
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Pragmatic Study on Request Behavior in Instant Message: On Characteristics and Validity

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| ABSTRACT

Instant messaging is a powerful communication tool people use to make a request. This paper analyzes the speech act of making and answering requests in instant messages from a pragmatic approach. The statistics result from 217 original instant messages collected, among which 137 are concerned with the process of "asking" and 80 with "answering". These messages are analyzed in terms of "directness" and "indirectness". The result reveals that the degree of directness is differed by illocution, and it is the degree of intimacy that influences the choice of direct and indirect in making a request, while the degree of politeness is mainly influenced by the nature of an event itself. It is hoped that the result of this study will help people better communicate with instant messages domestically and cross-culturally.

| KEYWORDS

Pragmatic approach; request; instant message; illocution; politeness; directness

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 23 March 2023

PUBLISHED: 01 April 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.4.3

1. Introduction

1.1 Preliminary Concerns

"Request" is an inevitable topic in a social community. Nowadays, with the development of telecommunication transmission systems and the popularization of cell phones, a new approach to making requests comes into people's life. Through the instant message, one can express his or her needs and wants directly or implicitly, and the receivers also get their own ways to respond. Generally speaking, the instant message is a special means of communication, which bears both characteristics of face-to-face and text interaction. Since the instant message is such a special communicational approach, are there any features when people make and answer requests through instant messages? Can the characteristics be explained from a pragmatic approach? Compared with other communicational means of making a request, how to judge the effectiveness of requests made via instant message?

2. Data Collection and Classification

On the basis of the previous suppositions, the statistics result from 217 original instant messages are collected, among which 137 are concerning with the process of "asking" and 80 with "answering". Thirty-one participants were each asked to retrieve from their mobile social apps the "request messages" and to transcribe them as accurately as possible, i.e. exactly as the display screens. For the concern of diversification, the participants are from different occupational areas. Among them, there are 11 post-graduates, 5 under-graduates, 4 teachers, 3 civil servants, 5 company employees, 1 military officer and 2 housewives. The messages are part of privacy, though it is not easy to collect these data. Most of the statistics in this essay are provided by acquaintances and friends of the author. After close examination, the following classifications can be made.

Categories	Secondary Classification	Examples	Number
Directness	Polite Request	Hi Aiden; I am a graduate of the class of 2009. I would like to ask about the postgraduate entrance examination review... Thank you!	18 / 137
	Request with Reasons	Urgent! I am going to be the host of a party tomorrow. But I'm working on a new case and another case analysis report to write. I don't have any time to sort out the words! be good! Help me.	23 / 137
	Imperative Request	Please sign for the official document.	7 / 137
Indirectness	"Says One but Means Another"	I'm so hungry. When will you come back?	53 / 137
	"Talk Around"	Cherry blossoms are about to bloom.	36 / 137

Table 1 Classification and Features in Making a Request

After a request is made, the way of answering also varies in different ways, especially when a request is to be refused.

Manner	Features	Examples
Direct	"No" Directly	All dormitory keys must be handed over to the boarding office before leaving school. Boarding school is not allowed during the summer vacation.
	Apology; Explain the Reason	I'm so sorry. I've been really...too busy. I have to write the thesis and prepare for the final exam. About that translation. . . Anyway, I'm sorry, next time I will help you translate! Forgive me, the poor child.
Indirect	Shift the Topic	A: I saw you carried a lot of big and small bags. It seems that today's shopping is quite fruitful. I have to come and visit. B: Well, I went to the supermarket without buying anything. By the way, have you asked the monitor about the sports meeting?
	Wordplay	A : 今天风和日丽, 你也应该休息一下。怎么样, 一起转转? B : 转啊? 本来大脑就昏了, 再转岂不要转晕了? 还怎么奋斗啊。

Table 2 Classification & Features in Answering a Request

As Tables 1 and 2 show, a request can be assessed in terms of varying directness. Below the level of "Direct" and "indirect" divisions, there are also secondary categories (Cohen, 2020). In communication via instant message, the choice of directness is influenced by different factors compared to face-to-face interaction. For example, in the data collected for this paper, a message written by an undergraduate to her mother may illustrate this diversification:

Example 1:

Mom, have you finished the meeting? Are you still going to the supermarket? Wait...wait...wait! If we don't go, I have other things to do.

