Politeness and in-directness across cultures: A comparison of English, German, Polish and Russian requests

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Abstract

This paper provides some (more) insights into cross-cultural variation in speech act realization by analyzing English, German, Polish and Russian requests. It aims to shows that the relationship between indirectness and politeness is interpreted differently across cultures. Hence, the analysis focuses on the difference between direct requests, which have been said to play a central role in Polish and Russian, and conventionally indirect requests, which are the most frequent request type in English and German. It further shows that the examined languages exhibit culture-specific preferences for syntactic and lexical downgraders modifying the illocutionary force of the request and, thus, reducing the threat to the hearer's face.

The requests analyzed in this study have been elicited by means of a discourse completion task and constitute responses to a scenario frequently used in previous request studies, so that the results can be compared with those established for other languages. The strong agreement among languages on the use of conventional indirectness in this scenario allows for testing the restricted applicability of interrogative constructions claimed for the two Slavic languages.

Keywords: requests, indirectness, politeness, English, German, Polish, Russian

1. Introduction

1.1. Politeness in cross-cultural research

Recent work on politeness focuses on its "chameleon-like" character (Watts 2003) and the ways in which it is negotiated in discourse in particular communities of practice (Mills 2003). Another central aspect of these so-called post-modern politeness theories is the criticism of previous work on politeness, in particular Brown and Levinson's speech act

based approach (1987). While it is certainly true that politeness does not reside within linguistic structures, every language has at its disposal a range of culture-specific routine formulae which carry "politeness default values" (Escandell-Vidal 1996: 643).

The culture-specific meanings and politeness functions conventionally associated with certain expressions and grammatical constructions in a given language become apparent through comparison with other languages. At the same time, approaching politeness contrastively makes it necessary to establish categories which can be compared across groups.

While post-modern theorists shift the focus towards the investigation of how people *disagree* on what constitutes politeness, cross-cultural research aims to establish how they *agree* on what is polite – and how they do so differently in different cultures. Not only is the mutual knowledge necessary to infer an implicature (Grice 1975) culture-specific but cultural values also determine whether it may be more appropriate to flout conversational maxims or to abide by the rules of the cooperative principle in a particular situation.

Although post-modern theorists devote ample attention to the discussion of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the vast amount of empirical research inspired by their framework is usually left unmentioned. Studies examining various speech acts in many different languages have provided valuable insights into culture-specific features of politeness and the difficulties foreign language learners experience in recognizing and adhering to the politeness norms of the target language.

The speech act of requesting has proved particularly popular in both theoretical and empirical work on politeness. Requests are central to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and the most frequently studied speech act in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Their social function consists in getting the hearer to do something for the speaker (Searle 1969: 66), which makes them beneficial to the latter and costly to the former. Since requests threaten the hearer's negative face by restricting her or his freedom of action (Brown and Levinson 1987), in order to assure the hearer's compliance with a request, it is necessary to formulate it in a socially and culturally appropriate way.

Although Brown and Levinson describe the social implications of speech acts and the strategies available for performing them as universal, empirical research has shown that the pragmatic force of syntactically and semantically equivalent utterances differs across languages. Research conducted in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics illustrates culture-specific preferences in realizing requests (e. g., House and Kasper 1981; Blum-Kulka 1987, 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989; House 1989; Sifianou 1992; Fukushima 1996, 2000; Van Mulken 1996; Lubecka 2000; Márquez Reiter 2000, 2002; Byon 2004, 2006; Barron 2008), while

interlanguage studies provide evidence for the difficulties second and foreign language learners with various L1s experience in bringing across the intended illocutionary force of a request (e. g., Trosborg 1995; Barron 2003; Cenoz 2003; Hassall 2003; Schauer 2004, 2007; Warga 2004, 2007; Marti 2006; Félix-Brasdefer 2007; Ogiermann 2007; Eslami and Noora 2008; Hendriks 2008; Otcu and Zeyrek 2008; Woodfield 2008).

Although the number of studied languages is steadily growing, English and German being particularly popular, little is known about the culture-specificity of Polish and Russian requests. This is not only because these languages have received less attention than Western European languages, but also because most of the literature on Polish and Russian speech acts has been written in languages other than English. Hence, one of the objectives of the present paper is to provide an insight into the research conducted by Polish, Russian and German linguists.

1.2. Politeness and indirectness: Theory and practice

Pragmatic politeness theories (e. g., Leech 1983; and Brown and Levinson 1987) assume a correlation between indirectness and politeness, and most empirical work centres on issues of indirectness. According to Leech, indirectness implies optionality for the hearer, and the degree of politeness can be increased "by using a more and more indirect kind of illocution" (1983: 108). In Brown and Levinson's theory, in contrast, the correlation between indirectness and politeness largely stems from viewing politeness as deviant from Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). They distinguish between three main levels of directness in performing a face-threatening act: Off-record strategies explicitly flout Grice's conversational maxims and focus on face-redress, while on-record strategies combined with redressive action have the advantage of being clear and polite at the same time (Brown and Levinson 1987: 72). Bald on-record strategies, in contrast, focus on clarity and efficiency, conform to Grice's maxims, and pay no attention to face (1987: 95).

Although these levels of directness have been described as universal and have been attested in all the languages studied so far, equating indirectness with politeness and viewing pragmatic clarity and directness as lack of concern for the hearer's face is an interpretation reflecting Anglo-Saxon cultural values.

What Brown and Levinson's theory does not account for is that some cultures appreciate pragmatic clarity while associating directness with honesty. Indirect requests, on the other hand, not only increase "the interpretive demands on the hearer" (Blum-Kulka 1987: 133), but can also "make the speaker sound devious and manipulative" (Pinker 2007: 442). This interpretation of indirectness dominates research on the Rus-

sian concept of politeness, which has been shown to rely on directness and frankness rather than on the avoidance of face-loss (Rathmayr 1994: 271).

