

A CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY ON THE LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF CANTONESE AND ENGLISH REQUESTS¹

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Abstract

This study investigates the cross-linguistic devices of requests written by native English-speaking (NSE) and native Cantonese-speaking (NCS) respondents in an academic context on the basis of 197 discourse completion tests. Both groups asked in a direct sequence accompanied by a different proportion of syntactic and lexical devices to reduce directness. NES used a higher frequency and a wider range of syntactic downgraders than NCS. NCS, however, used a higher frequency of lexical downgraders and a greater number of combinations of lexical devices than NES.

The cross-linguistic comparison of the linguistic features of Cantonese and English requests demonstrates how the distinctive linguistic properties of each language and social factors combine to constitute a request. Further investigation could be made between idealized and authentic English and Cantonese requests for a range of age groups and contexts, or to compare the linguistic forms of requests made by NCS in English with the linguistic forms of requests made by NES in Cantonese.

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1. Introduction

This paper compares the linguistic expressions of Cantonese and English requests in hierarchical social and power relationships in an academic context based on discourse completion tests. The findings show that the native English-speaking respondents (hereafter NES) and the native Cantonese-speaking respondents (hereafter NCS) ask directly accompanied by a different proportion of syntactic and lexical devices and emphasis. NES tended to use a higher frequency and a wider range of syntactic downgraders but a lower frequency of lexical devices than NCS to reduce directness. NCS, however, were inclined to use a lower frequency of and limited syntactic downgraders but a higher frequency and a wider range of lexical devices. Both groups take into consideration power and social relationships between the interactants while making a request. The cross-linguistic comparison provides some new findings and insights, and demonstrates how the distinctive linguistic properties of each language and social factors combine to constitute a request.

2. Requests and linguistic devices

A request can be interpreted as a face-threatening act (FTA) because the hearer may have the feeling of being imposed on (Brown and Levinson 1987), or as a self-face threatening act (SFTA) (Chen 2001) on the part of the speaker because the speaker may have the feeling that s/he is imposing something on the hearer. Regardless of how a request is interpreted, speakers in many cultures tend to use strategies and language to address the hearer's negative face wants or their own positive wants. With a view to fulfilling these purposes, a speaker may have to consider the social factors such as the power relationship and social distance between the speaker and the hearer, as well as the context, when s/he formulates a request.

The recent cross-cultural research on requests, which is mainly based on the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding categories, has compared the uniqueness of strategy types of different groups of language users such as native American, British, Hebrew, Japanese, Greek and English language learners,

as well as directness and politeness in which the linguistic forms are also revealed (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Levenston 1987; Sifianou 1992; Bilbow 1995; Fukushima 1996; Van Mulken 1996; Chang & Hsu 1998; Rinnert & Kobayahi 1999). Research into the requests made by native English and Chinese speakers, with particular reference to their linguistic expressions, that is lexicogrammatical features, is nevertheless limited. There are only some studies analyzing the linguistic forms of requests in the Chinese language (e.g., Zhan 1994; Zhang 1995; Kasper & Zhang 1995), and a few comparing the strategies and the corresponding linguistic forms of oral and written requests made by Chinese learners of English (Lee 2004; Kirkpatrick 1991) or between English learners and native English speakers (Chang & Hsu 1998).

One study which investigated the differences in email requests written in English by Chinese English learners and native American English speakers in the academic context (Chang & Hsu 1998) found that the Chinese English learners asked in an indirect sequence (i.e. with explanations first) with mostly direct linguistic forms (such as imperatives and want-statement), which are considered as less polite on the politeness scale devised by Blum-Kulka (1987), in both power-unequal and power-equal requests. In the same way as many other native English speakers, the native American English speakers made a straightforward request but with indirect linguistic forms in terms of preparatory conditions (such as 'I would like to...', 'May/ Can/Could I...?', 'I wonder if ...'), which are considered as the most polite request category on the politeness scale. The indirect sequence made by Chinese English speakers has also been proved in Lee's (2004) and Kirkpatrick's (1991) studies. Another study on oral requests in English made by native English-speaking westerners and Hong Kong Chinese in business meetings also yields similar results (Bilbow 1995). The former are found to be more conventionally indirect, accompanied by syntactic, lexical and phrasal downgraders which serve to reduce directness (Bilbow 1995: 50).

Contrary to the above findings, a study of requests written in Chinese by native Mandarin speakers in a variety of power-equal and power-unequal social and academic interactions with little intimacy in discourse completion tests showed that the majority adopted query preparatory (54.2%) featured by the forms of *neng*: *can*, *keyi*: *may* and sentence final *zengmoyang*: *how about* (Zhang 1995: 45). In addition to the above syntactic downgraders, interrogatives, conditional clauses and interrogative+negation were also employed. However, 60.3% and 90.3% of the respondents did not use any lexical downgraders and upgraders respectively. About 8.1% used politeness markers such as *qing2*: *please*, *maa fan*: *trouble you*, *bei tau*: *bow and entrust you*; followed by understaters such as *yi xiao bu fen*: *a small part* (3.1%); subjectivisers such as *wo xiang*: *I think* (3.7%) and downtoners such as *da gai*: *probably* (2.8%). Zhang has

given a picture about the Chinese linguistic forms for requests based on a small sample size, however, he did not analyse the relationship between linguistic forms and social factors.

Given that there is little research comparing the linguistic forms of requests written by native English and Chinese speakers, this paper aims to fill the gap, focusing on the linguistic forms of English and Chinese requests in an academic context in which hierarchical social and power relationships are involved. Knowing how to make a request politely and appropriately to people of different social ranks is crucial in interpersonal communication, and the academic context is a real community that facilitates this practice.

