

Exploring the use of request modification devices in Italian learners of English

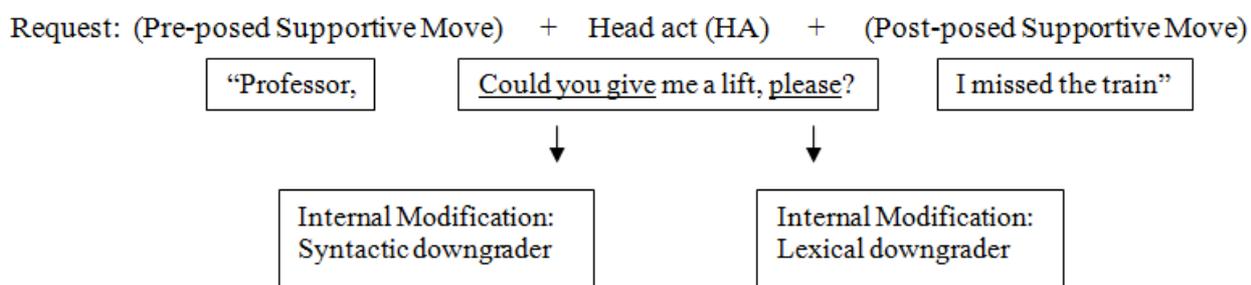
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Introduction

As impositive acts, requests are face threatening acts as they impose the speaker's interest on the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The interlocutor who issues the request attempts to exercise power or control over the intentional behavior of the hearer and, in so doing, the speaker threatens the requestee's negative face, that is his or her will to be unimpeded by others. (Trosborg, 1995). Previous studies on the request speech act have revealed that requests present a rich variety of strategies and modifiers necessary to mitigate their impositive effect. One way in which the speaker can minimize the imposition is by preferring an indirect strategy to a direct one, that is by activating specific choices on the scale of indirectness. Moreover, the speaker has a variety of other linguistic means available through which it is possible to manipulate the degree of imposition involved. Such manipulations might have the form of either "internal" or "external" modifications and are used to modify the illocutionary force conveyed in the request speech act. Internal modifications are used within the main part of the sequence constituting the speech act itself, namely the Head act. External modifications or "Supportive moves", instead, are external to the head act and may occur either before or after the main request speech act.



(Adapted from Blum-Kulka et al. 1989)

Focus of the study

This study focused on the analysis of the request internal and external modifications employed by a group of Italian learners of English and those employed by a group of English native speakers in the same situational contexts, in order to understand to what extent the group of learners approximated native speakers and whether English learners would transfer their L1 request modification patterns into the L2.

Methodology

A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) including 8 scenarios was employed to elicit performance data from 20 participants: 10 Italian learners of English and 10 native speakers of English. An Italian version of the questionnaire was constructed with basically the same situations and the same

variables as the English version. Italian participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire in English as well as in Italian.

Data Analysis

The classification scheme used for the analysis of the data in this study is based on the categories developed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) in the “Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project” and Trosborg (1995). More specifically, the analysis focused on the mitigating function of lexical and syntactic modifiers and that of external supportive moves in socially similar situations and examines whether the two language groups use combinations of internal/external modifications in the same way and to the same extent.

Results

The general results of this study are in line with those yielded in previous studies revealing that the English learners, when compared to the English native speakers, displayed an underuse of lexical and syntactic downgraders (internal modifications). More specifically, the range of downgrading devices used by the learners was much narrower than that of the native speakers, evidencing a restricted pragma-linguistic repertoire. Moreover, the group of English learners showed a significant preference for external modifications (Supportive moves). The same pragma-linguistic behavior was observed in the Italian speakers’ responses in which, the directness of the request speech act was softened by “verbose” supportive moves. As a consequence, the English learners’ tendency to employ a larger number of external modifications producing more elaborate requests might be regarded as a specific deviation from native English speakers’ general pragmatic behavior, due to the effect of certain pragmatic conventions in Italian according to which requests are generally performed in a more verbose way.

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