When Courtesy Does Not Travel

Why a request may acquire a different social meaning

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How can the wording of a request and the background attributed to its sender affect readers' evaluations, and how far can those evaluations be read as evidence about what happens next?

ABSTRACT

A request can sound considerate to its writer and different to its reader. Research on requests shows that the relation between indirect wording and perceived politeness is neither simple nor identical across the situations studied. An experiment with English workplace emails found that softening a request changed some ratings of its writer, while the emails themselves were not rated significantly more polite.

The studies considered here measure different things: how people formulate requests and how they rate words, writers and a colleague's claim on their cooperation. This note asks what can be learned from those differences without turning a favourable impression into a predicted workplace outcome.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Softer wording is not a universal courtesy scale. In the email experiment, it changed some ratings of the writer without a significant change in ratings of how polite the email itself was.
2. A rating of the writer and a questionnaire score combining intended effort, perceived right to ask and obligation are distinct outcomes.
3. Cross-language comparisons show both variation and overlap in request forms. They do not provide fixed instructions for communicating with members of a nationality.

THE COLLEAGUE INSIDE THE REQUEST

Imagine receiving an English email from a colleague with two work requests. Each begins either "Can you …?" or "I was wondering if you could …". Would the second version seem more considerate? Would it change what you think of the colleague? Those questions have separate answers.

Berna Hendriks, Frank van Meurs and Bob Kakisina tested four versions of the email with 120 Dutch and 131 British readers. The factual requests stayed the same. Two things changed: how the English requests were softened, and the background attributed to their writer. The readers were introduced either to Robin Young, a British first-language English colleague in the London office, or Robin de Jonge, a Dutch colleague writing in English from Eindhoven. Both were described as colleagues at the reader's level. [1]

The wording variants did not differ significantly in ratings of the emails' politeness, directness or appropriateness. Writers of the softer versions were, however, rated less bossy. With the British colleague, the less-softened version led to a lower competence rating than the more-softened version. With the Dutch

colleague, it led to a higher authority rating and a higher score on what the researchers called “willingness to comply”. The reported effect sizes were small. Dutch and British readers differed in several overall ratings, but the study did not find that the two groups responded differently to the email variants. [1]

That last score needs care. Its three questionnaire items asked whether the reader would try to comply, whether the colleague had the right to ask, and whether the reader felt obliged to comply. It combines an intended effort with judgments about legitimacy and obligation; it is not a direct measure of future action. [1] The sender background also arrived as a package: name, nationality and office location changed together, so the study cannot isolate which cue mattered.

WHAT COUNTS AS CONSIDERATE?

The question predates email. In experiments with Hebrew and English requests, Shoshana Blum-Kulka found that the most indirect forms, such as hints, were not rated as the most polite. Conventionally indirect requests received the highest politeness ratings. Her interpretation gave weight both to avoiding coercion and to making the request clear enough for the other person to understand. [2]

That suggests a difficulty with simply adding more distance from what is being asked. A hint may leave someone free to respond, while also leaving them to work out whether a request has been made. This is an interpretation of the studies, not a universal rule that one formulation will work best.

The shape of a request also has to be distinguished from its social value. Eva Ogiermann asked British, German, Polish and Russian university students to write a request to borrow another student's lecture notes. Imperatives appeared more often in the Polish and Russian responses than in the British and German responses, but interrogative forms were the most frequent in all four groups. [3] A shared preference for questions still left variation in how the requests were written. This production study tells us what participants wrote in one scenario, not how recipients judged it.

Kyong-Ae Yu investigated Korean request forms and politeness ratings in five situations. Some forms classified as direct were nevertheless rated as polite. Korean deferential forms and conventional expressions carry social information that an English gloss does not fully convey. [4] Yu compared the Korean results with the earlier English and Hebrew data from Blum-Kulka [2]; these are not three newly recruited, independent samples. A grammatical label can organise the comparison without predicting what a particular reader will make of a particular request.

AFTER THE WORDS

Suppose a revised email makes its writer seem more considerate. The route from that judgment to completed work is longer than any of these studies observes. The colleague may still lack the information, time or authority needed to help. That is a possible explanation in a real organisation, not a finding from these request studies. If the question is whether the revision helped the work get done, we would need evidence of what happened after the email and of the conditions in which the recipient could act.

Courtesy can matter without travelling intact from intention to interpretation or from interpretation to action. When the work matters, the useful questions are what changed, for whom, and what happened next.

WHAT THIS NOTE ESTABLISHES

Evidence level: bounded synthesis of published studies; no original empirical data.

The studies support a separation between request form, attributed sender background and several kinds of judgment. They also show that the relation between directness and politeness varies across the tested forms and settings.

CLAIM BOUNDARY

This note does not establish a national communication style, a universal wording recommendation, a measured change in actual compliance or a causal effect of language background alone. It does not test a COMMODYN intervention. The requested actions were not observed.

SOURCES AND NOTES

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