THE USE OF MODALS IN REQUESTS: A COMMUNICATIVE STUDY

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The purpose of this paper is to study how sociolinguistic variation is manifested in language use with reference to making requests in English ;and to investigate the usage of modal auxiliaries in requests on the basis of a questionnaire. In this case, one has to view language in its broader context which extends beyond the linguistic context, i. e., one has to view language in its communicative context which includes the total context of situation for the speaker-hearer behaviour.

Communicative context means the speaker's "competence for use", whereas the linguistic context means the speaker's" competence for grammar" (Hymes, 1972 =296). Communicative context includes paralinguistic factors which are both attitudinal and social. Among the attitudinal factors, the intuition, emotion, and attitude of the speaker/writer lend great significance to the communicative role of language behaviour. For example, the same sentence or utterance may have different attitudes of the speaker such as happiness, anger, or sympathy, depending on the tone of voice and intonation.

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Example:

1. What are you doing?

This sentence can have at least three different emotional attitudes:

 a. Simple question of neutral nature with a falling intonation.

 b. An accusing exclamation with prominent stress on" what" and "doing".

 c. An affectionate way of talking to children with a rising intonation in a gentle voice.

As for the social factors included in communicative context, situational context and role relationship are important factors for language choice and behaviour. Language activity in various contexts reveals differences in the type of language chosen as appropriate for such context. These factors form the major components of registers.

According to Halliday et al (1964:p. 90), register is classified into three major dimensions: field of discourse, mode and discourse, and style of discourse. Field of discourse refers to the subject matter: technical, literary, journalistic, etc. Mode refers to the medium of language activity – mainly spoken and written. Style of discourse refers to the relations among the participants which determine the language forms according to the relative status and the degree of intimacy. The scale of formality in language use moves from formal to informal. This aspect of sociolinguistic variation of language in relation to the structure of English will be focused on later in this paper.

Requests in English and their Forms:

The speech act of requesting can be realized in different sentences. The imperative is the basic form of a request which is shown in (2a) below. But an imperative construction may be modified by the addition of certain lexical items, such as please and kindly (bi), or certain conditional clauses like if you don't mind (bii). They may be changed into different types of sentence by the addition of such grammatical constructions as would you mind (c. i), or I wonder if (c. ii) in more indirect requests.

2. a. Take it away.
b. i. Take it away, please.
i. i. Take it away, if you don't mind.
c. i. Would you mind taking it away ?
ii. I wonder if you could take it away.

 All these additional forms, derived from the basic imperative construction, indicate a softening effect on the original imperative.

Linguistic variation in the speech act of requests reveals important dimensions of formality and politeness. These are determined by the interpersonal relationship together with the other contextual factors included in register. Formality is defined as "the range of variation reflecting adjustments to the
audience (Turner:1973: 186). In other words, it is affected in different ways by the relative status and intimacy between speakers and hearers.

But a study of formality is not easy when other factors of politeness are introduced. It is believed that polite forms are usually marked by a high degree of formality. But politeness does not always correspond in a one-to-one step to formality. It is possible to be impolite in formal language and also possible to be informal but still polite. The degree of formal-ity is also determined by interpersonal relationships. We tend to be more polite when talking to a person whom we do not know very well, or a senior person in terms of age and social status.

One of the main features of linguistic variation according to formality and politeness is shown in the use of modal auxiliaries. These modals operate as grammatical devices to formalize the stylistic variation in the speech act of requests. "Modal auxiliaries have several morphological and syntactic characteristics in common, distinct from lexical verbs and primary auxiliaries". (Qurik et al, 1972:83-84) see also (Palmer. 1972:16; and (Palmer. 1979:82); and (Crystal &Dawy. 1969:101) for a similar view. But the analysis of the modals is not easy due to the multi-functional nature of these verbs. They cover a wide range of uses such as permission, willingness, futurity, ability, possibility, necessity, obligation …. etc. The uses are even made more complex by the multi-functional uses of each item of these auxiliaries.

Example:

a. He can drive a trailer.

b. Cigarettes can seriously damage your health.

c. Can I do it for you?

Can here expresses ability(a), possibility (b), and permission(c).

The Use of Modals in Bequests. . . A Questionnaire.

With all the previously discussed points and problematic areas in mind, a form of questionnaire was prepared by the researchers to investigate how modal auxiliaries are used in requests. The questionnaire consists of the following

two parts:

Part one:

This part is designed to show how formality and -politeness interact with each other, and where each of the modals is placed on these scales. The five-point scale of formality is based on (Quirk et al:1972, and Joos:1961), and the politeness scale is devised by the researchers themselves. The politeness scale is devised in a way to correspond to that of formality respective-ly. The ten sentences in part one are all derived from the basic form in sentence (1); i. e. the meaning of all the ten sentences remains constant.

