Persian-Speaking Translation Trainees Perception of Degree of Politeness of English Request Strategies

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Abstract

This paper was aimed at investigating the Persian-speaking translation trainees perception of politeness of English request strategies. They judged the strategies for requesting (e.g. can, could, will, do, etc.) using the paired comparison method. The findings showed great divergence between the judgment of English native speakers with respect to the degree of politeness of 14 generic request strategies and that of the Persian-speaking translation trainees. The t-test showed no significant difference between the female and male trainees in their judgment of politeness.

1. Introduction: Politeness

In ordinary language use, 'politeness' refers to proper social conduct and tactful consideration of others. Politeness in this non-technical sense contrasts with 'rudeness.' What counts as polite in any given context is socio-culturally and historically determined. In English, 'polite' dates back to the fifteenth century ('polished'); in the seventeenth century, a polite person was 'of refined courteous manners' (*The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*). Politeness was thus associated with the norms of social conduct extant in the upper classes, and this sense of the term has survived

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in collocations such as 'polite society.'

Even though the etymology of 'polite' sheds light on its historic and current usage, 'politeness' as a technical term in linguistic pragmatics refers to a broader, substantially more democratic concept. Since the object of pragmatic inquiry is linguistic action, 'politeness' as a pragmatic notion refers to ways in which linguistic action is carried out—more specifically, ways in which the relational function in linguistic action is expressed. This is about as far as one can go in identifying a common denominator for the variety of politeness concepts which have been proposed in the pragmatics literature.

Most of the work in linguistics, anthropology, and sociology on the form and function of politeness in communication finds its roots in the writings of Goffman (1959, 1971 & 1981). Goffman presents his views of deference in the context of a theory of action or behavior in general, not restricting himself to linguistic concept of deference as "the appreciation an individual shows to another through avoidance or presentation rituals' (p. 77). By appreciation, he means the value ascribed to an individual, e.g. in assigning high status or prestige to that person. By avoidance rituals Goffman means those actions which allow social distancing to be maintained, including the avoidance of certain topics of conversation. Among presentation rituals he includes salutations, invitations, compliments and requests.

In perhaps the most elaborate extension of Goffman's thinking to linguistic aspects of politeness, Brown and Levinson (1978 & 1987) present an

intricate model and a lengthy taxonomy of politeness strategies with examples of linguistic (including pragmatic, lexical, syntactic and semantic) manifestations of those strategies from three very different languages; English, Tzeltal and Tamil. Their politeness strategies include:

1. Notice the listener's interests, wants and needs
2. Use in-group identity markers
3. Seek agreement/avoid disagreement
4. Offer, promise.
5. Give reasons
6. Apologize

The linguistic examples they provide draw most heavily on speech acts and lexical information. For example, in noticing the listener's wants, interests and needs, a strategy discussed is paying a compliment to the listener. Moreover, some of the politeness strategies actually represent names of speech acts (e.g. offers, promises and apologies). The authors conclude finally that "indirect speech acts have as their prime raison d'etre the politeness functions they perform" (p. 147).

R. Lakoff's (1973 & 1974) rules of politeness seem to be based on some of the same assumptions as Brown and Levinsons' work. One of those assumptions is that the relationship between the speaker and hearer governs the linguistic expression of politeness. Lakoff's rules for being polite dictate to the speaker how to act toward the hearer. They tell him/her:

Don't impose

Give options

Make the listener feel good

Lakoff mainly draws upon lexical strategies as examples for these rules. She cites words like *elimination* as the proper way to avoid imposing on the listener and the use of expressions like *y'know* and *I mean* as ways of making him/her feel good.

Fraser (1981) defines politeness as a function which is based on the hearer's perception of an utterance. It can be categorized then as a perlocutionary effect according to Austin's (1962) tripartite division of speech acts. Fraser goes on to discuss the use of various speech act forms, *please* and certain topics as significant components in the hearer's perceptions.