A high degree of indirectness has been portrayed as a waste of the hearer's time (Zemskaja 1997: 297), and refusal to "join the speaker's manipulative game" has been discussed as a factor leading to communicative failure (Ermakova and Zemskaja 1993: 52). It has further been argued that a Russian hearer does not necessarily regard a request as an imposition on her or his personal freedom, and a potential refusal involves less face-loss for a Russian speaker than it does for somebody with an Anglo-Saxon cultural background (Rathmayr 1994: 274).

However, despite its over-emphasis on the hearer's autonomy, Brown and Levinson's theory does acknowledge that all speakers have a negative and a positive face and that verbal interaction tends to affect both the hearer's and the speaker's face. Off-record strategies, for instance, not only satisfy the hearer's negative face to a greater degree than negative politeness but also allow the speaker to "avoid the inescapable accountability, the responsibility for his action that on-record strategies entail" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 73).

As analyses of request sequences evolving over several conversational turns have shown, off-record strategies often take the form of pre-requests. Pre-requests are face-saving to the speaker as they help avoid the face-loss inherent in a refusal (Levinson 1983: 357−358). The possibility of obtaining the desired object without explicitly asking for it has led some researchers to suggest that requests are dispreferred actions, their preferred variant being an offer (Schegloff 1990: 63) or compliance with the pre-request (Levinson 1983: 361). Complying with a non-overt request can be viewed as more polite than making an offer, since an offer makes the propositional content disguised by the off-record pre-request explicit.

Off-record request strategies offer an 'out' for both: the hearer, who may refuse to comply with the request by simply ignoring the hint, and the speaker, who can continue the conversation as if no request had been issued without incurring the face-loss involved in one's request being ignored.

While speakers who associate indirectness with politeness are likely to perceive off-record requests as strategies focusing on the hearer's negative face, those preferring a more direct conversational style may view the evasive approach underlying off-record requests as benefiting the speaker's face and even as *increasing* the imposition on the hearer's face.

The reluctance to clearly formulate one's wishes may be interpreted as an attempt to save one's own face while putting the hearer in a position where she or he has to take the initiative for the speaker's wishes to be fulfilled. The increased degree of optionality is illusive since once the

slightest hint is dropped, the hearer feels compelled to take it up and offer what the speaker is too reluctant to ask for. Ignoring such a hint would be impolite, therefore, an indirect request may put more pressure on the hearer than would a straightforward one.

1.3. Request strategies and levels of directness

Empirical research generally supports the broad distinction between three main levels of directness suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) by differentiating between direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect requests. While most studies adhere to the framework developed in the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), where nine different substrategies are suggested, some researchers arrive at as many as 18 different request types (Aijmer 1996: 132−133), which illustrates the complexity of this speech act.

Although the strategies have been placed on a scale of increasing indirectness (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 18), indirectness and politeness do not necessarily constitute parallel dimensions. Speakers of several languages, including English, have been shown to perceive conventionally indirect requests as most polite (e. g., Blum-Kulka 1987: 131). The most frequent realization at this level of directness is the so called query preparatory, which refers to the ability or willingness to perform the speech act (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 18) and mostly takes the form of an interrogative construction containing the modal verb *can* (see Searle 1975).

While English and German show a strong preference for conventional indirectness, literature available on Polish and Russian requests assigns a more central role to direct requests, especially those taking the form of imperative constructions. The little that is known about Polish and Russian requests in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics mainly goes back to Wierzbicka's writings (e. g., 1985, 1991 and 1992). Since her main aim is to illustrate an Anglo-Saxon bias in politeness research, she emphasizes the role of the imperative in performing Polish and Russian requests, while pointing out the softening effect of the diminutive on its illocutionary force and the restricted applicability of interrogative constructions.

Although imperative constructions are more likely to be interpreted as polite requests in Polish (Marcjanik 1997; Lubecka 2000) and Russian (Mills 1992; Rathmayr 1994; Berger 1997; Larina 2003) than in English, describing requests as speech acts in which "the diminutive and the imperative work hand in hand" (Wierzbicka 1991: 51) does not do justice to the complexity of this speech act either in Polish or in Russian.

Marcjanik maintains that although imperatives are mainly associated with orders in Polish, they can also serve as polite requests (1997: 159),

in particular if their illocutionary force is softened, e. g., through intonation, the addition of address forms, personal pronouns or modal particles (1997: 160).

Researchers analyzing Russian requests not only agree that the imperative is the most frequent and appropriate strategy for performing requests in Russian (Rathmayr 1994; Berger 1997; Brehmer 2000; Betsch 2003; Larina 2003), but also point out the complex nature of its many forms and functions. Rathmayr, for instance, discusses pragmatic differences between perfective and imperfective imperatives (1994: 252), while Benacchio (2002) suggests a correlation between negative politeness and perfective imperatives and positive politeness and imperfective imperatives, respectively.

Interrogative constructions, such as ability questions, are regarded as hyper-polite (Mills 1992: 68), and their use in daily communication is said to be heavily restricted (Rathmayr 1994: 271). However, Mills shows that Russian offers numerous possibilities for realizing conventionally indirect requests and even goes as far as to claim that Russian provides the speaker with "a richer combinatory variety by which to formulate his indirection" (1992: 76) than does English.

Similarly, in her chapter on Polish requests, Marcjanik discusses twelve different types of interrogative constructions (1997: 161−170) and argues that conventionally indirect strategies constitute the most frequent request type in Polish (1997: 175). Lubecka's (2000) contrastive analysis of Polish and English requests shows that imperatives are more frequent in Polish than they are in English, but interrogative constructions form the largest group of request strategies in both languages in her data. Interestingly, Lubecka analyses requests along with invitations and provides figures for a category containing both speech acts. Since invitations, being beneficial to hearer, are generally more direct than requests, this increases the amount of imperative constructions in her data.