The hypothesis is that formality and. politeness would show a close connection under normal circumstances, and that they would move roughly in the given order. However, for the sake of simplicity, the number of sentences is reduced to the

minimum, and the situation for the speech act of requesting is not specified for the same reason.

Question one:

Where would you place each of the following sentences on the scales of formality and politeness ? Please indicate by the alphabet. If it is difficult to choose,

please write like B-C or A-B.

	A	B	C	D	E
Formality scale	Rigid (frozen)	Formal	Neutral	Informal	Familiar (intimate)
Politeness scale	Very polite	Polite	Neutral	Casual	Impolite (vulgar)

Figure (1): Scales of Formality and Politeness

Sentences:

1. Pass me the salt. (/)
2. Please, pass me the salt. (/)
3. Will you pass me the salt? (/)
4. Would you pass me the salt? (/)
5. Can you pass me the salt? (/)
6. Gould you pass me the salt? (/)
7. "Do you mind if you pass me the salt? (/)
8. Would you mind passing me the salt? (/)
9. Would you be kind enough to pass me the salt? (/)
10. I wonder if you could pass me the salt. (/)

Part Two:

The second part of the questionnaire (question two)is designed to determine how request forms relate to interpersonal relationships, such as relative status in social standing, age, as well as the degree of intimacy. It is assumed that formality and politeness will increase in proportion as the addressee becomes more senior and superior, and in inverse proportion as the addressee becomes more intimate.

Question Two

Which sentences would you choose in each of the following situations ? please indicate by the alphabet:

1- to your family member.   ( ) A- pass me the salt.

2- to your friend   ( ) B- please, pass me the salt.

3- to your acquaintance   ( ) C-will you pass me the salt please?

4- to a stranger   ( )   D- would you pass me the salt?

5- to an older person   ( ) E-would you mind passing me the salt?

6- to a younger person.   ( ) F- would be kind enough to pass me the salt?

7- to your superior   ( ) G- I wonder if you could pass me the pass?

8- to your inferior

Procedure:

Forty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to native speakers of English and 36 were returned. The main purpose of the survey was to investigate the use of modal auxiliaries in requests with special emphasis on the framework of formality and politeness.

At the same time, it was intended to find out any variation in the usage of request forms according to sex, age, and social class. For this purpose, it was necessary to get native informants of varied backgrounds in terms of sex, age, and social standing. The composition of 36 informants according to the three categories is classified as follows:

Sex	Male:17	Female: 19	
Age	Under 30: 15	Between30-45: 14	Over 45: 15
Social Class	Middle class:13	Students: 8	Working class: 15

Figure 2: Composition of Informants

The classification of social classes is based on a rough subjective estimate of the occupation and educational back-ground. The students are treated as a separate social group because it was suspected that their role in the society -might have some linguistic effects. Intentionally, students special-izing in linguistics or other related subjects were excluded from sampling for obvious reasons.

Part one:

The figures in the following analysis of the data were obtained by counting the number of responses. When an informant responded with two units such as 'A-B' or 'B - C', each item was counted as 0. 5

	A	B	C	D	E	a	b	c	d	e
1	11	1	5	4	14	0	0	3	12	21
2	0	15	15	4	2	0	4. 5	2. 5	8. 5	0. 5
3	4	12	15	3	3	0	3	12	11. 5	9. 5
4	2	5	17	11	1	1	9	13	8. 5	4. 5
5	3	2	16	14	1	0	5	18	9	4
6	0	7	18	8	3	0	10. 5	19. 5	6	0
7	7	18	4	4	5	8	16	4	6	2
8	5	15	11	5	0	6	20	4	6	0
9	14	15	1	3	3	25	10	0	1	0
10	3	19	7	6	1	11	18	4	3	0

Figure 3: Responses to the sentences in question one

It is not easy to interpret the general tendency concerning the use of modal auxiliaries from the above numbers and to come to any definite conclusion with respect to the relationship between formality and politeness. Yet the following correspondences between them can be observed:

Sentence (1) is the best example for the conflict between the two norms. It is distributed throughout the formality, but much more thickly distributed at both extremes   (rigid and familiar). However, it is generally agreed to be impolite on the politeness scale. Please in sentence (2) seems to indicate politeness because the distribution is

more pushed towards left on the politeness scale. In contrast, the request form with the modal will in sentence (3) is felt to be more formal than polite, judging from the differences in the contrasted distribution of B-C vs. c-d.