The intent of the study was to investigate how much politeness could be squeezed out of request strategies alone. In other words, the principal research question was: How do Persian-speaking translation trainees perceive the politeness contained in the strategies of request forms? In that light, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1. **There is no significant difference between native English speakers and Persian-speaking translation trainees in their judgment and measure of psychological distance between politeness strategies, as the B.A. program for English Translation is hoped to help develop the minimal communicative competence required for such judgment.**

H2.   There is no significant difference between the mean scores of female and male Persian-speaking translation   trainees as far as it concerns the judgment and measurement of psychological distance between politeness strategies.

H3.   There is no relationship between the gain scores of politeness judgment test and the cumulative average of Persian-speaking translation trainees.

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects. The 100 subjects (56 females and 44 males) who took the Politeness Judgment Test (PJT) were enrolled in the last semester of the program which leads to a B.A. degree in English Translation.

2.2 Materials. A Politeness Judgment Test (the full text of which is attached hereto as Appendix One) was developed using 14 generic request strategies (see Table 1). These strategies were equivalent to the semantic form. These were attached to a standardized lexical content (i.e. lending/borrowing a quarter) to assist the subjects in making their judgments. Table 1 below provides a list of such strategies. The origin of this particular set of request strategies is a corpus of 256 requests produced by 32 native American English speakers in a role-playing experiment. The 14 request strategies in Table 1 below accounted for more than 97% of the corpus.

No.	Strategy	Sentence
1	I wonder if you can	I wonder if you can lend me a quarter?
2	May	May I borrow a quarter?
3	Could	Could you possibly lend me a quarter?
4	Would	Would you lend me a quarter?
5	Do	Do you have a quarter on you?
6	Will	Will you lend me a quarter?
7	Can	Can you lend me a quarter?
8	I came to	I came to ask for a quarter.
9	You can	You can lend me a quarter, can't you?
10	You have	You have a quarter on you, don't you?
11	Where	Where can I borrow a quarter?
12	I want	I want a quarter.
13	Imperative	Give me a quarter.
14	You have to	You have to give me a quarter.

**Table 1. Generic Request Strategies & Sentences
Submitted for Judgment**

2.3 Procedure. Each subject was provided with a set of instructions which read as follows:

Directions: The concept known as politeness as it applies to language use has been defined as a speaker's symbolic subordination to the addressee. That is, the speaker intends to come across as having fewer rights and/or more obligations (i.e. subordinate) than the hearer.

Each row on the next page contains two sentences which express a certain amount of politeness. Your task will be to decide **which member of each pair is more polite.** You should ignore context as much as possible. Rely only on the words of the sentences to make your decision about its politeness.

Put a check mark ( ) against the sentence that you think is more polite. Example:

Shut up ( ) -------------------- Be quiet ( )

Following Edwards (1957), the method of paired comparison was implemented to arrive at a scale of deference for the generic request strategies by Persian-speaking learners of English. This method required that each strategy be compared with every other strategy for the purpose of scaling. Fourteen strategies, when paired with every other one, gave a total of 91 pairs (14x13:2=91). The method developed a Politeness Judgment Test (PJT) consisting of 91 pairs of sentences with a standardized lexical content. See Appendix One for a full text of PJT. The result of this method provided a rank order of the strategies from the most to least deferential and a measure of psychological distance between successive strategies.

2.4 Data Analysis. The checks for PJT were counted to arrive at a new rank order of polite request strategies from the most to the least deferential on the basis of the mean values of the frequencies of politeness judgments which were made for every strategy.

2.5 Results. As mentioned earlier, the Politeness Judgment Test (PJT) was meant to provide a rank order of the strategies from the most to the least deferential and a measure of psychological distance between successive strategies.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the ranking and the judgment by the Persian learners of English. This Table demonstrates that Persian students' judgment concerning six strategies i.e. strategies No. 1, 7, 10, 12, 13 and 14 (42.85% of the cases) was identical with that of the native speakers. However, four strategies, namely, No. 3, 4, 6 and 11 were over-estimated, while strategies No. 2, 5, 8 and 9 were down-estimated.