On the whole, the above cited studies suggest that although Polish and Russian rely on the imperative to a greater degree than does English, they both offer a wide range of conventionally indirect request strategies. While in Russian, these strategies are associated with a high level of formality, in Polish, they are said to constitute the most common request strategy.

2. Data collection

2.1. Method

While most speech act studies conducted in Western Europe are based on empirical data, Polish and Russian linguists tend to rely on examples

from literature and the press, their own observations and intuitions, or the intuitions of native speaker informants (e. g., Wierzbicka 1985; Mills 1991, 1992; Marcjanik 1997). Russian requests have also been studied on the basis of linguistic corpora (e. g., Berger 1997; Brehmer 2000; Betsch 2003).

The present analysis is based on data elicited by means of a written discourse completion test (DCT). Despite the criticism DCT data have received for not adequately rendering authentic speech, this method is valued for its administrative advantages (Billmyer and Varghese 2000: 517) and has proved particularly useful for the study of politeness phenomena in cross-cultural and interlanguage contexts. The DCT is the only data collection technique yielding large amounts of fully comparable data in an unlimited number of languages, allowing for making generalizations about what is typical and acceptable in a particular culture and comparing politeness norms across cultures.

Even if DCT responses constitute idealized and normative data, they reliably illustrate the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic norms of the respondent's culture (Beebe and Cummings 1996: 75; and Kasper 2000: 329) and provide valuable pragmatic input that can help the foreign language learner "approach the norms for the given L2 speech community" (Cohen 2006: 359).

2.2. The DCT

The DCT with which the data for the present study were collected consists of ten scenarios designed to elicit apologies, requests and complaints. To ensure comparability, situations from everyday and academic life were chosen. In choosing the scenarios native speakers of all four languages were consulted. The probability for the scenarios to happen and their possible interpretations and reactions to them were discussed. The DCT was formulated in English and then translated into the three other languages, though the translation process was greatly facilitated by the fact that the scenarios had already been formulated while discussing them with native speakers in their languages.

2.3. Request scenario

The data analyzed in this study consist of responses to a scenario in which a student falls ill, misses a lecture and rings up a fellow student to ask if she or he can borrow his notes. The relationship between the interlocutors in the scenario is characterized by low social distance and equal social power, suggesting that the situation is not particularly face-threatening and does not afford a high degree of indirectness.

Since scenarios featuring requests for notes have frequently been used in previous research, the results of my study can be compared with those established for other languages, such as British English (Faerch and Kasper 1989; House 1989; Woodfield 2008), Irish English (Barron 2003, 2008), American English (Blum-Kulka and House 1989; Rose 1992), Australian English (Blum-Kulka 1989), German (Faerch and Kasper 1989; House 1989; Barron 2003), Dutch (Hendriks 2008), Danish (Faerch and Kasper 1989), Turkish (Marti 2006; Otcu and Zeyrek 2008), Canadian French (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989), Hebrew (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989), Argentinean Spanish (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989), Mexican Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer 2005), Korean (Byon 2004), Japanese (Rose and Ono 1995), Chinese (Lin 2009 forthcoming) and many more.

An assessment study, in which German, Hebrew and Argentinean informants estimated the contextual factors underlying this scenario on a scale ranging from 1 to 3 (Blum-Kulka and House 1989: 142), shows that the right to issue the request and the estimated likelihood of compliance with the request tends to be rated high (2.80 and 2.64, respectively). The assessment of the obligation to carry out the request, in contrast, has resulted in an average value of 1.74.

According to previous studies (see above), respondents with different cultural backgrounds show a strong agreement in using conventionally indirect, mostly query preparatory strategies, in response to this scenario. These results offer an opportunity to test the restrictions on the use of interrogative constructions and the broader applicability of the imperative suggested for Russian and Polish.

2.4. Population

The present study examines requests elicited from British, German, Polish and Russian university students. The English data were collected at universities in London, Cardiff and Swansea, the German data at the University of Oldenburg, the Polish version of the DCT was distributed at the University of Wrocław and the Russian version at two universities in Moscow.

Although over 600 participants were engaged in the project, only 400 DCTs were selected for analysis. Some of the DCTs had to be excluded because they were incomplete or because the respondents had a different native language from those analyzed. To ensure comparability across groups, the amount of DCTs was further reduced to match the size of the groups. The DCTs which were removed from the corpus were chosen randomly, allowing me to create a corpus containing 100 questionnaires in each of the languages, with equal distribution between genders (50/50).

Accordingly, the data analyzed in this study consist of a total of 400 requests elicited under identical contextual conditions from comparable population groups.

3. The analysis

The present analysis compares preferences for direct vs. indirect realizations of the head act and the use of internal and external modification in the four languages under investigation. It thus addresses the question of whether indirectness correlates with other forms of face-redress or whether downgraders and supportive moves are used to compensate for the higher degree of imposition inherent in more direct request realizations. The categorization of the data is based on the coding scheme suggested in the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

3.1. Direct vs. conventionally indirect requests

While German, Polish and Russian have all been characterized as more direct than English (e.g., Wierzbicka 1985; Lubecka 2000; Rathmayr 1994; Larina 2003, House 2005), there has been no attempt to compare the degree of directness characterizing these three languages. The following cross-linguistic comparison of the preferences for direct and conventionally indirect realizations of the head act focuses on imperative and interrogative constructions.

Although Polish and Russian offer a wider range of direct request strategies (see e.g., Marcjanik 1997; and Berger 1997) than the two Germanic languages, those occurring in my data all take the form of imperative constructions, such as:

(1) Get the notes for me mate.

(2) *Bring mir mal eben die Notizen vorbei.*
     'Bring me (downtoner) the notes.'

(3) *Pożycz mi notatek*[1].
     'Lend me the notes.'

(4) *Одолжи конспекты на пару дней.*
     'Lend me the notes for a few days.'

