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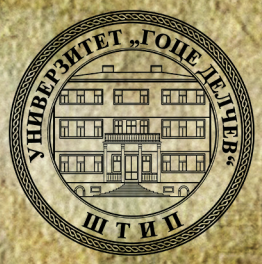

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Original research paper

Meri Basovska
Biljana Ivanovska

GERMAN NATIVE SPEAKERS' USE OF MODIFICATION DEVICES OF THE SPEECH ACT OF *REQUEST*

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to investigate the different strategies and linguistic forms that native speakers of German use to express the speech act of *request*. It presents the findings of an introductory study of the most common modification devices they use to formulate their *requests*. First, we give a short description of the research we conducted. Then, we present the findings focusing on the modification devices used in a variety of different situations. In particular, we focus on their dependence on the variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition. We also illustrate our findings with examples from the pool of speech acts that we collected.

Key words: *speech act, request, modification devices, German language.*

1. What is a request?

The speech act of request is a directive speech act and a very common event in everyday interaction. It is produced for various everyday purposes in order to receive certain information or to prompt the hearer to act in some way. They are culturally bound and are differently formulated in different communities.

For example: *Es zieht hier. (*with the meaning: *Machen Sie bitte das Fenster/die Tür zu!)*

In other words, it is crucial to understand the meaning of the speech act of requesting not only for the persuasive interpersonal, but also for successful cross-cultural communication. Speech acts facilitate the speaker to convey his/her communicative intention and enable the hearer to understand the information and the message as it is actually intended and meant by the speaker.

Ellis (1994) states that the speech act of requesting "can be connected to numerous interactional, illocutionary and sociolinguistic characteristics" (p.176-8). At interactional level, requests are often presented as discourse initiators intending to prompt the hearer to perform an action. Ellis (1994) lists three conditions at the illocutionary level that the speaker needs to fulfill for the requests to be appropriate:

> First, the speaker must be sincere in his or her wish that the hearer perform the act. Second, the speaker believes that the hearer is able to perform the act. Third, the speaker does not believe that the act will be performed without the request. (Ellis, 1994, p. 167)

There are three types of strategies which refer to the speech act of requests depending on the level of directness that are essential for understanding the

utterance as an act of request. These can be summarized in the following three groups: direct strategies, conventionally-indirect strategies (CI), and non-conventionally indirect (NCI) strategies (Blum-Kulka, House, &. Kasper, 1989). Direct and conventionally-indirect strategies involve a continuum of different strategies.

The perspective of expressing the speech act of requesting can be projected toward the speaker *([1]Kann ich Ihre Notizen haben?)* or toward the hearer ([2]*Können Sie mir Ihre Notizen ausleihen?*) or both the hearer and the speaker *([3]Können wir zusammen das machen?)* (Blum-Kulka et.al., 1989). Since one should take into consideration many factors when the speech act of requesting is performed (for example, social status, power, age, social distance, gender, and degree of imposition), the speaker has the opportunity to use different strategies for expressing his/her intention (linguistic as well as non-linguistic) to minimize or strengthen the effects of his/her own request, ask or appeal to the interlocutor.

According to Yule (1996), the pragmatics is the study of the speaker's meaning and the contextual meaning. Hymes (1972) notes that competence is the most general term for the capabilities of a speaker. The pragmatic competence is the ability to use the language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand the language in a given context (Thomas, 1983: 92). *Requests* have attracted a lot of interest from sociolinguists because they have been used to reveal the role that pragmatic competence plays in speaking a certain language and performing a certain speech act. Some studies suggest that the length of the stay in the target community influences interlanguage pragmatic behaviour (Kasper, 1992).