3. Research design

3.1 Research questions

Two questions were raised:

- (1) What are the syntactic and lexical features of requests frequently used by native Chinese and native English speakers to soften the impositive force of a request?
- (2) To what extent are the syntactic and lexical choices of both groups influenced by social factors, that is power relationship and social distance between the interactants?

3.2. Methodology

In this study, each request is defined as an act that demands a favour from another person (Nelson, Carson, El Batal & El Bakary 2002), for instance, asking for a reference book from a friend, in which the hearer's negative face want is being attacked. The data was collected from 197 discourse completion tests (DCT) on six request situations in the academic context in Chinese and English; and in which social distance and hierarchical power relationships between the interactants were involved in three situations: Student-teacher (with social distance, unequal low-high power relationship), student-student (without/ little social distance, equal-equal power relationship) and teacher-student (with social distance, unequal high-low power relationship) (see Table 1).

The Chinese version of the DCT was written in standard written Chinese, a written form used by educated Cantonese speakers in most contexts in Hong Kong. Cantonese is one of the many Chinese dialects. It is widely spoken and used in Hong Kong by its residents. It has both spoken and written versions. The written version is a form for informal communication particularly between youth; and it also appears in some magazines and newspapers. It shares a lot of similar grammatical features with standard written Chinese, and there has been studies on Hong Kong Cantonese grammar (Matthews & Yip 1994). Many Hong Kong Cantonese Chinese can master the two forms and they appear together in writings. The Chinese DCT (Appendix 2) was administered to 110 native Cantonese-speaking students in a university of Hong Kong. The respondents were born, brought up and educated in Hong Kong. They were aged 18-20 and were first-year university students during the research period. They have studied Chinese as a subject for at least 13 years. They had passed the Chinese Language in the two public examinations: The Hong Kong Certificate Examination after finishing secondary education and the Hong Kong Advanced Level of Examination after matriculation, and were taking a compulsory course -- University Chinese for all first-year students. They were able to read and write standard written Chinese and written Cantonese.

The English version of the DCT (Appendix 1) was administered to 110 native English speaking students who were studying in Hong Kong. Half of the native English respondents were matriculated students whose parents are working in Hong Kong and they were at Grade 12 or were preparing for university entrance examinations during the research period. Half were international exchange students who had studied in Hong Kong for a month during the research period. They were mainly Americans, followed by British and Australians.

One hundred and one Chinese DCT (91.82%) and 87 (79.1%) English DCT were returned from the native Cantonese Chinese and native English respondents respectively. Over 95% of NCS respondents answered in written Cantonese, and a few mixed it with standard written Chinese.

Table 1 summarizes the social situations and the social factors (i.e., social distance and power relationship between interactants) involved.

Table 1: Situations and social factors involved in DCT

Request No.	Social situation	Social distance	Power relationships
	<i>Social situation 1: Student-teacher (S-T)</i>		
1.	A student asks his/her teacher the test score.	Yes	Power unequal, low-high
5.	A student wants to borrow a reference book from his/her teacher.	Yes	Power unequal, low-high

	<i>Social situation 2: Student-student (S-S)</i>		
2.	Student A asks lecture notes from student B.	No/little	Power equal, equal-equal
3.	Student A asks student B to clean up the pantry.	No/little	Power equal, equal-equal
	<i>Social situation 3: Teacher-student (T-S)</i>		
4.	A teacher asks his/her student the time.	Yes	Power unequal, high-low
5.	A teacher wants to borrow a pen from his/her student.	Yes	Power unequal, high-low

3.3. Coding categories

The syntactic and lexical features of requests were coded based on the CCSARP request coding manual (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), comprising three main areas: (1) syntactic downgraders, (2) lexical downgraders and (3) lexical upgraders. Regarding the coding of Cantonese data, the researcher took into account Zhang's (1995) findings on the use of Chinese linguistic devices for requests, and Cheung's (1994) as well as Matthews' & Yip's (1994) grammar books on standard written Chinese and written Cantonese respectively. All written discourse was in Cantonese transcription based on Kwok et al's (1997) *Guide to LSHK² Cantonese Romanization of Chinese characters*. Appendix 3 shows the categories which are juxtaposed with examples taken from DCT answered by NES and NCS. The identified English lexical-syntactic downgraders or upgraders are underlined whereas the Cantonese ones are both italicized and underlined.

3.4. Data analysis – Average frequency rate in percentage and written discourse

The data was analysed in the following ways. Firstly, the syntactic and lexical devices of each written request were coded based on the CCSARP coding categories, with reference to written Cantonese and standard Chinese grammar (Zhang 1995; Cheung et al. 1994; Matthews & Yip 1994) for NCS data. Then the total frequency rate of each of the categories (syntactic and lexical) for each of the six requests (2 requests for one social situation) was counted and presented in percentages so as to provide information to the researcher on how common certain categories were. Finally, the average frequency rate of each of the categories and subject groups in each social situation was calculated and the central tendency on the typical behaviour of NES and NCS

² LSK is the abbreviation of the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong.

respondents was presented in tables (see Tables 2-7). The average frequency rate of the S-T situation was based on the frequency rates of requests 1 and 5; the average frequency rate of the T-S situation was based on requests 4 and 6; and the S-S situation from requests 2 and 3. In addition to the statistical data, written discourse was studied to reveal the unique linguistic forms and the distinctive patterns.

In the following sections, I report on the average frequency rates (in percentages) of different syntactic and lexical devices employed by NES and NCS in each situation, describe the unique linguistic features of each language taken from the written discourse of DCT, and discuss significant observations.

4. Findings

4.1. *Syntactic devices used by NCS and NES in the three social situations*

Both groups of respondents asked in a direct sequence (i.e. with no explanations first) with mostly indirect linguistic forms. Only 12 requests from 606 NCS replies comprised an explanation (1.98%). Eight out of 12 explanations (66.67%) referred to personal wants and needs, such as one's carelessness, thirst for knowledge or absence and the remaining four was about the hearer's fault. Explanations were specifically given to justify the equal-equal S-S (66.67%) and the low-high S-T (33.33%) requests. For instance,

Speaker's wants and needs

我 上 堂 無 返, 可 唔 可 以 借 筆 記 俾 我?