This message shows the great dissatisfaction and impatience of the addresser. Though it is not so polite to consideration of the addressee's seniority in a family as an instant message, it can be accepted. However, if the same words are produced in the office of the addressee, with many of her colleagues on the spot, it is not acceptable. It seems that people in a close relationships tend to make more indirect requests. But they usually chose to answer a request in a direct manner. The discourse is frequently shifted in short message communication, which is probably for the existence of unavoidable intervals.

3. Discussion

3.1 Directness as an Assessment

Requests are assessed in terms of varying directness in the following three types: A locutionary act is an act of saying something; the illocutionary act is an act performed in saying something; and a perlocutionary act is performed by or as a result of saying something (Mey, 2007). Here is an example of an indirect request.

Example 2:

A: You are so angry. You don't want to see me anymore.

B: I want to eat the dry pot in the canteen.

The context of this conversation is that A has done something that made B really angry. A begged for B's forgiveness but failed at first. After a whole week, A sent B a text message, expecting for A's forgiveness. Then he received B's reply. The directness of this conversation can be analyzed as shown in Table 3.

	A	B
Locutionary Act	A asks B if she's still angry; A asks if B would like to go out with him.	B thinks that the hotpot in the public square is delicious.
Illocutionary Act	By saying that, A guesses that B might have cooled down, and it's time to solve the problem.	By saying "想吃广场那家干锅", B means that she'd like to have dinner with A.
Perlocutionary Act	A and B go out for dinner, and their conflicts resolved.	

Table 3 Analysis of the Directness of Example 2

Here a direct request is analyzed to make a comparison.

Example 3:

A: Can I use your QQ account? I will add some friends.

B: Use my QQ to add your friends? I don't quite understand. Besides, what if there is a secret and you accidentally see it?

A: You can't let it go if you have a secret. I have a new account, and I just want to add some of our common friends.

B: Oh, oh. I see. But don't peek at the message.

	A	B
Locutionary Act	A asks B's QQ number.	B considers about the "secret".
Illocutionary Act	A makes a request, hoping to use B's QQ.	B tries to refuse A's request.
Perlocutionary Act	A gets B's QQ number.	B gives her QQ number to A.

Table 4 Analysis of the Directness of Example 2

Tables 3 and 4 show that, in regard to the illocutionary act, the indirect request is more complex than the direct one. Directness means the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution (Li, 2017). A request strategy is the obligatory choice of the level of directness by which the request is realized. The more direct a given request strategy type, the shorter the inferential path to the requestive interpretation; such a request can then be said to be more illocutionary transparent^[4]. With direct request, the illocutionary force is indicated in the utterance by grammatical, lexical or semantic means. Indirect requests express the illocution via fixed linguistic conventions established in the speech community or require the hearer to compute the illocution from the interaction of the locution with its context (Thomas, 2008). Therefore, it is illocution that differs in the degree of directness.

3.2 Intimacy as an Influential Factor

Since directness is a prominent parameter in the categorization of text messages of request, what factors decide the degree of directness? Let's start with the following examples.

Examples 4:

A: What are you so slow like a turtle? Five minutes! Hurry up.

B: I'm coming.

Examples 5:

A: My notebook crash again!

B: I'm back!

Examples 6:

A: Are you busy now?

B : Sure. I'm a busy man, concentrating on academics.

A : You need to relax. How about I tell you a joke?

Examples 7 :

A : Listen! Linsey is so hungry that her stomach is growling to wake her up. So... how about...Let's go!

Examples 8 :

A : The dumplings are yummy!

B : Yeah. They are delicious.

A : What do you think?

B: I'm coming. See you in the canteen.

Example 9 :

A: I really want to invite you to the cinema. But I'm not sure if you'd like to go. Have a nice day.