Interrogative constructions, in contrast, cover various syntactic structures, such as questions in the present tense or the conditional, with and without a modal verb, or more complex constructions including lexical downgraders, such as consultative devices.

(5) *Leihst du mir deine Notizen?*
     'Will you lend me your notes?'

(6) *Mogę od ciebie pożyczyć notatki?*
     'Can I borrow the notes from you?'

(7) *Ты не мог бы мне дать свои конспекты?*
     'Couldn't you give me your notes?'

(8) Would it be ok if I borrowed your notes?

Table 1 shows the distribution of these two request types across languages. The category 'other' includes five off-record strategies (three in German and two in Polish) and nine declarative constructions, such as:

 (9) Müsste mir morgen Deine Notizen kopieren.
     'I'd have to copy your notes tomorrow.'

(10) Chciałbym przeanalizować Twoje notatki.
     'I'd like to analyze your notes.'

Table 1. *Imperative vs. interrogative head act realizations across languages.*

N = 100	English	German	Polish	Russian
Imperative	4	5	20	35
Interrogative	97	88	75	65
other		8	6	
Total	101	101	101	100

While imperatives are marginal in the English and German data, they make up 20 % of the Polish and 35 % of the Russian requests. The strong preference for conventional indirectness in my English and German data is in accordance with previous findings. However, since interrogative constructions are the preferred strategy in all four languages, the restricted applicability of interrogative constructions suggested for Polish and Russian in previous literature cannot be confirmed.

   The distribution in the Polish data renders support to Marcjanik's (1997) claim that questions constitute the most frequent request type in Polish, though, considering the informal character of the situation, one might have expected a higher proportion of imperative constructions. The preference for interrogative constructions is even more surprising for Russian, where indirect requests are regarded as typical of formal conversations (Rathmayr 1994: 266), characterized by high social distance and power (Mills 1992: 68).

3.2. *Syntactic downgraders*

The cross-cultural differences in the overall level of directness established so far suggest that more disparities can be expected in the use of request modification across languages. Since syntactic downgraders, such as modal verbs, tense, and negation modify the illocutionary force of the head act, they are regarded as instances of internal modification.

Among the various interrogative constructions, some of which were listed in examples 5 to 8, ability questions with the modal verb *can/ können/móc/мочь* constitute the most frequent request type in my data. Table 2 illustrates the preferences for ability questions across languages, while taking into account syntactic downgrading through the use of tense and negation.

In the English and German data, most of the ability questions were formulated in the present tense. The relatively low frequency of conditional constructions, which render the request more polite by reducing "the expectations to the fulfilment of the request" (Trosborg 1995: 210), is likely to be related to the informal character of the situation. In the two Slavic languages, however, the conditional is the preferred tense, suggesting that the overall higher level of directness characterizing the Polish and Russian requests in my data is reduced by the frequent use of the conditional.

According to Marcjanik, ability questions are the most polite request realization among all the interrogative constructions available for the performance of requests in Polish (1997: 165), with the conditional being more polite than the present tense (1997: 167). Betsch suggests that Russian ability questions formulated in the conditional are used "either in a rather formal, written style or if an important request is to be expressed" (2003: 278).

Another syntactic downgrader accompanying ability questions is negation. In Russian, especially, negation is regarded as an obligatory element, its absence potentially leading to an interpretation of the construction as a genuine question (Rathmayr 1994: 266; Betsch 2003: 280). In my Russian data, negation indeed seems to serve as a marker of

Table 2. *Preferences for the modal verb* can *across languages.*

English		German		Polish		Russian	
can I	45	kann ich	32	mogę	4		
can you	10	kannst du	16	możesz	14	(не) можешь	5
could I	15	könnte ich	14	mógłbym	5		
could you	3	könntest du	5	(nie) mógłbyś	34	ты не мог бы	41
	73		67		57		46

illocutionary force in conditional constructions, all of which were ne-gated. However, three of the five ability questions in the present tense were not negated (cf. Formanovskaja 1982: 132).

In Polish, negation is optional and can imply genuine doubt about the ability to comply with the request. There are three negated constructions in my data: two ability questions: *Czy nie mógłbyś …* 'Whether you could not …' and one conditional construction without a modal verb: *Nie pożyczyłbyś …* 'Would you not lend …'. While in these expressions, negation softens the illocutionary force of the request, negated availabil-ity questions, such as *Nie masz …* 'Don't you have …' are more likely to be interpreted as expressing genuine uncertainty about the availability of the requested object and, thus, the potential success of the request. This uncertainty can be strengthened by the addition of the downtoner *może* 'perhaps' or *przypadkiem* 'by any chance' (cf. Marcjanik 1997: 163−164).

There are no negated constructions in my German data, though the use of negation as a syntactic downgrader in German requests has been reported in previous studies. Barron provides examples of negation of preparatory conditions in her discussion of German syntactic downgrad-ers, such as *Kannst Du nicht x?* 'Cannot you x?' (2003: 145), whereas Faerch and Kasper state that the use of negation in German requests is "much more restricted" than it is in Danish (1989: 227). In English, however, the sentence "Couldn't you (possibly) pass the salt?", which is a literal translation of the corresponding, highly polite, Russian request realization has been classified as rude (Brown and Levinson 1987: 135).

As table 2 illustrates, interrogative constructions with a modal verb denoting ability can be formulated either in the 1st or in the 2nd person and, thus, represent the speaker's or the hearer's perspective (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 19). The choice of perspective has been shown to affect the illocutionary force of the request. According to Blum-Kulka et al., "avoidance to name the hearer as actor can reduce the form's level of coerciveness" (1989: 19). On a similar note, Leech argues that a re-quest can be softened "by omission of reference to the cost to *h*" and suggests that "Could I borrow this electric drill? is marginally more po-lite than Could you lend me this electric drill?" (Leech 1983: 134).