The results for would, sentence (4), and could, sentence (6) show that would, in particular, falls behind in formality compared with will, though they are rated

as almost equivalent in politeness. Could is less formal than Can though it is rated higher than either will and can in politeness.

The expressions making use of mind in sentences (7)and (8) are pushed more towards left on the formality scale, and also to left on the politeness scale. Sentence (8)was never labeled as familiar or impolite. The expressions in

sentences (8)and (9) with would are dominantly interpreted as formal and very polite. The apparently contradictory results between these last sentences and sentence (5) can be accounted for by their degree of complexity in syntactic construction. These complex constructions refer to possibility or kindness on the part of the addressee, rather than a direct request. Making a statement about one's own wish such as in sentence (10) is considered more polite than formal as is shown by the results for sentence (10) on the formality and the politeness scales.

For Part One, it can be summarized from the above results that there is an observable distinction between formality and politeness elements. That is to say, will and the request forms with 'mind' tend to facilitate formality rather than politeness, whereas please and the statements about one's own wish tend to facilitate politeness.

Furthermore, complex constructions making use of would facilitate both formality and politeness, in contrast with simple usage of would. These findings can duly be considered in accordance with the theoretical distinction made between formality and politeness on page(4). Above all, the politeness elements deduced here are closely connected with the speaker's attitudinal factors.

Part Two:

The figures in the following diagram show the number of occurrences in the responses. When an informant chose more than one expression, each was counted as one point.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	13	14	1	8	1	0	0
2	10	16	1	6	2	1	1
3	0	11	3	14	7	0	1
4	0	3	0	8	15	4	6
5	0	0	0	5	18	9	4
6	1	14	3	7	6	5	0
7	0	0	0	5	15	14	2
8	2	10	7	9	6	1	1

Figure 4: Responses to the sentences in question two

There is a great similarity between addressing one's family member and one's friend, sentences (1 & 2). Similar results are shown by the sentences of speaking to a younger person (6), and to one's inferior (8). It is particularly evident that in speaking to a younger person, the expression (B), (politeness element according to the findings in Part One) is dominant, while (C), (formality element), occurred only three times.

Also, a different degree of intimacy between a friend and an acquaintance is indicated by the increase of more formal/ polite forms (D & E) in sentence (3), and by the increase of less formal/ polite forms(A, B & C) in sentence (2).

Speaking to an older person sentence (5), and to one's superior (7), also presents similar patterns of distribution (A, B & C) are never adopted, while a more formal/ polite form (E), is most favoured.

Speaking to a stranger makes it necessary to use a formal/ polite expression such as (G). But (G) is only chosen six times, though it was expected to have more favourites because it is a politeness element according to the findings of part One. (E) again has the highest rate which contains the
formality element.

It must be noticed that the expressions (B, D and E) are distributed throughout with relatively high frequency, and that (A) and (C) are critical expressions to a senior or superior person, as well as to a stranger.

The diagram below shows the results of Question two analyses further according to the three categories of Sex, Age and Social Class.
Sex: Male 17 (the first number). Female 19 (the second number after colon).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	8:4	5:8	3:0	6:2	1:0		
2	2:0	7:10	4:1	3:5	2:0		
3	0:0	8:3	2:1	3:11	4:3		
4	0:0	1:2	0:0	3:5	9:6	3:1	2:5
5	0:0	0:0	0:0	5:2	4:11	6:4	2:3
6	0:1	3:8	4:3	2:5	6:1	3:3	0:0
7	0:0	1:0	0:0	2:3	9:9	7:0	0:6
8	2:0	4:7	4:2	3:7	1:4	0:0	3:0

Figure 5: Responses in terms of sex

According to sex, there are some differences to be noted. For family members and friends, women tend to favour the expression with (please)(politeness element), while men adopt other expressions like (A) and (C) as well. In speaking to an older person, women concentrate on would you mind. . . (formality element), while men choose all the three varieties of would forms equally. Also, in addressing one's superior, I wonder if. . . (politeness element) does not occur among men, whereas would you be kind. . (formality and politeness element) does not occur among women. One might be able
to conclude that women tend to emphasize politeness elements more, whereas men
tend to adopt formality elements as well as politeness elements.