2. Modification of requests

In our analysis of the speech act of request, we mostly rely on the research and methodology developed by Trosborg (1995) and Sifianou (1999), who have made great contribution to the study of the speech act of requesting in pragmatics. Research on requests is often shaped on the basis of the studies in the fields of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. Trosborg (1995) and Sifianou (1999) stated that the speech act of requesting consists of an illocutionary act in which the speaker is expecting the hearer to perform a certain action that is for the benefit of the speaker. The speaker might not obtain what he/she has expected, wanted or needed and the hearer, in some situations, might feel more or less offended. Some cross-cultural studies point out that this speech act requires both speakers' sufficient knowledge of the target language (in our case it is the German language) and hearers' specific pragmatic competence and linguistic ability. According to Sifianou (1999),

> internal modification devices refer to those linguistic elements that appear within the same request act in order to mitigate or intensify its force (e.g. Could you *probably*

[1] The German examples in brackets are given by the authors.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

> open the door for me?[4]), whereas external modification devices appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request act (e.g. Could you open the door for me? *I'm carrying so many bags that I cannot do it*[5]). (Sifianou, 1999, p. 158)

According to Searle's theory (1979), the speech act of requesting consists of a head act (the actual request) and modification of the request (which can be external or internal). The aim of the linguistic means that speakers use to modify their requests vary depending on the impact they want to achieve. Their use may result into mitigating, strengthening or aggravating the request.

According to Fraser (1978, p. 13), "mitigators are defined as elements that soften or ease the force of the request intentionally". Elements for reinforcing and strengthening the acts of request are used to increase the force of the request. Elements that modify the act of request in the opposite direction are called aggravators, and they are used for threats, insults and moralizing statements (Blum-Kulka, 1982, p. 35). Internal and external modification categories are of two types of modification categories. The external modification categories can occur after the request: *head act + supportive move*, or they can precede the request: *supportive move + head act*.

The internal modification categories can be classified in two major categories. The first one is the so called "downgraders", which includes elements that are used to mitigate the force of this speech act, by adding the element "*engl*. please" (germ. *bitte*) to a request as a sign of politeness. The second category includes "upgraders" which emphasize the degree of inevitability such as the use of intensifiers, commitment indicators and time intensifiers. Examples of modifications, as well as interactional data among German speakers are presented below.

3. Design of the research and methodological frame

The aim of this study is to investigate the speech act of *request* by German native speakers as representatives from another cultural and language orientation and their written expressions of this speech act, as well as the use of the modification devices when performing this speech act. This study presents the data that were obtained by the native speakers of German, the instruments as well as the methods for their analysis. The requests analyzed were taken from the DCTs. The situations used in these tests were chosen since they are frequently used in everyday life.

The research questions for this study are the following:

a) What knowledge and competence in the field of pragmatics is expressed by the native speakers of German when performing the speech act of request in written expressions?
b) Which modification devices are used by German native speakers when performing the speech act of request?

[4] The listed English examples translated into German: „*Könnten Sie vielleicht die Tür für mich öffnen?"*.
[5] "*Könnten Sie vielleicht die Tür für mich aufmachen? Ich kann sie nicht öffnen, ich trage zu viele Tüten*."

4. Investigating a *request* speech act used by German native speakers

For the purpose of investigating how German native speakers formulate the speech act of *requesting* and how they use the modification devices, we administered the well-known "*germ.* Diskursergänzungstest"/*engl.* Discourse Completion Task, /DCT/. Many researchers have criticized this kind of test (Beebe & Cummings 1996, Billmyer 2000), but it is still the most commonly and frequently used test as a tool for measuring and evaluating the pragmatic competence not only for L2 language learners, but for native speakers as well. The advantage of this test, used as a tool for data collection is that the given situations are similar to the real ones. The test is also practical because it enables researchers to collect data from a large number of participants within a short period of time (McNamara & Roever, 2006, p. 65) Even though the assumption about the Discourse Completion Task is that it cannot reflect reality, it can still offer substantial benefits. McNamara & Roever (2006) give the following explanation about the function and importance of this written test:

> Although DCTs (and most multiple choice measures) measure knowledge and do not allow direct predictions of real-world performance, they can be thought of as measuring potential for performance, as knowledge is arguably a necessary precondition for performance. (p. 67)

Our DCT was created to measure the formulation of the speech act of *request* and its modification devices in different situations used by native speakers of German.