Interestingly, English offers two different verbs denoting the process of borrowing/lending, as if referring to different activities depending on whether they are viewed from the speaker's or the hearer's perspective. This culture-specific distinction indicates that one should be careful to assume the above interpretation to be universal. In a culture placing particular emphasis on independence and indirectness, phrasing the re-quest in the 1st person may be seen as reducing the imposition on the hearer. In a culture that values directness, portraying the speaker as

Table 3. *Request perspective across languages.*

N = 100	English	German	Polish	Russian
Speaker-oriented	76	63	14	4
Hearer-oriented	18	35	85	96
other	7	3	2	
Total	101	101	101	100

responsible for the successful outcome of the request could be interpreted as manipulative (cf. section 1.2).

The fact that none of the ability questions in the Russian data and only a few in the Polish data were formulated in the first person seems to support such an interpretation. Although Russian requests in the first person are not impossible (Formanovskaja 1982: 131), it has been argued that speech acts formulated in the second person are generally more polite than those in the first person, an important feature of Russian politeness being to acknowledge the role of the addressee (Nikolaeva 2000, cited in Rathmayr 1996: 22).

Table 3 shows the preferences for request perspective across languages. While imperative constructions are always hearer-oriented and declarative utterances tend to be speaker-oriented, interrogative constructions without a modal verb tend to take the hearer's perspective. As already illustrated, those introduced by the modal verb 'can' can be formulated from the speaker's as well as hearer's perspective. Although previous research tends to classify both formulations as query preparatory (e. g., Barron 2003), strictly speaking, 'Can you …?' refers to the hearer's ability to perform the request, while 'Can I …?' functions as a request for permission.

In English requests for permission the modal verbs 'can' and 'may' are interchangeable, but the latter does not occur in my data. The German modal verb denoting permission *dürfen*, in contrast, was used nine times. In Polish and Russian, the only modal verb serving this function is that denoting ability, though permission can be requested by means of a performative verb.

Although most requests tend to take the hearer's or the speaker's perspective, requests can also be inclusive: 'Could we …?' or impersonal: 'Is it possible to …?'

(11) Would it be at all possible to copy some notes?

The two Slavic languages also have the impersonal form: *można/можно* + infinitive 'is it possible to'. This impersonal construction does not occur in my data, but three Russian respondents combined *можно* with

the first person pronoun *я* 'I', which translates as 'is it possible for me' and shifts the perspective from neutral to the speaker's.

3.3. Lexical downgraders

Along with syntactic downgraders, lexical downgraders are generally regarded as forms of internal modification, i. e., modification within the head act. The most frequent phrasal downgraders in the English data are consultative devices, which modify the illocutionary force of the request by consulting the hearer's opinion (House and Kasper 1987: 1269):

(12) *Do you think* I could copy your notes?

What is worth noting about this example is that although consultative devices acknowledge the role of the hearer, the speaker is still portrayed as the one executing the activity named in the propositional content of the request. Among the 34 consultative devices found in my English data, only two are combined with the hearer's perspective while seven are embedded in infinitive constructions, which tend to take a neutral perspective (compare example 11).

Since consultative devices are negative politeness strategies, it is not surprising that they occur mainly in English. Previous research has shown that they are very rare in German (House and Kasper 1987: 1275; Faerch and Kasper 1989: 234), and also my German data contain only two constructions equivalent to the English consultative devices, for example:

(13) Wäre das OK für Dich*, dass ich deine Notizen kopiere?*
    'Would it be OK for you if I copied your notes?'

Three more phrasal downgraders were classified as consultative devices, although they serve a slightly different function; namely *wäre nett wenn* 'it would be nice if …', *es wäre echt total toll wenn* 'it would be really totally great if …' and *magst du so lieb sein* 'will you be so dear'. Similar formulae were found in the Polish data:

(14) Czy byłbyś tak miły *i mógłbyś przynieść mi notatki?*
    'Would you be so nice and could bring me the notes?'

Although the formula used in this example serves a function similar to that of a consultative device, asking somebody to be nice − or implying that complying with the request would classify them as nice − is not equivalent to consulting somebody's opinion.

Likewise, the Russian data include a formula appealing to the hearer's kindness/goodness, namely the imperative construction *Будь добр!* lit.

'Be good!', which has been described as a politeness marker in previous research (e. g., Rathmayr 1994; Brehmer 2000). However, the imperative construction makes it problematic to classify this formula as a device consulting the hearer's opinion and since it cannot appear within the head act, it does not even classify as an internal modifier.

While consultative devices seem to be culture-specific, the use of the politeness marker *please* as a device softening the imposition inherent in a request is − if not universal − cross-culturally shared. There are 16 instances of *please* in the English data, its German equivalent *bitte* was used 19 times, the Russian *пожалуйста* 22, and the Polish *proszę* three times. As these figures already indicate, although speakers of all four languages use this politeness marker, its applicability and illocutionary force are likely to vary across languages.

In contrast to the English *please* or the German *bitte*, the Russian *пожалуйста* cannot be combined with ability questions (Rathmayr 1994: 266; Mills 1992: 67). Since the Russian politeness marker occurs exclusively with imperative constructions (Betsch 2003: 280), one could also say that it was used in 22 of 35 (63%) possible cases in my data.

The applicability of the Polish politeness marker, on the other hand, is restricted by the performative function of the word *proszę*, which is the first person singular form of the verb *prosić* 'to ask/beg'. It is a formulaic request in its own right that can be further modified, e. g., *Bardzo Cię proszę* 'I beg you very much'. Accordingly, the low frequency of politeness marking in the Polish data is, at least in part, related to the fact that *proszę* cannot occur within the head act.

Consequently, while politeness markers appear in all four sets of data, they are subject to culture-specific restrictions concerning the combination possibilities with the different types of head acts as well as the possibilities of embedding them into the request. Although the words *please* and *bitte* are generally regarded as instances of internal modification, that is elements appearing within the head act, a closer look at my data shows that the examined languages differ in positioning the politeness marker within the utterance.