Table 2. Means of Judgments by Persian-Speaking Translation Trainees Concerning Generic Request Strategies

No.	Judgment Mean	Corresponding Politeness Strategy No.	Politeness Estimation
1	11.820	1 (I wonder if you can)	identical estimation*
2	11.620	3 (Could you possibly)	over-estimated**
3	10.510	4 (Would you)	over-estimated
4	9.340	2 (May I)	down-estimated***
5	7.990	6 (Will you)	over-estimated
6	7.450	11 (Where)	much over-estimated
7	7.090	7 (Can you)	identical estimation

8	6.010	5 (Do you)	down-estimated
9	5.430	8 (I came to)	down-estimated
10	4.800	10 (You have) (Tag Ques.)	identical estimation
11	4.520	9 (You can)	down-estimated
12	2.550	12 (I want)	identical estimation
13	1.340	13 (Imperative)	identical estimation
14	0.530	14 (You have to)	identical estimation

Number of Valid Cases = 100

Identical Estimation = 6/14 = 42.8571%

Over-Estimated = 4/14 = 28.5715%

Down-Estimated = 4/14 = 28.5715%

*   means that Persian-speaking translation trainees judgment of politeness is identical with that of English native speakers

**   means that Persian-speaking translation trainees upgraded the strategy, giving a higher rank to the degree of politeness of the strategy in question.

***   means that Persian-speaking translation trainees downgraded the strategy, giving a lower rank to the degree of politeness of the strategy in question.

Table 3. Comparison of English Speakers & Persian Learners Judgment of Politeness Strategies

No.	Native Speakers of English	Persian-Speaking Translation Trainees	Politeness Estimation & Rank Ordering
1	I wonder if you can	I wonder if you can	identical estimation
2	May I	Could you possibly	over-estimated
3	Could you possibly	Would you	over-estimated
4	Would you	May I	down-estimated
5	Do you	Will you	over-estimated
6	Will you	Where	much over-estimated
7	Can you	Can you	identical estimation
8	I came to	Do you	down-estimated
9	You can	I came to	down-estimated
10	You have (Tag Question)	You have (Tag Question)	identical estimation
11	Where	You can	down-estimated
12	I want	I want	identical estimation

13	Imperative	Imperative	identical estimation
14	You have to	You have to	identical estimation

Number of Valid Cases = 100

Identical Estimation = 6/14 = 42.8571%

Over-Estimated = 4/14 = 28.5715%

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*   **means that Persian-speaking translation trainees judgment of politeness is identical with that of English native speakers**

**   **means that Persian-speaking translation trainees upgraded the strategy, giving a higher rank to the degree of politeness of the strategy in question.**

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2.5.1. Mean Score & Standard Deviation

Table 4 below shows the mean score and standard deviation of PJT, the mean score being equal to 74.820 out of a maximum score of 91, with the standard deviation of 3.735. It implies that the chances are 68.26% that a subject selected at random will be within one SD (above or below) the mean in the PJT, i.e. within 71.085 and 78.555. The rounded-up mean score of 75

indicates that the subjects had not developed a full-fledged sensitivity to deferential rank ordering and the psychological distance between the strategies.

Table 4. Politeness Judgment Test Mean,
Standard Deviation and Variance

Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
74.820	3.735	13.947

2.5.2. Critical t Value

In order to observe the significance of the difference, if any, between the mean scores of female and male subjects in the PJT, a t-test was conducted. Table 5 below shows the result.

