Academic Email Requests: A Pragmalinguistic and Sociopragmatic Comparison between Faculty and Students

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Abstract

Through a case study of the email messages received by a faculty member in a university account in one year, the present study investigates the pragmatic characteristics of one-to-one email requests in a Hong Kong university setting as an attempt to understand the impact of institutional role as a sociopragmatic variable on the pragmalinguistics of email requests. Specifically, it compares the similarities and differences in email requests produced by faculty and students through an analysis of the head acts, openings, supportive moves and closings. Drawing on the findings based upon the authentic email interactions among faculty and students, the study shows that faculty and students share some similarities in their preferred request head act strategies, though they differ in their linguistic realizations of openings, supportive moves and closings. Email requests from faculty are more standardized and formulaic in nature, while students’ requests are more varied in formality, structure and lexical choice. The findings therefore point to some differences in how the faculty and the students perceive, negotiate and enact social relationships in the construction of their email requests in this specific setting. A data-driven pedagogic approach is proposed to raise students’ awareness of the impact of sociopragmatic variables on the pragmalinguistic choices made in academic email requests.

1 Introduction

Pragmatic competence, an aspect of communicative competence which has gained growing attention following the advocacy of communicative language teaching over the past three decades, is concerned with the linguistic ability to behave appropriately in a given situation. It is composed of two components: pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Leech 1983). Pragmalinguistics deals with the linguistic resources which are available for conveying communicative acts and performing pragmatic functions (Kasper and Rose 2002).
Sociopragmatics, in contrast, deals with how social context affects the linguistic resources to employ, the interpersonal meanings to convey and the type of action to take in a given situation (Kasper 1992, 2001). To be pragmatically competent therefore requires one to 1) associate specific linguistic resources with particular meanings and functions and 2) be able to appropriately select from those resources according to an assessment of the socio-contextual factors involved.

Requesting, as one of the most widely researched communicative acts in the literature of pragmatics in general, and in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics in particular, can be broadly defined as a demand made by someone for something from another person, for the benefit of the requester (see, for example, Lee 2011; Nelson et al. 2002). While requests may specifically refer to “attempts on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to perform or to stop performing some kind of action in the interests of the speaker” (Ellis 2012, 172), they may also cover demands for information (Sifianou 1992). Given that requesting can pose a potential threat to the requestee’s negative face (i.e. one’s need for independence, freedom of action and avoidance of imposition), it is considered a face-threatening act, or FTA for short (Brown and Levinson 1987), and some face work has to be done, accordingly, to redress the potential face damage incurred. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the weight of an FTA depends on three variables: the relative power (P) between the speaker and the hearer, the social distance (D) between them, and the absolute ranking (R) of the imposition in a particular culture. As such, the study of requests is relevant to both pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. To master the communicative act of requesting successfully, not only does one have to know and be able to use a number of pragmalinguistic features to realize requests, one should also be capable of choosing appropriate strategies when making requests by assessing the sociopragmatic variables and hence the weight of a request in different social contexts.

Taking both aspects of pragmatic competence into account, this chapter examines the email requests made by students and faculty members in a university setting in the Chinese city of Hong Kong. Specifically, a comparison will be made between the email requests written by students and those produced by faculty members to identify any similarities and differences in the pragmatic characteristics of such email messages. The aim is twofold. First, the paper seeks to explore how requests are actually realized in authentic academic email interactions in a foreign language setting by applying the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding framework. Second, it attempts to examine whether and how institutional role, as a combined factor of age and status, affects the accompanying strategies used when making