This research investigates how native speakers of German use this speech act and focuses primarily on the language devices that they use to modify it. In particular, we focus on the use of internal and external request modification devices. The DCT was written in the native language of the respondents (German language) and was distributed to a group of 30 native speakers of German, age 20-80. We compiled a corpus consisting of 30 requests by personally contacting native speakers of German and asking them to fill in the DCT, or by sending the DCT via e-mail to our respondents. The DCT which was used for our analysis contained 12 different situations (scenarios) varying in power, social distance and degree of imposition. All participants were asked to imagine themselves in a particular situation and to write a spontaneous answer taking into consideration the given power, social distance and the degree of imposition.

5. Research findings

For the purposes of determining which modification devices are used for expressing the speech act of request it is important to point out the relevance of the variables shaping this speech act. Within the research presented in this paper, the variables that were taken into consideration were: power, social distance and degree of imposition. Table 1 presents the situations used in this research:

Table 1. Scenarios describing the speech act of *request* and their variables

Situation	Appropriate context input	Power	Social distance	Degree of Imposition
Request				
1.	submitting a term paper	+	+	average
2.	invitation for giving a speech	+	+	high
3.	requesting, asking for a ride	-	+	average
4.	asking for a cigarette lighter	-	+	average
5.	borrowing lecture notes	-	-	average
6.	borrowing money from a friend	-	-	high
7.	asking for the missing cream of a meal in a restaurant	+/-	-	average
8.	waiting in the line	+/-	-	average
9.	asking for an explanation	+	+	high
10.	asking for the bad school test note to be checked again	+	+	high
11.	reserved seat in a train	-	-	average
12.	asking for moving a vehicle to a different parking lot	-	-	average

The choice of the speaker/hearer perspective of the request presents a point of specific interest in the request realization. *Requests* may have speaker perspective (*Kann / Darf ich ein Glas Bier haben*?), hearer perspective (*Können Sie mir ein Glas Bier bringen?),* common perspective (*Können wir das machen?)* or it may be impersonal. (*Es muss gemacht werden*).

The examples below demonstrate the distribution of different perspectives used by our test respondents:

1. **Request directed to the speaker -** used with different forms of the modal verbs (indicative active form and/or conjunctive form), such as:
   Kann ich/Könnte ich ...?, Darf ich ...?, Ich wollte ..., ich möchte/wir möchten..., etc.

2. **Request directed to the hearer:**
   Kannst du/Können Sie bitte ...?, Könntest du/Könnten Sie sich vorstellen ...?, Möchten Sie ...? Hast du/haben Sie Zeit…?, Hättest du/Hätten Sie Zeit ...?, Seien Sie/ sei so nett / so freundlich ..., Du musst ..., Sie würden uns sehr helfen, wenn ..., Was halten Sie davon ...?, Es wäre Ihrerseits angebracht, wenn ..., Es muss hier ein Irrtum von Ihrer Seite vorliegen ..., Haben Sie was dagegen, wenn ...?, Es wäre toll, wenn Sie uns ..., Es würde/wäre eine Ehre, wenn Sie ..., Es wird mich/uns sehr freuen, wenn Sie ..., Stell bitte dein Auto auf einen anderen Platz ..., Würde es Ihnen ausmachen/Macht es Ihnen/dir aus, wenn ...? etc.,
3. **Request from a common perspective:**
   Könnten Sie mit mir durchgehen?, Können wir zusammen ...?, Ich möchte, dass wir das noch mal besprechen.
4. **Impersonal requesting:**
   Ist es möglich ...?, Geht es, wenn…?. Kann es verlängert werden? Hier fehlt...? Wäre es (vielleicht) möglich...?, Besteht (eventuell) eine Möglichkeit, dass ...?, Es wäre außerordentlich nett/großartig, wenn ...? Woran liegt es, dass...?

Table 2 presents the frequently used perspectives expressed by the German native speakers who participated in this research:

Table 2. The frequently used perspectives while expressing the speech act of requesting.

Request directed to the speaker	Request directed to the hearer	Request from a common perspective	Impersonal requesting
98	218	4	21

Taking into consideration the number of requests presented in the table above, we may conclude that the request directed to the hearer is the most common perspective used by the native speakers of German, regardless of the social distance between the partners in the communication or the power of the speaker and the hearer. In the following section we will present the most common modification devices used by native speakers of German when making requests.