Ngo5 seong5 tong4 mou4 faan2, ho4 m4 ho2 ji2 ze3 bat1 gei3 bei2 ngo5? (Cantonese transcription)

I last lesson no present, can-and-cannot lend notes to me? (Literal English version)

I was not present in the last lesson, can you me lend the notes? (Edited English version)

Hearer's fault

你 整 到 個 茶 水 間 亂 晒, 你 可 唔 可 以 執 番

Nei5 zing2 dou3 gwo1 caa4 seoi2 gaan1 lyun6 saai3, nei5 ho4 m4 ho2 ji2 zap1 faan1

乾 淨?

gon1 zeng6? (Cantonese transcription)

You make the pantry messy, you can-and-cannot tidy up clean? (Literal English version)

You mess up the pantry, can you tidy it up? (Edited English version)

Table 2: The frequency rates of explanations (in percentages)
written by NCS in the three social situations

Social situation	Frequency
S-T (requests 1 + 5)	4
S-S (requests 2 + 3)	8
T-S (requests 4 + 6)	0
Total	12 (1.98%)

N = 606 (101 replies from each request)

Both groups usually used an interrogative form to soften the force of a request, particularly NES. NES had an average of 71.65% of interrogative question and 4.4% of other syntactic downgraders; while NCS had an average of 55.44% of interrogative question and 0.99% of other syntactic downgraders in all three social situations. The variety of syntactic downgraders in the Chinese data was much fewer than that in the English data. NCS only used three types of syntactic downgraders, namely interrogative question, condition and conditional sentence.

The most common indirect syntactic form for requests written by NES was interrogative question. It is the linguistic form for the query preparatory strategy in the CCSARP coding categories. Typical interrogative questions appeared in the NES requests included: ‘Can/could I/you/we...?’, ‘May I/you/we...?’. For instance,

Can I see my test score? (NES, S-T, request 1)

May I borrow some lecture notes? (NES, S-S, request 2)

Would you mind cleaning up the pantry today? (NES, S-S, request 3)

They also made use of the unique tense-aspect feature in English grammar to increase the impact of the request such as ‘I was wondering if you could...’

Likewise, NCS made requests by means of an interrogative construction (59.9% in the S-T situation; 73.27% in the S-S situation and 33.16% in the T-S situation) in the Chinese language – yes/no questions in the forms of a a-not-a question which start with 可以 *ho ji/* 可唔可以 *ho m ho ji*: *can/can-not-can*; and a sentence particle (PRT) such as 呀 *aa1* or 呢 *ne1* at the end of a declarative statement in the three situations. For example,

(可唔) 可以借那本書俾我呀?

(Ho4 m4) ho2 ji2 ze3 naa5 bun2 syu2 bei2 ngo5 aa1?(Cantonese transcription)

Can-not-can lend that book to me PRT? (Literal English version)

Can you lend that book to me PRT? (Edited English version)

Besides the interrogative construction, they occasionally used condition (2.48%) and conditional sentences (0.49%) in the S-S situation.

The frequency rates of indirect syntactic forms varied with the power and social relationships between the interactants (see Tables 3-5). Both groups tended to ask more indirectly with a preparatory condition in the request in the power equal S-S situation (Table 4), followed by the power unequal S-T (Table 3) and the T-S situations (Table 5).

Table 3: The average frequency rates (in percentages) of syntactic downgraders used by NES and NCS in the S-T situation (Requests 1 & 5)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
Interrogative question	131	75.287	Interrogative construction	121	59.90
Condition	0	0		0	0
Aspect	1	0.575		0	0
Conditional clause	2	1.150		0	0
Tense	3	1.724		0	0
Tense + conditional clause	6	3.448		0	0
Aspect + conditional clause	0	0		0	0
Sub-total		82.184			59.90
<i>Others</i>					
Wh-question	28	16.092	Wh-question	52	25.74
Polar question	3	1.724		0	0
Imperative	0	0		0	0
I want ...	0	0		29	14.36
Sub-total		17.816			40.10
Total		100			100

Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ;
Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)

Table 4: The average frequency rates (in percentages) of syntactic downgraders used by NES and NCS in the S-S situation (Requests 2 & 3)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
Interrogative question	153	87.931	Interrogative construction	148	73.27
Condition	0	0		5	2.48

Aspect	0	0		0	
Conditional clause	4	2.299		1	0.49
Tense					
Tense + conditional clause	3	1.724			
Aspect + conditional clause					
Sub-total		91.954			76.24
<i>Others</i>					
Wh-question	3	1.724	Wh-question	8	3.96
Polar question	1	0.575			
Imperative	10	5.747	Imperative	40	19.80
Sub-total		8.046			23.76
Total		100			100
Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ; Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)					

Table 5: The average frequency rates (in percentages) of syntactic downgraders used by NES and NCS in the T-S situation (Requests 4 & 6)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
Interrogative question	90	51.720	Interrogative construction	69	33.16
Condition	0	0			
Aspect	0	0			
Conditional clause	2	1.150			
Tense	0	0			
Tense + conditional clause	2	1.150			
Aspect + conditional clause	0	0			
Sub-total		54.020			33.66
<i>Others</i>					
Wh-questions	53	30.460	Wh-question	92	45.52
Polar question	21	12.070			
Imperative verb	6	3.450	Imperative	30	14.85
			I want	6	2.97
Sub-total		45.980			63.34
Total		100			100
Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ; Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)					

Four syntactic structures whose tone is more straightforward were found from both NES and NCS requests and they were put under 'others' in the tables (Table 3-5). These structures do not provide a preparatory condition; rather they ask in a direct manner such as the wh-questions, polar questions (from NES) and the 'I want to ask' declarative statement (from NCS). The imperative verbs for the requests between

students (S-S) connote a commanding tone. The average frequency rate of wh-question in the T-S situation and the frequency rate of imperative in the S-S situation were the highest.