Table 5. Comparison of Female/Male Mean Scores:
T-Test for PJT

Group	No. of Cases	Mean	S.D.	SE of Mean	T-Value	d.f.	2-Tail Sig.
Female	56	74.6071	4.314	0.576			
Male	44	75.0909	2.860	0.431	-0.67	98	0.503

Maximum Total Score = 91

Gosset's t Critical Value for df. of 98 = 1.980

The result of the t-test demonstrates that, using a two-tailed test at the .05 level of significance with 98 degrees of freedom, the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of female and male subjects in their judgment of politeness is not rejected, the reason being that the relevant t critical value is not equal to or does not exceed Gosset's t-critical value of 1.980. Non-rejection of the null hypothesis denotes that there is no significant difference between the Persian female and male learners of English in their judgment of politeness, and that the chance or sampling error probably accounted for the difference.

2.5.3. Correlation Coefficient

In order to investigate the relationship between the student's judgment of politeness on the one hand, and their cumulative average on the other, the Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation was obtained. Table 6 below shows the result.

Table 6. Correlation Coefficient Between Cumulative Average and Politeness Judgment Test

	PJT
Cumulative Average	0.1027 (P=0.309)

As Table 6 shows, the relationship between the subjects' cumulative average and their politeness judgment is negligible, with the relevant r being equal to 0.1027.

The first hypothesis was rejected since there existed a distance greater than 4.3 SD's between the subjects' mean score and the maximum score of the politeness judgment test, supporting the common sense prediction that there, in fact, exists a significant difference between the native speakers of English and Persian in their judgment of politeness of various generic strategies and the measures of psychological distance between them.

As for the second hypothesis, the result of the relevant t-test showed that there did not exist a significant difference between female and male subjects in their judgment of politeness of the generic strategies.

Concerning the third hypothesis, the result of the relevant coefficient of correlation showed that there existed a negligible relationship between the subjects' judgment of politeness and their cumulative average.

3. Pedagogical Implications

We can conclude from this research that there may be profound cultural/linguistic difference in the perception of politeness.

1. At the very early stages of instructing the students on the modals, they should grow sensitive to the psychological distance created between every two generic request strategies, through the choice of the modal. It should be noted that almost 60% of generic request strategies was misjudged by the subjects in the present study.

2. Students should be trained to grow sensitive to factors and parameters, such as age, gender, power, familiarity, degree of indebtedness and context of situation (situational variables) which affect their choice of the degree of directness/indirectness, formality/informality, and/or register of their speech acts.

3. The teaching methodology is required to equip the translation trainees with the means of choosing the appropriate words, phrases and modality markers for the realization of their speech acts.

4. When instructing students on how to make requests for information and requests for service, one should clarify the relationship between the age of the addressee and use of title of respect, as well as the effect of familiarity between speakers on the use of attention-getters. Likewise, the relationship between familiarity and the length of utterance used to request a favor which usually implies the use of syntactic and lexical downgrades, should be delineated.

5. Attention needs to be paid to several potential areas of socio-pragmatic deficiency relative to requesting demonstrated by the learners in this study, such as the lack of downgraders to soften a request, and a tendency to use direct requests in situations where indirect requests are the norm. Incorrect socio-pragmatic choices such as these may make a learner's speech appear impolite or overtly aggressive.

6. As more research studies delineate the rules of language use, textbooks must reflect our growing understanding of what constitutes sociopragmatic competence in a given language. Information such as that pertinent to the effects of age or familiarity between speakers on the use of various speech-

act strategies can be presented in textbooks from beginning levels on.

7. Students should be made aware of the fact that English and Persian have their own unique "cultural ways of speaking", and that the clashes between different interactional styles can lead to interactional miscommunication.

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Appendix One Politeness Judgment Test (PJT)

Directions: The concept known as politeness, as it applies to language use, has been defined as a speaker's symbolic subordination to the addressee. That is, the speaker intends to come across as having fewer rights and/or more obligations (i.e. subordinate) than the hearer.

Each row on the next page contains two sentences which express a certain amount of politeness. Your task will be to decide **which member of each pair is more polite.** You should ignore context as much as possible. Rely only on the words of the sentences to make your decision about its

politeness.

Put a check mark ( ) against the sentence that you think is more polite.