(15) Can I borrow your notes *please*?

(16) *Kannst Du mir* bitte *Deine Notizen ausleihen?*
      'Can you please lend me your notes?'

(17) Proszę, *pożycz mi swoje notatki.*
      'Please, lend me your notes'

(18) *Дай пожалуйста тетради.*
      Give please   notes.
      'Give me the notes please'

Table 4. *Position of the politeness marker across languages.*

N = 100	English	German	Polish	Russian
Preceding head act	4	1	2	3
Within head act	2	16		16
Following head act	10	2	1	3
Total	16	19	3	22

Whereas in English, German and Russian, the politeness marker can precede, follow the head act, or appear within it, Polish does not offer the last possibility. Hence, *proszę* cannot be regarded as an internal modifier, and even English shows a strong preference for using *please* outside the head act. The figures in table 4 suggest not only that word order is likely to have an impact on the illocutionary force of the request, but also that the implications of the position of politeness marking within the utterance, and of the stress it receives, are likely to vary across languages.

The distribution of downtoners, that is devices reducing the imposition of the request, again shows that languages differ not only in the extent to which they modify the impositive force of the request, but also in the linguistic means they employ. While there are two occurrences of *possibly*, one of *at all* and one of *by any chance* in the English data, the German data contain 20 instances of *mal (eben)* 'just' and ten of *vielleicht* 'perhaps'. Four Polish respondents used the word *może* 'perhaps', but no adverbial downtoners were identified in the Russian data. The Russian respondents, however, show a strong preference for situation-specific expressions minimizing the imposition of the request, such as *на пару дней* 'for a few days' and *до завтра* 'until tomorrow'.

Whereas adverbial downtoners and modal particles (on the use of modal particles in Russian requests see Zybatov 1990 and Berger 1998) can be employed in virtually any request situation, minimizers reflect the particular situation in which they are used − as well as the speaker's concern for the hearer's needs. Internal lexical modifiers specifying and minimizing the duration of the requested favour appear 24 times in the Russian, twice in the English, and once in the Polish data.

Linguistic devices portraying the size of the favour as small lead us directly to another type of downtoner, namely diminutives, which operate on a morphological level and have been assigned a central role as devices softening the illocutionary force of Polish (Wierzbicka 1991) and Russian (Larina 2003; Brehmer 2006) directive speech acts.

Brown and Levinson define diminutives as positive politeness strategies when they serve as "in-group identity markers" (1987: 109) and as

negative politeness strategies in their function as hedges or minimizers (1987: 157, 177). Diminutives used within the head act are more likely to function as negative politeness devices, though they can also be used by a more powerful speaker to minimize his or her right to issue the request (Brehmer 2006: 33).

If one considers the central role assigned to diminutives, in particular in imperative constructions (Wierzbicka 1991: 51; Larina 2003: 94; Brehmer 2006: 34), it is surprising that there are no diminutives in the Polish, and only five in the Russian data. None of them appears in an imperative construction and one does not even occur within the head act. In the following example, the diminutive portrays the time for which the desired object will be kept, which has already been restricted to one day, as particularly short.

(19) *Можно я возьму у тебя на денек конспекты?*
       'Is it possible for me to take from you the notes for a day-DIM?'

Diminutive forms were either applied to words referring to the time or the notes, confirming that diminutives reduce the illocutionary force of the directive speech act by portraying the propositional content of the request as small (Brehmer 2006: 32), thus qualifying as negative politeness devices in Brown and Levinson's terms.

Table 5. *Distribution of lexical downgrading across languages.*

N = 100	English	German	Polish	Russian
Consultative devices	34	5	3	
Politeness markers	15	19	3	22
Adverbial downtoners	4	30	4	
Minimizers	2		1	24
Diminutives				5
Total	55	54	11	51

Although table 5 clearly shows that English, German and Russian exhibit similar frequencies of lexical downgrading, which is much higher than that established for Polish, the total numbers are indicative at best since the different types of downgraders are not interchangeable; nor are they pragmatically equivalent across languages.

Ultimately, no conclusions can be drawn as to cross-cultural differences in request modification without taking into account the distribution of external modification, the so-called supportive moves.

3.4. Supportive moves

In contrast to syntactic and lexical downgraders, which have been classified as internal modifiers, supportive moves are external to the head act. Although it is the head act that carries the illocutionary force of the request, supportive moves can also be used on their own and constitute off-record requests. Grounders, in particular, may include a hint to be taken up by the hearer.

When combined with a head act, however, grounders supply a reason for making the request. Explaining why it is necessary to impose on the hearer makes the request more plausible and may thus increase her of his willingness to comply with it. The grounders occurring in my data generally refer to the speaker's illness preventing her or him from going to the lecture.

(20) I'm not feeling too good.

(21) *Oh man geht's mir dreckig.*
    'Oh man, do I feel shit.'

(22) *Dopadła mnie jakaś przeklęta choroba.*
    'Some damned illness got me.'

(23) *Я тут малость приболел.*
    'I got a little ill here.'

Grounders are most frequent in the English and least frequent in the Russian data, which might be due to the overall lower social distance characterizing Russian culture (see Bergelson 2003). Perhaps, borrowing notes is more common at Russian universities, which would increase the right to issue the request and the expectations of compliance.

The term preparator has been applied to several related strategies in previous literature − all of them "preparing the hearer for the ensuing request by announcing it or asking permission to perform it" (House and Kasper 1987: 1277). Trosborg distinguishes four different categor-

Table 6. *Distribution of supportive moves across languages.*

N = 100		English	German	Polish	Russian
Grounders		81	63	59	43
Preparators	(introduction)	1		16	5
	(availability)	7	8	6	5
Indebtedness	(gratitude)	4	4	12	5
	(compensation)	2	7	6	1
Total		95	82	99	59

ies of preparators: those preparing the content; the speech act; those checking on availability; and those getting a pre-commitment (1995: 216−217).