6. Linguistic devices for *request* modification used by native German speakers

As it was already explained earlier in this paper, speech act modification means application of certain linguistic devices with the aim of changing the force of the speech act in focus. We further examine the internal modification devices we were able to observe in the written answers of the native German speakers involved in this study.

One of the most common internal modification device is the use of the modifier *bitte (please)* which plays the role of a downgrader, as in the examples below:

- ***Bitte*** *geben Sie mir die Möglichkeit zu einer Verlängerung, damit ich die Arbeit zu Ende bringen kann!*
- *Herr Ober, bringen Sie mir* ***bitte*** *noch die Kräutercreme?*
- *Könnte ich* ***bitte*** *einen Zeitaufschub bekommen?*
- *Kannst du mir* ***bitte*** *dein Vorlesungsskript leihen, damit ich für die Prüfung lernen kann?*
- *Kannst du* ***bitte*** *dein Auto wegfahren, mein Vater kommt gleich von der Arbeit und möchte es in die Garage fahren.*
- *Kannst du mir* ***bitte*** *meine Zigarette anzünden?*
- *Kannst du den Platz* ***bitte*** *freimachen?!*
- *Darf ich* ***bitte*** *Ihre Namen und Dienstnummer wissen?*
- *Kannst Du mir* ***bitte*** *die Arbeit zum Kopieren ausleihen?*
- ***Bitte*** *stell dein Auto sofort an eine andere Stelle, mein Vater kommt gleich nach Hause.* etc.

The above written examples state that the modifier *bitte (please)* as a modification device is used in a variety of situations, which was supported by the written answers of the native speakers of German, regardless of the social distance between the speaker and the hearer or the power of the hearer. There are no rules in using the lexeme *bitte* in the context of the perspective expressing a request. *Bitte* is considered a modification device of a speech act of requesting and it is used in interrogative, declarative or imperative sentences expressing a request, with the aim of mitigating the intention expressed by the speech act of requesting.

Another "downgrader" which was frequently used in the written answers in the DCT was the adverb/particle *vielleicht:*

- *Könnten Sie mich* ***vielleicht*** *mitnehmen?*
- *Könntest du mir* ***vielleicht*** *100 Euro leihen?*
- *Würden Sie mich* ***vielleicht*** *vorlassen?*
- *Haben Sie* ***vielleicht*** *Feuer?*
- *Wäre es* ***vielleicht*** *möglich eine Verlängerung zu bekommen?*
- *Hätten Sie* ***vielleicht*** *noch einen Platz im Auto frei?*
- *Könntest du mir* ***vielleicht*** *deine Mitschriften leihen?*
- *Könnte ich* ***vielleicht*** *bei euch mitfahren?*
- ***Vielleicht*** *finden Sie etwas Zeit, mir zu erklären, wie ich meine Arbeit für Sozialkunde verbessern könnte.*
- *Sag mal Judith, kannst du mir* ***vielleicht*** *dein Vorlesungsskript leihen?*
- *Können Sie* ***vielleicht*** *über meine Arbeit nochmal drüber schauen und mir genauer erklären, wieso meine schlechter bewertet wurde?*
- *Besteht die Möglichkeit, dass Sie mich* ***vielleicht*** *vorlassen?*
- *Wären Sie* ***vielleicht*** *so nett und würden Sie mich mit nach Hause nehmen?*
- *Ist das* ***vielleicht*** *eine Lösung?*

In many examples, the adverb *eventuell* is used in the same way as the adverb *vielleicht:*

- *Würdest du mir **eventuell** dein Vorlesungsskript ausleihen?*
- *Haben Sie **eventuell** für mich einen freien Platz in Ihrem Auto?*
- *Könntest du mir **eventuell** 100 Euro leihen?*
- *Besteht **eventuell** die Möglichkeit meinen Abgabetermin um ein bis zwei Tage zu verschieben?*

Naturally, these two adverbs, *vielleicht* and *eventuell* are not always used as downgraders, thus mitigating the speech act of request. They can also be used as *"upgraders"* emphasizing the degree of certainty or obligation, and have the function of obligatory or compulsory indicators. For example, in the situation when someone else has taken someone's seat on a train/bus, these adverbs express the polite request of the speaker in form of a suggestion:

- *Wäre super, wenn du dich **eventuell** woanders hinsetzen könntest.*
- *Könntest Du **vielleicht** nach einem anderen Platz Ausschau halten?*

As it can be seen from the above responses referring to different situations, expressing the speech act of *request,* it can be stated that this speech act is mostly conveyed by using modal verbs: *können, möchten, dürfen,* and *wollen.*

- ***Kannst** du mir deine Mitschrift bis morgen geben?*
- ***Darf** ich mit Ihnen nach Hause fahren?*
- *Wir **möchten** Sie gern einladen, uns Ihre Sicht der Dinge zu erläutern und mit uns zu diskutieren.*
- *Ich **möchte,** dass Sie meine Arbeit noch mal kontrollieren.*
- *Herr Lehrer, ich habe eine Frage zu meiner Arbeit, **können** wir diese zusammen durchgehen?*
- ***Können** Sie mir eine Verlängerung anbieten?*
- ***Wollen** Sie sich nicht wenigstens entschuldigen?*

Thus, the conjunctive form of the modal verbs is used more frequently than their indicative conjugated present forms, to express a request:

- ***Dürfte** ich die Seminararbeit nun erst in einer Woche abgeben?*
- ***Könnten** Sie mich mitnehmen?*
- ***Könnten** Sie mir die noch einmal genauer erläutern?*
- *Sie **könnten** sich wenigstens bei mir entschuldigen und sich erkundigen, ob ich verletzt bin, so wie es von jedem normalen Menschen erwartet würde!*

Apart from the conjugated forms of the modal verbs, the conjunctive forms of the verbs were also used by the native speakers of German to express a request, a

fact that occurred also in Macedonian foreign language learners to express politeness.

Moreover, the use of the conjunctive forms of the auxiliary verbs *haben - hätten (to have), sein - wären (to be)* and *werden - würden (to become, to get, would)* is understood as a (strict) command:

- ***Hätten*** *Sie vielleicht noch einen Platz im Auto für mich frei?*
- ***Hätten*** *Sie mal Feuer für mich?*
- ***Wären*** *Sie eventuell bereit, die Rede zu halten?*
- ***Wären*** *Sie so nett und würden Sie mich mitnehmen?*
- ***Würden*** *Sie mir bitte Feuer geben?*
- ***Würden*** *Sie sich meine Arbeit nochmal anschauen?*
- ***Würden*** *Sie meine Abgabefrist bitte verschieben?*

In rare cases, the particle *mal* is used in combination with modal verbs to express the urgency of the request made by the speaker:

- *'Tschuldigung, darf ich* ***mal*** *ihre Streichhölzer benutzen?*
- *Kann ich mir bitte* ***mal*** *dein Skript von letzter Woche ausleihen?*
- *Hey, hättest du* ***mal*** *kurz Feuer?*
- *Entschuldigung, darf ich mich* ***mal*** *vordrängeln?*
- *Sehen Sie* ***mal,*** *ich habe eine Platzkarte für diesen Platz, würden Sie mich bitte setzen lassen?*
- *Kannst du* ***mal*** *schnell das Auto woanders parken?*

7. Conclusion

The speech act of *request* is the most common speech act in everyday living, the purpose of which is to try to get or to force the hearer to do something. This paper presents the results of a research conducted among native speakers of German on how they modify their requests to vary the effect. Depending on different kinds of context variables, power, social distance and degree of imposition presented in the situations analyzed in this research, it can be concluded that there is a variety of modification devices used when a request is formulated with perspective to the speaker, to the hearer, from a common perspective or as an impersonal request. The most common modification devices used, are: *bitte, vielleicht, eventuell, mal,* the modal verbs in their conjugated and present forms, as well as the conjunctive forms of the auxiliary verbs *haben* and *sein* (*to have* and *to be).* The findings of this research indicate that the German native speakers predominantly formulate this speech act with hearer perspective. Native German speakers have at their disposal a variety of internal modification devices which function is to mitigate requests. To express a *request* in their written expression, German native speakers mostly use the particle *mal,* which also expresses urgency and impatience.

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