Example:
Shut up ( ) -------------------- Be quiet ( )

Politeness Judgment Test

1a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )
1b. May I borrow a quarter? ( )

2a. You have to give me a quarter. ( )
2b. Give me a quarter. ( )

3a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
3b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

4a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )
4b. Will you lend me a quarter ( )

5a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )
5b. Give me a quarter. ( )

6a. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

6b. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

7a. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )
7b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

8a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
8b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

9a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
9b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

10a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )
10b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

11a. I want a quarter. ( )
11b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

12a. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )
12b. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

13a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )
13b. I want a quarter. ( )
14a. Give me a quarter. ( )
14b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )
15a. I want a quarter. ( )

15b. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

16a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
16b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

17a. Give me a quarter. ( )
17b. I want a quarter. ( )

18a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
18b. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

19a. Give me a quarter. ( )
19b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

20a. You have to give me a quarter. ( )
20b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

21a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )
21b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

22a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
22b. May I borrow a quarter? ( )

23a. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )
23b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

24a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
24b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

25a. Give me a quarter. ( )
25b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

26a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
26b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

27a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
27b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

28a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )
28b. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

29a.   May I borrow a quarter? ( )
29b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

30a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
30b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

31a. Give me a quarter. ( )
31b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

32a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

32b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

33a. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

33b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

34a. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

34b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

35a. I want a quarter. ( )

35b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

36a. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

36b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

37a. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

37b. I want a quarter? ( )

38a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

38b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

39a. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

39b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

40a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

40b. Give me a quarter. ( )

41a. I want a quarter. ( )
41b. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

42a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )
42b. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

43a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
43b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

44a. You have to give me a quarter. ( )
44b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

45a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
45b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

46a. You have to give me a quarter. ( )
46b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

47a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )
47b. May I borrow a quarter? ( )

48a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )
48b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

49a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

49b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

50a. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

50b. I want a quarter. ( )

51a. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

51b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

52a. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

52b. Give me a quarter. ( )

53a. I want a quarter. ( )

53b. May I borrow a quarter? ( )

54a. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

54b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

55a. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

55b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

56a. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

56b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

57a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

57b. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

58a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

58b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

59a. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

59b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

60a. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

60b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

61a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

61b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

62a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

62b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

63a. I want a quarter. ( )

63b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

64a. I want a quarter. ( )

64b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

65a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

65b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )

66a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
66b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

67a. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )
67b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

68a. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )
68b. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )

69a. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )
69b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

70a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
70b. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )

71a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
71b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

72a. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )
72b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

73a. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )
73b. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )

74a. May I borrow a quarter? (　)
74b. Give me a quarter. (　)

75a. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? (　)
75b. You have to give me a quarter. (　)

76a. Will you lend me a quarter? (　)
76b. Give me a quarter. (　)

77a. Do you have a quarter on you? (　)
77b. Would you lend me a quarter? (　)

78a. I want a quarter. (　)
78b. You have to give me a quarter. (　)

79a. I want a quarter. (　)
79b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? (　)

80a. Would you lend me a quarter? (　)
80b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? (　)

81a. Do you have a quarter on you? (　)
81b. I came to ask for a quarter. (　)

82a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
82b. Give me a quarter. ( )

83a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
83b. I came to ask for a quarter. ( )

84a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )
84b. Where can I borrow a quarter? ( )

85a. Would you lend me a quarter?
85b. I wonder if you could lend me a quarter? ( )

86a. Can you lend me a quarter? ( )
86b. Could you possibly lend me a quarter? ( )

87a. You have a quarter on you, don't you? ( )
87b. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )

88a. You can lend me a quarter, can't you? ( )
88b. You have to give me a quarter. ( )

89a. May I borrow a quarter? ( )
89b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

90a. Give me a quarter. ( )

90b. Would you lend me a quarter? ( )

91a. Will you lend me a quarter? ( )
91b. Do you have a quarter on you? ( )