I would like to limit the distinction to just two types of preparators, namely those checking on the availability of the notes and those introducing the request. While the only example of the latter in the English data is an interrogative construction aimed at getting a pre-commitment, those found in the Polish data are declarative sentences and can be better described as devices preparing the hearer for the request by merely announcing it. The preparators introducing the request found in the Russian data, in contrast, are all formulated in the imperative and they constitute requests for help.

(24) Could you do me a favour?

(25) *Mam do Ciebie ogromną prośbę.*
'I have a huge favour to ask you.'

(26) *Друг, помоги.*
'Friend, help.'

What is problematic about regarding requests for help as preparators, though, is that they can constitute a request on their own, which is why requests for help were only classified as preparators when combined with another head act. Another Russian expression that has been included in the category of preparators is the formula *Будь добр!* 'Be good!' discussed above. While this expression does not classify as a consultative device, a request to 'be good' can be regarded as a formula introducing the request proper, i. e., the occasion for the hearer to prove his goodness.

While preparators introducing the request consist of formulaic − and therefore often culture-specific − expressions, preparators checking on availability refer to the specific situation in which the request is uttered. In my data, this category covers expressions ascertaining that the hearer is in possession of the requested object, such as:

(27) *Du schreibst doch immer mit, oder?*
'You always take notes, don't you?'

(28) Did you bother going?

In contrast to formulaic preparators introducing the speech act, preparators checking on availability were very similar across languages, not only in terms of semantic content and pragmatic force but also in terms of frequency.

Indebtedness can be expressed through a routinized formula or, on a more practical level, by offering compensation. All languages but Ger-

man relied mainly on formulaic expressions of gratitude, with those found in the Polish data being not only most frequent but also most elaborate and effusive.

(29) *Będę Ci bardzo, bardzo wdzięczny! Z góry dzięki.*
  'I'll be very, very grateful to you! Thanks in advance.'

Promises of reward can take the form of formulaic acknowledgments of debt, as illustrated by the English example, or involve material compensation − a strategy preferred by the German respondents.

(30) I owe you one.

(31) *Trinken wa nächste Woche mal schön nen Kaffee.*
  'We will nicely drink a coffee next week.'

Another supportive move that occurs in my data and that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been discussed in previous literature are expressions minimizing the imposition of the request by assuring the hearer that the notes will not be kept long or that they will be returned soon. These expressions are particularly frequent in the Russian data, where they appear 19 times.

(32) *Долго держать не буду, сразу же верну.*
  'I will not keep them long, I will return them straight away.'

The Polish data include seven and the English two instances of this strategy, but no similar expressions were located in the German data. Hence, while Russians did not justify their requests as often as did the speakers of the other three languages, they made the request sound plausible in a different way, namely by letting the hearer know that the imposition of the request will be kept to a minimum. Incidentally, this external modifier performs a very similar function to the internal modifier that has been labelled minimizer. Both reduce the duration of the favour and both are particularly frequent in the Russian data.

4. Conclusion

The results of the present study show that in all four examined languages requests can be realized at different levels of directness and their illocutionary force can be downgraded by means of internal (syntactic and lexical) and external modification. Cross-cultural differences have been mainly established at the level of substrategies, their linguistic realizations, restrictions on their applicability and, consequently, the frequencies with which they were used.

The preferences for direct vs. conventionally indirect strategies across languages show a distributional pattern which seems to be in accordance with the geographical position of the countries where the data were collected. The use of imperative constructions increases from West to East: with 4% in the English, 5% in the German, 20% in the Polish, and 35% in the Russian data.

The strong preference for interrogative constructions in the English and German data confirms previous findings (see, for example, Faerch and Kasper 1989). However, while the results for these two languages can be compared with results obtained with the same data collection instrument, under the same contextual conditions and from similar populations, no such comparison can be made for Polish and Russian.

The level of directness characterizing the Polish data illustrates the central role assigned to interrogative constructions by Marcjanik (1997) and confirmed by Lubecka's results (2000), and provides counterevidence to Wierzbicka's early − and still extensively cited − claims (1985, 1991) on the broad applicability of the imperative in Polish.

The amount of imperative constructions in the Russian data is more difficult to interpret. Since nearly two thirds of the respondents opted for a conventionally indirect head act realization, previous results, according to which the imperative constitutes the most frequent request type in Russian (e. g., Rathmayr 1994; Berger 1997; Brehmer 2000; Larina 2003) cannot be confirmed. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that 35% of the Russian requests contained imperative constructions, which by far exceeds the amount of direct requests established for other languages. While research on Hebrew and Spanish has shown both languages as displaying a relatively high level of directness (e. g., Blum-Kulka 1987; Blum-Kulka and House 1989), Hebrew responses to the 'Notes' scenario contain 16% of direct requests and those in Argentinean Spanish only 10%. These figures are even exceeded by the proportion of imperative constructions in my Polish data, where they were employed in 20% of all cases.

Clearly, the choice of indirect vs. direct requests strategies depends on various contextual factors, and the 'Notes' scenario seems to depict a situation with a high degree of agreement on the acceptability of conventional indirectness across cultures. Accordingly, the relatively high frequency of direct requests in some languages can be expected to be even higher in other situations.

Another interesting distributional pattern, again in accordance with the geographical position of the four countries, is that of the request-perspective. The speaker's perspective was most frequent in the English data (73%), slightly less prominent in the German (63%), and much less popular in the Polish (14%) and Russian (4%) data.

The increasing amount of imperative constructions and the hearer's perspective as one moves from West to East both suggest that in Slavic cultures, requests are not regarded as threats to the hearer's face to the degree that they are in Western Europe. This is reflected in the relatively high level of directness and in the tendency to acknowledge the hearer's role in performing the request (cf. Rathmayr 1994).