B: I really want to see the movies. But I'm just too busy recently, with many exams and papers. Have a nice day.

Example 4 and Example 5 are interactions between lovers. Example 4 is more like an instruction, which may not be well received in daily communication. However, for the close relationship between the addresser and the addressee, it is not only accepted but also evokes particular affection in the latter party; say, the boy would think that his girlfriend is so cute and lovely, and the term *turtle* may even become a target for jokes. Example 6 takes place between good friends. By saying *I'm busy. Are you busy?* A is not asking a question. In fact, he's making an invitation or asking B to chat with him to kill time. B, who keeps a close relationship with A, sees through B's intention and makes a joke by saying *Sure. I'm a busy man, concentrating on academics*. At last, A tells what he really wants to do indirectly. Example 7 is similar to Example 6. By stating that someone besides her is hungry, the addresser expressed her request: *I'm hungry now; I want to eat something*. Example 8 happens between two colleagues who are not as close as friends or lovers aforementioned but are familiar with each other. The similar living and work environment provides them with some common knowledge and understandings, which keep the conversation going. Example 9 is between people who are not on familiar terms. It is direct and polite.

A conclusion can be drawn that it is the degree of intimacy that influences the choice of directness or indirectness in making a request through an instant message. People in an intimate relationship tend to make both direct and indirect requests, but in answering, they are more direct about whether the request is to be enabled or refused. Those who are only casual acquaintances or strangers are more direct in delivering their needs and wants with great politeness. Most frequently, people who share the relationship between the aforementioned poles, say, close or plain, are more indirect when asking others to do something.

3.3 Politeness of Request

Politeness can be understood as a social phenomenon; for example, offering a seat to the elderly one on a bus is considered polite behavior. It is a means to achieve good interpersonal relationships (Cohen, 2020). By making a request, the speaker infringes on the hearer's freedom from imposition. The hearer may feel that the request is an intrusion on his\her freedom of action or even as a show in the exercise of power. As for the speaker, he\she may hesitate to make the request for fear of exposing a need or out of fear of possibly making the hearers lose face (Liu, 2020). In this sense, requests are face-threatening to both the speaker and the hearer and should be delicate.

Example 10:

A: Hi, Mandy. How are you? I'd like to ask where do you usually do your hair?

B: The one at the South Gate. Are you here?

A: Yeah. I'm here on holiday with my colleague.

B: Why didn't you tell me earlier?! Where are you now?

In Example 10, the first speaker tries to make a request by asking something which seems to be irrelevant to her real intention. She uses the term *Hi. How are you?* to start the conversation politely and avoid the possibility of being refused with a consultative question. B directly understands that A may arrive in her city, and A's question is actually a request. But it is not wise to provide help directly because B is not sure if A has come with somebody and they want to get together without others' interference. She just answers the question and goes on to make the situation clear. This is a necessary way to save her own face and avoid making A feel embarrassed. At last, when everything becomes clear, the request which is posed at the very beginning is answered in accordance with the addresser's initial expectation. Compared to face-to-face communication, the degree of politeness in the instant message is largely decided by the nature of the event itself. Other factors say the specific context, distance and social class, which are always taken care of in a real-life conversation, should be noticed but are not the essential ones.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the speech act of making and answering requests in instant messages from a pragmatic approach. The objective of the study is to investigate the strategies of request employed in an instant message. The result shows that the degree of directness is differed by illocution, and it is the degree of intimacy that influences the choice of direct and indirect in making a request. Besides, the degree of politeness is mainly influenced by the nature of an event itself. By reading the results of this research, students as foreign language learners can learn that performing requests act via language can be conducted in various ways, and requests can be better understood cross-culturally by employing certain strategies. However, this paper only focuses on the types of requests and request strategies viewed from a pragmatic approach. Further studies are suggested to conduct research on requests analyzed from different perspectives, such as sociopragmatic analysis.

Funding: This research was funded by Gansu College Students' Employment and Entrepreneurial Ability Improvement Project in 2022(2022-43) and the 2022 Gansu Medical College Research Fund Project (GY-2022RS001)

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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