Wh-question

而 家 幾 點 呀?

Ji1 gaa1 gei2 dim2 aa1? (Cantonese transcription)

Now what time PRT? (Literal English version)

What time is it now? (Edited English version)

(NCS, T-S, request 4)

When will you clean up the mess? (NES, S-S, request 3)

What time is it? (NES, T-S, request 4)

Polar question

Do you want to clean up a bit? (NES, S-S, request 3)

Do you know what time it is? (NES, T-S, request 4)

Imperative

請 借 你 的 筆 一 用.

Cing2 ze3 nei5 di1 bat1 jat1 jung6. (Cantonese transcription)

Please lend you pen one use. (Literal English version)

Please lend me your pen to use for a while. (Edited English version)

(NCS, T-S, request 6)

Oh, you left a mess, clean it up! (NES, S-S, request 3)

Tell what the time is, John (NES, T-S, request 6)

I-want/ I-want-to-ask statement

我 想 同 你 借 參 考 書 俾 我 呀.

Ngo5 seong2 tung4 nei5 ze3 caam1 haau2 syu2 bei2 ngo5 aa1. (Cantonese transcription)

I want you borrow reference book to me PRT. (Literal English version)

I want to borrow a reference book from you PRT. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 5)

我 想 問 下 測 驗 成 績.

Ngo5 seong2 man6 haa5 caak1 jim6 sing4 zik1 (Cantonese transcription)

I want ask test result. (Literal English version)

I want to ask about the test results. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 1)

4.2. Lexical downgraders and upgraders used by NCS and NES in the three social situations

The analysis showed that a politeness marker was the most popular lexical downgrader, followed by a time intensifier in both languages (Tables 6-8). NES frequently used ‘please’ and ‘excuse me’ to indicate politeness; and ‘now’, ‘today/night’, ‘for a while/few days/second/moment/minute’ as time intensifiers to increase the impact of the request. NCS used 請 *cing2/* 唔該 *m4 goi1: please*, 麻煩你 *maa4 fan4 nei5: trouble you*, *m4 hou3 ji3 si3: excuse me* as the politeness markers; and 而家 *ji4 gaa1/* 現在 *jin6 zoi6: now*; 快的 *faai3 di1/儘快* *zeon2 faai3: be quick* as the time intensifiers. For instance,

Politeness markers³

Can you please clean the pantry? (NES, S-S, request 3)

唔 該 , 我 想 知 測 驗 成 績 呀! (NCS, S-T, request 1)

M4 goi4.ngo5 seong2 zi3 caak1 jim6 sing4 zik1 aa1! (Cantonese transcription)

Please, I want know test result PRT. (Literal English version)

Please, I want to know the test results PRT. (Edited English version)

Time intensifiers

Could you give us our tests back now? (NES, S-T, request 1)

Can I use that book for a while? (NES, S-T, request 5)

請 你 儘 快 清 理 茶 水 間 , 好 嗎? (NCS, S-S request 3)

Cing2 nei5 zeon2 faai3 cing1 lei5 caa4 sei2 gaan1, hou2 maa5? (Cantonese transcription)

Please you quick clean pantry, okay? (Literal English version)

³ Some other examples of politeness markers and time intensifiers can be found in the paragraphs that show the various types and combinations of lexical downgraders.

Please clean the pantry as quickly as possible, is it okay with you? (Edited English version)

Secondly, NES tended to use fewer lexical downgraders and fewer combinations of lexical devices than NCS. NES did not use any appealer; they only had one lexical downgrader or upgrader or a combination of two at the most in each request to soften its impositive force. NCS, however, used the spectrum of lexical devices suggested by the CCSARP coding categories to modify the requests, ranging from one (e.g. politeness marker) to four (subjectiviser + politeness marker + understater + time intensifier). Fourteen combinations of lexical devices had been identified (Tables 6-8). The average frequency rate of using more than one category of lexical devices by NES was 0.575% in the S-T and S-S situations, whereas the average frequency rate of using more than one category by NCS was above 20% in all three social situations. The following are the range of combinations of lexical devices and their examples.

NES

1. Politeness marker + time intensifier:
E.g. Would you please clean the pantry soon? (NES, S-S, request 3)
2. Downtoner + time intensifier:
E.g. Clean up the room, preferably now. (NES, S-S, request 3)

NCS

1. Politeness marker + time intensifier:
E.g. 請 問 現 在 幾 多 點?
Cing2 man6 jin6 zoi6 gei2 do1 dim2? (Cantonese transcription)
Please ask now what time? (Literal English version)
What time is it now, please? (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-T, request 4)
2. Politeness marker + understater:
E.g. 請 問 可 以 借 一 借 筆 記 給 我。
Cing2 man6 ho2 ji2 ze3 jat1 ze3 bat1 gei3 kap1 ngo5? (Cantonese transcription)
Please ask can lend once lend notes to me? (Literal English version)
Can you lend the notes to me once, please? (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-S, request 2)
3. Politeness marker + subjectiviser:
E.g. 若 空 間 存 在 的 話 , 我 希 望 你 來
清潔 這 些 東 西。
Joek6 hung3 gaan1 cyun4 zoi6 di1 waa6, ngo5 hei1 mong6 nei5 loi6
cing1 kit3 ze3 se1 dung1 sai4 (Cantonese transcription)
If space exist as said, I hope you come clean these things. (Literal English version)

If time allows, I hope you come to clean these things. (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-S, request 3)

4. Politeness marker + downtoner:

E.g. 請 問 可 知 會 派 卷 呢?