Another strategy which follows the same distributional pattern is the grounder, whose frequency can be viewed as indicative of the estimated necessity of justifying the intrusion upon the hearer's face in a given culture, and which occurs 81 times in the English, 63 in the German, 59 times in the Polish, and 43 times in the Russian data.

These culture-specific preferences show that cultures differ in the extent to which they assign importance to negative face, thus confirming the validity of the distinction between positive and negative politeness cultures suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) while, at the same time, showing that emphasis on positive vs. negative face needs is a matter of degree rather than a clear-cut distinction (cf. Ogiermann 2006).

The distribution of modifiers further illustrates that although requests were downgraded in all examined languages, the preferences for the various downgrading devices are culture-specific. While the English respondents used consultative devices and the Germans downtoners, Poles and Russians relied more heavily on syntactic downgrading, such as tense and negation.

The low frequency of politeness markers in Polish is equalled out by the strong preference for formulaic preparators and expressions of gratitude emphasizing the imposition of the request and thereby acknowledging the hearer's role. Russian, on the other hand, shows a particular preference for internal and external modifiers minimizing the duration of the favour, and thus showing consideration for the hearer − though diminutives play a much less central role in the two Slavic languages than predicted in previous research.

Despite the criticism directed at Brown and Levinson's theory in the past decades, they must be credited with developing a framework for cross-cultural analysis, for which no alternative has been offered so far. There is no way of applying theories rejecting the possibility of making generalizations and predictions (Mills 2003; Watts 2003) to the contrastive study of politeness phenomena. While analyzing politeness as an unpredictable concept constructed and negotiated in ongoing conversation sheds light on the infinite possibilities of using language, Brown and Levinson's "static", "speaker-oriented" and "speech act based" approach to politeness has revealed divergent patterns in strategy choice across languages.

Even though no utterance is inherently polite but merely 'open to interpretation' as such, the quantitative approach of cross-cultural research has illustrated that there is a great degree of consensus among members of a culture, allowing for predictions to be made on the appropriateness of particular structures in a given context. These predictions are particularly valuable when it comes to communicating in a foreign language. Whether the strategies employed in order to save face result in polite or just "politic" (Watts 2003) behaviour does not really matter as long as by using them, the non-native speaker can avoid being unintentionally rude.

With the ongoing process of globalization and the increasing need for intercultural communication, it is essential to find out more about cultural differences in communicative styles. The insights into cross-cultural differences in requesting behaviour offered in the present study are based on a limited amount of data. While I have restricted my analysis to a situation characterized by the frequent use of conventional indirectness – one of the objectives of this study being to show that the two Slavic languages do not rely as heavily on the imperative as has been claimed in previous research – other situations are likely to lead to different strategy choices.

Mills' analysis (1991), for instance, illustrates the impact of time pressure on requestive behaviour in Moscow's public sphere. The examples cover situations in crowded places, such as shops or public transport, where pragmatic clarity and brevity are a necessity, leaving no time for indirectness and elaborate formulations.

Furthermore, despite the advantages of the DCT, consisting in the comparability and amount of the elicited data, in order to be able to make more refined statements on politeness norms across cultures, other types of data should also be used. Although recordings of authentic conversations are regarded as the ideal data for the study of politeness, focusing on comparing a particular speech act across languages makes this type of data problematic. Hence, speech act studies based on recorded speech tend to be restricted to a specific setting characterized by a frequent occurrence of the speech act under investigation and generally do not attempt cross-cultural comparison (but see Aston 1995).

Linguistic corpora, on the other hand, seem to be a promising resource for speech act studies, and they have been employed for the study of Russian requests. Unfortunately, the Polish and Russian corpora developed so far contain mainly literary texts and are, thus, of limited use for the study of spoken language. Furthermore, despite the ongoing process of tagging, the researchers encounter difficulties in identifying all pertinent constructions[2]. Russian corpus data, however, have proved useful for the investigation of the Russian politeness system from a dia-

chronic perspective. A comparison of request realizations in literary texts from different centuries has shown that ability questions are a new development in Russian (Berger 1997).

Perhaps the high proportion of conventional indirectness in my Russian and Polish data can be ascribed to the heavy influence of Western culture on these cultures since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Changes in the interactive styles of Russian citizens have been described in Kronhaus' study of greetings and partings on Russian TV, where he identifies a shift of Russian politeness norms towards Western (2004: 164, 175). Similarly, Nikolaeva observes that apologies are increasingly used in situations which, according to Russian etiquette, require thanking or saying please (2000: 7).

Bionote

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Notes

1. Since one of the reviewers has pointed out to me that my examples contain grammatical errors, I think it may be necessary to draw attention to the fact that all my examples come from the data. Some of my translations have been further criticized for being unidiomatic. The translations of the German, Polish and Russian examples have been kept as close to the original as possible since a cross-cultural analysis of conventionalized politeness formulae makes it necessary to provide literal rather than idiomatic translations. While an idiomatic translation involves adapting the formula to its culture-specific conceptualization in the language into which it is translated, a contrastive study of politeness phenomena aims at capturing the cultural implications of the formula in the original language, which is often embodied by lexical choices and their culture-specific meanings. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on this paper.
2. Berger (1997: 22) identifies ability questions by combining:

   negation marker + second person forms of *мочь* in the present/conditional

   As my data show, not all constructions in the present tense are negated, in which case they cannot be identified in this way. Negated requests without a modal verb were identified by combining:

   personal pronoun + negation marker + ?

   However, since personal pronouns can be, and often are, left out, a considerable proportion of this type of requests cannot be accessed. Betsch (2003: 280) identifies imperative constructions serving as requests by locating all instances of the word

please, thus excluding imperatives without politeness marking and including other constructions in which *please* is used. The corpora used by these authors can be accessed via: TUSNELDA (Tübinger Sammlung Nutzbarer Empirischer Linguistischer Datenstrukturen), available at: http://www.sfb441.uni-tuebingen.de/tusnelda.html (accessed 05 March 2008).

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