language use, and ... other variables need to be considered as simultaneously relevant". Gender and politeness researchers should pay greater attention to intra-gender and inter-gender similarities in strategic discourse since, as our data has revealed, there are many interesting patterns that, whilst traditionally ascribed to either male or female speech style / politeness, are used by both groups.

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