Cing2 man6 ho4 zi3 hu paai3 kyun4 ne1? (Cantonese transcription)

Please ask know when distribute scripts PRT? (Literal English version)

When are the scripts distributed PRT, please? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 1)

5. Understater + downtoner:

E.g. 可 以 借 我 這 筆 一 用?

Ho2 ji2 ze3 ngo5 ze3 bat1 jat1 jung6? (Cantonese transcription)

Can lend me this pen use a while? (Literal English version)

Can (you) lend me this pen to use once? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 3)

6. Subjectiviser + downtoner:

E.g. 我 想 同 你 借 參 考 書 俾 我 呀.

Ngø5 seong2 tung4 nei5 ze3 caam1 haau2 syu2 bei2 ngo5 aa1 (Cantonese transcription)

I want you borrow reference book to me PRT. (Literal English version)

I want to borrow a reference book from you PRT. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 5)

7. Downtoner + appealer:

E.g. 借 本 筆 記 俾 我, 得 唔 得 呀?

Ze3 bun2 bat1 gei3 bei2 ngo5, duk1 m4 duk1 aa1? (Cantonese transcription)

Lend notebook to me, is it okay aa1? (Literal English version)

Lend your notebook to me, is it okay aa1? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 2)

8. Time intensifier + downtoner:

E.g. 甘 污 糟 快 的 執 返 好 佢 呢.

Gam3 wu1 zou1 faai3 di1 zap6 faan1 hou3 keoi5 ne1. (Cantonese transcription)

So dirty, quick tidy up PRT. (Literal English version)

It's so dirty, tidy it up quickly PRT. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 3)

9. Politeness marker + subjectiviser + downtoner:

E.g. 唔 該, 我 想 知 測 驗 成 績 呀!

M4 goi4, ngo5 seong2 zi3 caak1 jim6 sing4 zik1 aa1!
(Cantonese transcription)

Please, I want know test result PRT. (Literal English version)

Please, I want to know the test results PRT. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 1)

10. Politeness marker + understater + downtoner

- E.g. 請 問 我 可 以 借 你 的 筆 記 看 看 嗎?
Cing2 man6 ngo5 ho2 ji2 ze3 nei5 dik1 bat1 ge3 hon1 hon1 ma3?
(Cantonese transcription)
Please ask I can borrow your notes see see PRT? (Literal English version)
Can I borrow your notes to take a look PRT, please? (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-S, request 3)

11. Politeness marker + time intensifier + appealer:

- E.g. 請 你 儘 快 清 理 茶 水 間, 好 嗎?
Cing2 nei5 zeon2 faai3 cing1 lei5 caa4 sei2 gaan1, hou2 maa5?
(Cantonese transcription)
Please you quick clean pantry, okay? (Literal English version)
Please clean the pantry as quickly as possible, is it okay with you? (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-S, request 3)

12. Politeness marker + time intensifier + downtoner:

- E.g. 請 問 而 家 幾 多 點 呀?
Cing2 man6 ji4 gaa1 gei2 do1 dim2 aa1? (Cantonese transcription)
Please ask now what time PRT? (Literal English version)
What time is it now PRT, please? (Edited English version)
(NCS, T-S, request 6)

13. Subjectiviser + politeness marker + understater + time intensifier:

- E.g. 我 想 請 問 一 下 而 家 幾 點 鐘?
Ngo5 seong2 cing2 man6 jat1 haa6 ji4 gaa1 gei2 dim2 zung1? (Cantonese transcription)
I want please ask a bit now what time? (Literal English version)
I want to ask a bit what time it is now, please? (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-T, request 5)

14. Politeness marker + intensifier + time intensifier:

- E.g. 請 問 可 唔 可 以 借 那 本 書 俾 我?
Cing2 man6 ho4 m4 ho2 ji2 ze3 naa5 bun2 syu2 bei2 ngo5?
我 用 完 一 定 儘 快 還 俾 你。
Ngo5 jung6 jyun4 jat1 ding6 zeon2 faai3 waan4 bei2 nei5 (Cantonese transcription)
Please ask can-and-cannot lend that book to me? I finish use must return very quick to you. (Literal English version)
Can you lend that book to me, please? I must return it to you after use. (Edited English version)
(NCS, S-T, request 5)

Thirdly, NCS employed a higher frequency rates of understaters, downtoners and subjectivisers in all social situations than NES in order to soften the tone and to

increase the impact of the requests. In standard written Chinese, an understater is made by means of the reduplication of verbs – verb+verb, *jat1+verb*, verb+*jat1+verb* to express the notion of ‘doing an action a little bit or for a while’, such as *hon1 jat1 haa5*: *take a look a bit* (Cheung 1994: 32). The structure of verb + tentative marker *jat1 haa6* is also very similar to the reduplication of verbs grammatically and semantically (Zhan 1992: 5). All these unique Chinese grammatical features were also found in NCS replies.

(a) Reduplication of verbs

-- [Verb+verb]

可 唔 可 以 借 份 筆 記 俾 我 睇 睇?

Ho2 ng4 ho2 ji5 ze3 fan6 bat1 gei3 bei2 ngo5 tai2 tai2? (Cantonese transcription)

(verb+verb)

Can-and-cannot lend lecture notes to me see see? (Literal English version)

Can you lend me your lecture notes to see? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 1)

-- [Verb+*jat1+verb*]

麻 煩 你 抹 一 抹 茶 水 間.