Social class (11 middle class on the left; 9 students: number in the middle class ; and 12 working class: the number on the right)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	3:6:3	8:2:3	0:0:0	2:4:1	1:0:0	0:0:0	0:0:0
2	1:2:0	9:3:3	2:1:1	2:3:3	1:0:1	0:0:0	1:0:0
3	0:0:0	6:2:3	1:2:0	4:4:5	1:2:2	0:0:0	1:1:2
4	0:0:0	2:0:1	0:0:0	2:4:1	7:4:2	3:0:1	3:1:1
5	0:0:0	0:0:0	0:0:0	1:3:1	7:4:4	3:2:3	1:0:2
6	0:0:0	4:3:3	1:2:3	2:2:2	3:2:1	4:0:1	0:0:0
7	0:0:0	0:1:0	0:0:0	1:4:0	2:2:8	7:2:4	1:0:1
8	0:2:0	5:3:2	1:2:3	2:0:2	3:0:3	0:0:0	1:1:1

Figure 6: Responses in terms of age

It is not easy to draw some conclusive ideas when it comes to talking about social class. The middle class seems to overlap to a considerable degree with older generation group, and the same applies to the students with the younger generation (see classification of Age groups below). It is striking that the working class contrasts with the middle class in the use of please. Among the former class, the use of please is less whereas it is almost emphasized through the latter class.

Generally speaking, the working class seems to be placed between the middle
class and the students in the relative emphasis of formality vs. politeness.

Age: (15 informants under 30 years the number of the left; 14 between 30-45 years: number in the middle; and 7 informants over 45 years: number on the right):

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	5:4:3	3:8:3	3:0:0	4:3:1	0:0:1	0:0:0	0:0:0
2	2:1:0	5:9:3	4:3:0	3:4:1	0:0:1	0:0:0	0:0:1
3	1:1:0	2:6:2	1:1:1	8:4:2	3:4:0	0:0:0	0:0:2
4	0:0:0	0:5:1	0:0:0:	2:5:1	5:7:0	0:0:4	2:3:3
5	0:0:0:	0:4:0	0:0:0	1:4:0	5:8:2	2:4:5	1:3:1
6	1:0:0	3:6:3	3:3:0	4:3:0	0:3:9	0:1:3	0:0:0
7	0:0:0	0:5:0	0:0:0	2:2:0	7:4:1	2:6:6	0:3:0
8	1:1:0	2:4:4	2:1:1	3:5:1	0:6:0	0:0:0	1:3:1

Figure 7: Responses in terms of social class

A distinctive feature of the middle generation(between 30-45) is its emphasis on 'please' throughout. This is contrasted with the relatively high frequency of 'will You'. . . to family members and friends, and of would you mind…to acquaintances and seniors by the young generation.

This might suggest that the young generation emphasizes formality elements, while the middle generation tends to favour politeness elements due to their different social role. The distribution in the table shows that the older generation is inclined to be more formal/ polite than the other two age groups. For example, would you mind formality element) is selected for addressing family members friends and younger people, whereas for the other two groups, this expression does not appear in the table.

Conclusion:

This paper has come up with the following:

1. There is an observable distinction between formality and politeness elements This distinction is manifested in language use with reference to the use of modals in requests.
2. The modals (could, would) are more polite than their present form parts counter (can, will) which are more formal.
3. 'P1ease' is more polite than formal. It is closely connected with the speaker's attitudinal factors.
4. Complex syntactic constructions making use of 'mind' are both formal and
polite, especially the ones with 'would'. Such express-ions are far from being impolite or familiar.
5. Addressing young people requires politeness more than formality. Addressing seniors and superiors requires both formal/polite forms.
6. Women tend to emphasize politeness elements more than men who tend to adopt both formality and politeness elements.
7. The middle-aged generation emphasizes 'please' more than the other two age groups.

The young generation emphasizes formality, while the older generation is inclined to be both formal and Polite.

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استخدام الأفعال المساعدة في صيغة الطلب : دراسة تواصلية

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة كيفية انعكاس التنوع الاجتمـاعي فـي اللغـة الانكليزيـة فـي اسـتخدام صـيغ الطلـب وذلـك باسـتخدام الأفعـال المـساعدة (Modal auxiliaries) .وهذا يتطلب دراسة اللغة في سياقها الواسع الذي يتجاوز السياق اللغوي أي النظر إليها في سياقها التواصلي الذي يشمل سياق الحالة الشامل وسـلوك المتحـدث والمـستمع أثنـاء الكـلام . إذ يتـضمن الـسياق الـتواصـلي Communicative Competenc عوامل شخصية واجتماعية عدا اللغة ومن هذه العوامل الحدس أو البدهية والعاطفة وحالة المتكلم الكاتب والتي لها أهمية كبيرة في الدور التواصلي للسلوك اللغوي . فالجملة الواحدة على سبيل المثال قد تعبـر عـن مواقف مختلفة للمتكلم كالعادة ، الغضب ، العاطفة ... وحسب طبقة الصوت والتنغيم.