Maa4 faan3 nei5 mut3 jat1 mut3 caa4 seoi2 gaan1. (Cantonese transcription)

(verb+*jat1+verb*)

Trouble you/please clean one clean pantry? (Literal English version)

Sorry for causing you trouble to clean the pantry once? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 3)

-- [*jat1+verb*]

老 師, 我 對 那 本 書 有 興 趣 呀. 請 借 我 一

Lou 5 si1, ngo5 deoi3 naa5 bun2 syu1 jau6 hing1 ceoi3 aa, cing2 ze3 ngo5 jat1
閱.

iyut6 (Cantonese transcription)

Teacher, I to that book interest aa, please lend me one look (Literal English version)

Teacher, I am interested in that book, please lend me to look for a bit (edited English version)

(NCS, S-T, request 5)

(b) Tentative marker *jat1 haa6*

-- [verb+*jat1 haa6*]

請 你 整 理 一 下 茶 水 間。

Cing2 nei5 cing1 lei5 jat1 haa6 caa4 sei2 gaan1 (Cantonese transcription)

Please you clean a bit pantry. (Literal English version)

Please clean the pantry a bit. (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 3)

In Cantonese, a downtoner was added by means of a sentence particle (PRT) such as *aa1*, *laa1* and *maa3* at the final position to indicate speech act types such as questions and requests, attitudinal factors and emotional colouring (Matthews & Yip 1994: 340). The sentence particles are described as one of the most distinctive features of Cantonese (ibid.: 65). Subjectivisers were achieved through phrases such as 我想 *ngo5 soeng2*: *I think/ want* and 我希望 *ngo5 hei1 mong6*: *I hope*. Downtoners were used in combination with the different forms of understaters and subjectivisers. All this intensifies interest to hearer -- a positive politeness strategy used in some other languages as well (Brown & Levinson 1987: 106-107).

(a) Reduplication of verbs + particle

-- [Verb+verb] + [particle]

我 想 問 你 借 你 剛 剛 寫 的 講 課 筆 記 呀!

Ngo5 soeng2 man6 nei5 ze3 nei5 gong1 gong1 se2 dik1 gong2 fo3 bat1 gei3 aa1!

(subjectiviser)

(verb+verb)

(particle)

(Cantonese transcription)

I want ask you borrow your just written lecture notes PRT! (Literal English version)

I want to ask you to borrow your recently written lecture notes PRT! (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 2)

-- [Verb+jat1+verb] + [verb+verb] + [particle]

請 問 可 以 借 一 借 講 課 筆 記 給 我 看 看 嗎?

Cing2 man6 ho2 ji2 ze3 jat1 ze3 gong2 fo3 bat1 gei3 kap1 ngo5 hon1 hon1 maa3?

(verb+jat1+verb)

(reduplication of verbs)(particle)

Please ask can lend one lend lecture notes to me? (Literal English version)

Can you lend me your lecture notes once, please? (Edited English version)

(NCS, S-S, request 2)

(b) Tentative marker + particle

-- [jat1+verb] + [particle]

這位同學，可以借筆一用嗎？

Ze3 wai6 tung4 hok6, ho2 ji5 ze3 bat1 jat1 jung6 maa? (Cantonese transcription)

(jat1+verb) (particle)

This student, can lend a pen for one use PRT? (Literal English version)

Can this student lend me a pen PRT? (Edited English version)

(NCS, T-S, request 6)

NES also used subjectivisers, downtoners and understaters but in a relatively small percentage, including ‘I think’ (subjectiviser); ‘yet, preferably, possibly’ (downtoner); ‘a little’ and ‘a bit’ (understater).

Subjectiviser

The pantry’s a mess! I think it needs to be cleaned. (NES, S-S, request 3)

Downtoner

Have you marked the tests yet? (NES, S-T, request 1)

Clean up the room, preferably now. (NES, S-S, request 3)

Could I possibly take this [reference book] home? (NES, S-T, request 5)

Understater

Can you straighten up the pantry a little? (NES, S-S, request 3)

Do you think you could give the pantry a bit of cleanliness? (NES, S-S, request 3)

Table 6: The average frequency rates and percentages of lexical downgraders and upgraders used by NCS and NES in the S-T situation (Requests 1 & 5)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
<i>One category</i>					
Politeness marker	49	28.155		46	22.77
Understater	0	0		10	4.95
Subjectiviser	0	0		15	7.425
Downtoner	7	4.025		35	17.325
Time intensifier	7	4.025		1	0.495
Sub-total		36.205			52.965
<i>Two categories and above</i>					
Politeness marker+understater	0	0		3	1.445
Politeness marker+subjectiviser	0	0		1	0.495
Politeness marker+time intensifier	1	0.575		1	0.495
Politeness marker+downtoner	0	0		8	4
Understater+downtoner	0	0		6	2.97
Subjectiviser+downtoner	0	0		2	0.99

Downtoner+appealer	0	0	4	1.98
Downtoner+intensifier	0	0	2	0.99
Politeness marker+subjectiviser+downtoner	0	0	1	0.495
Politeness marker + intensifier + time intensifier	0	0	1	0.495
Sub-total		0.575		14.355
<i>None</i>	110	63.22	66	32.67
Total		100		100
Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ; Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)				

Table 7: The average frequency rates and percentages of lexical downgraders and upgraders used by NCS and NES in the S-S situation (Requests 2 & 3)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
<i>One category</i>					
Politeness marker	60	34.485		30	14.85
Understater	5	2.875		17	8.415
Subjectiviser	1	0.575		0	0
Downtoner	0	0		43	21.285
Time intensifier	4	2.295		5	2.475
Sub-total		40.23			47.025
<i>Two categories and above</i>					
Politeness marker+understater	0	0		8	3.96
Politeness marker+subjectiviser	0	0		1	0.495
Politeness marker+time intensifier	0	0		1	0.495
Politeness marker+downtoner	0	0		8	3.96
Understater+downtoner	0	0		6	2.97
Downtoner+appealer	0	0		1	0.495
Downtoner+ intensifier	0	0		0	0
Downtoner+time intensifier	1	0.575		7	3.47
Politeness marker+understater+downtoner	0	0		3	1.485
Politeness marker+appealer+time intensifier	0	0		3	1.485
Sub-total		0.575			17.825
<i>None</i>	103	59.195		71	35.15
Total		100			100
Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ; Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)					

Table 8: The average frequency rates and percentages of lexical downgraders used by NCS and NES in the T-S situation (Requests 4 & 6)

NES	Frequency	%	NCS	Frequency	%
One category					
Politeness marker	35	20.115		15	7.426
Understater	0	0		5	2.475
Subjectiviser	0	0		1	0.495
Downtoner	0	0		25	12.376
Time intensifier	21	12.07		30	14.85
Sub-total		32.185			37.622
Two categories and above					
Politeness marker+understater	0	0		2	0.99
Politeness marker+time intensifier	0	0		45	22.28
Politeness marker+downtoner	0	0		4	1.98
Understater+downtoner	0	0		5	2.475
Downtoner+ time intensifier	0	0		15	7.426
Politeness marker+downtoner+time intensifier	0	0		4	1.98
Subjectiviser + politeness marker + understater + time intensifier	0	0		1	0.495
Sub-total		0			37.626
None	71	67.815		50	24.752
Total		100			100
Key: Total no. of NES questionnaires = 174 (87 from each situation) ; Total no. of NCS questionnaires = 202 (101 from each situation)					

5. Discussion

Three observations were made. Firstly, both NES and NCS ask in a direct sequence (i.e. without an explanation first). The sequence of NES and NCS in the study is similar to that of native English speakers and native Mandarin speakers but is contrary to that of Chinese learners of English reported in the literature. The direct sequence (i.e. without explanations) that appears in both NES and NCS requests may be attributable to the data collection tool --- one line for each reply in the discourse completion test gives an impression to the respondents that it prefers short replies. The discrepancy in sequence made by native Chinese and Chinese learners of English is worth investigating. It would be interesting to compare how the two groups make their requests in idealized and authentic situations, and the linguistic forms in Chinese and English, both verbally and non-verbally.

Secondly, both groups used a different proportion of syntactic and lexical devices to reduce directness. NES mainly use syntactic downgraders accompanied by a small number of lexical devices. An average of 71.65% of NES usually request with a preparatory condition featured by an interrogative question; 4.4% adopt tenses, aspects and conditional sentences, and an average of 36.59% use lexical devices in all three

situations respectively (refer to Tables 3-8). The frequency of syntactic downgraders of NES supports the claim again that --- native English speakers ask directly with indirect linguistic forms --- found in the literature. Similarly, NCS ask in a direct sequence accompanied by both syntactic-lexical devices, but with more emphasis on the latter. They use a higher frequency and a wider range of lexical devices but fewer and a lower percentage of syntactic downgraders with an average of only 55.44% of NCS adopt the interrogative construction, 0.99% for other syntactic downgraders and about an average of 69.14% use lexical devices (refer to Tables 3-8). NCS outperform NES in the number of combined lexical devices, ranging from two to 14. The high frequency rate of lexical devices in NCS data is different from Zhang's study (1995) which reported that 60.3% and 90.3% of the Mandarin Chinese respondents did not use any lexical downgraders and upgraders. The greater number of combination may be partly due to the respondents' individual preference; and partly due to the inherent linguistic forms such as verbs reduplication in Cantonese for understating – verb+verb, verb+*jat1*+verb and *jat1*+verb; and sentence particles for downtoning. The absence of tense-aspect in requests is understandable as Cantonese lacks 'explicit tense marking, temporal relations are expressed by a combination of adverbials, aspect markers and contextual factors.' (Matthew & Yip 1994: 198). Thus NCS never use tense-aspect to soften the force of the act. Instead, they used the distinctive interrogative pattern and conditional sentence in Cantonese to fulfill the purpose of mitigation. The a-not-a question⁴ and sentence-final particles are typical examples of interrogative constructions, whereas the conditional sentence is expressed explicitly using a conjunction such as *jy4 gwo2: if* (ibid: 301).

Thirdly, both NES and NCS consider the use of syntactic-lexical devices in accordance with the social and power relationships between the interactants. In the power unequal T-S situation, in which the speaker (T) has a social distance with and is more powerful than the hearer (S), the respondents tend to use fewer syntactic downgraders and lexical downgraders in the request. This explains why there is an obvious drop in politeness markers in the T-S situation, and NES only had two lexical downgraders (Table 7). In contrast, in the power unequal S-T situation and the power equal S-S situation in which the speaker (S) has some social distance with but is less powerful than or has equal power with the hearer (T/S), the respondents are inclined to use more syntactic downgraders and lexical devices. Therefore, making a request

⁴ According to Matthews & Yip (1994: 311), the a-not-a question is 'the most neutral form of yes/no question' and 'is like asking Is A the case or not?' in English, in which the verb or adjective is repeated. For example, *zi m4 zi: know-no-know*.

directly with indirect linguistic forms by means of syntactic-lexical devices is not only applied to one's seniors, but is also heavily emphasized between peers. The findings in the S-S situation run contrary to our common expectation that indirectness is not necessarily required in power equal requests. Nevertheless, an explanation may be useful to justify one's request as shown in the respondents' discourse, particularly NCS. Perhaps asking with an indirect syntactic form accompanied by lexical devices and explanations between peers may fulfill multiple purposes: Mitigating the force of the act which may appear to be impositive to the hearer; justifying the act; increasing the probability of fulfilling the request; saving both the negative face want of the hearer and the positive want of the speaker who makes the request; and most importantly maintaining a harmonious relationship and be polite.

In short, it seems feasible to conclude that both groups of language users are aware of the relationship between what is said (locution), how to do things with words, (illocution) and the impact of those words on the hearer (perlocution). They are able to fully utilize the unique linguistic forms of their respective languages in their own way according to the social situation to reduce the force of a request and to ask politely.

6. Conclusion

Both NES and NCS ask in a direct sequence accompanied by a different proportion of syntactic and lexical devices to reduce directness. NES use a higher frequency and a wider range of syntactic downgraders than NCS to soften the tone of a request. In contrast, NCS use both linguistic devices but they rely more heavily on lexical devices than syntactic downgraders. They have a higher frequency of lexical downgraders and a greater number of combinations of lexical devices than NES. The cross-linguistic comparison of the linguistic features of Cantonese and English requests demonstrates the ways a request is constituted in accordance with the distinctive linguistic properties of the language and social factors, and makes some contribution to the Chinese-English request literature. The idealized written responses and the selected age group might not be able to truly reflect the ways in which requests are made in the real context. It would be interesting to find out how two similar groups of NCS and NES make their requests in a range of authentic situations and for a range of age groups verbally and non-verbally, or to compare the linguistic forms of requests made by NCS in English with the linguistic forms of requests made by NES in Cantonese.

Appendix 1

Discourse Completion Test (English version)

Request situations:

Imagine that you are one of the interactants. How do you ask in the following situations? You can write whatever you think is appropriate.

Situation 1: A student asks his/her teacher what his/her test score is.

Student: _____

Teacher: I'm going to return the papers to you before the lesson ends.

Situation 2: A student asks his/her classmate to lend him/her some (lecture) notes.

StudentA: _____

Student B: Sure, but you need to return them to me next week.

Situation 3: A student at the hostel asks his/her roommate to clean up the pantry because the roommate had left it in a mess the night before.

StudentA: _____

Student B: I'll be cleaning it up very soon.

Situation 4: A teacher asks a student sitting at the front the time.

Teacher: _____

Student: Ten past three.

Situation 5: A student wants to borrow a reference book from a teacher.

Student: _____

Teacher: Sure.

Situation 6: A teacher wants to borrow a pen from a student.

Teacher: _____

Student: Here it is.

Appendix 2

Discourse Completion Test (Standard written Chinese with Cantonese transcription)

Cing2 kau4 cing4 ging2 : Zoi6 ji5 haa5gok7 cing4 ging2 zong, nei5 wui5 zam2 jeong6 tai4 ceot1 cing4 kau4?

Cing4 ging2 jat1: *Jat1 ming4 hok6 saang1 hoeng3 gaau si1 caa4 seon1 caak1 jim6 sing4 zek3.*

Hok6 sang1: _____.

Lou5 si1: *haa6 fo3 cin4 ngo5 wui5 faat3 waan4 caak1 jim6 gyun2 kap1 taai6 gaal.*

Cing4 ging2 ji6: *hok6 saang gaap3 man6 tung4 hok6 jyut3 ze3 jyut6 gong2 fo3 bat1 gei3.*

Hok6 sang1 : _____.

Lou5 si1: *Dong1 jin4 ho2 ji5. bat1 gwo3 nei5 jiu3 zoi6 haa5 sing1 kei4 gaau1 waan4 kap1.*

Cing4 ging2 saam1: *Jat1 ming4 hok6 saang1 ceng2 kau4 suk1 se2 tung4 fong2 tung4 hok6 ceng1 lei5 caa4 sei2 gaan1, jan1 wai6 goi1 tung4 hok6 cin4 jat1 je6 baa2 caa4 sei2 gaan1 lung6 dak1 jat1 tyun4 zou1.*

Hok6 sang1 gaap3: _____.

Hok6 sang1 jyut3: *Ngo5 wui5 zeon6 faai3 ceng1 lei5.*

Cing4 ging2 sei3: *Jat1 wai6 gaau si1 hoeng3 zo6 zoi6 cin4 paai4 dik1 hok6 saang1 man6 si1 gang3.*

Lou5 si1: _____.

Hok6 sang1: *Saam3 si4 sap6 fan6.*

Cing4 ging2 ng5: *Jat1 ming4 hok6 saang1 soeng2 hoeng3 lou5 si1 ze3 caam1 haau2 syu1.*

Hok6 sang1: _____.

Lou5 si1: *Dong1 jin4 ho2 ji5.*

Cing4 ging2 luk6: Jat1 wai6 gaau si1 soeng2 hoeng3 hok6 saang ze3 bat1.

Lou5 si1: _____.

Hok6 sang1: ze2 zau6 si6.

Appendix 3

Lexical devices	Examples from NCS	Examples from NES
Syntactic downgraders		
Interrogative	<i>Nei5 ho2 ji5 kap1 ngo5 hon3 hon3 cak1 jim6 seng4 zik1 maa3?</i> (Cantonese transcription) You can let me see see test score maa? (Literal translation) Can you let me see my test score? (Edited English version)	Can you <u>tell</u> me my test score?
Subjunctive	---	
Aspect	---	I'm <u>wondering</u> if you've graded our tests.
Conditional clause	<i>Jyu4 gwo2 nei5 jau5 hung1 dik1 waa6, maa4 faan4 nei5 cing1 lei5 cing1 lei5</i> (Cantonese transcription) If you have time, bother you clean clean. (Literal translation) If you have time, you please clean it. (Edited English version)	Hey, do you mind <u>if</u> I borrow some of your notes from class?
Tense	---	I <u>was wondering</u> what my test score was?
Tense + conditional	---	Professor, I <u>was wondering if</u> you <u>could tell</u> my [me] how I did on the test.
Lexical downgraders		
Politeness marker	<i>Cing2 man6 jin6 zoi6 gei2 do1 dim2?</i> (Cantonese transcription) Please ask now what time? (Literal English version) What time is it now, please? (Edited English version)	Sir, would you tell me how many [the] score I get in the test, <u>please</u> ?
Understater	<i>Cing man6 ho2 jji2 ze3 jat1 ze3 bat1 gei3 kap1 nog5?</i> (Cantonese transcription) Please ask can lend once lend notes to me? (Literal English version) Can you lend the notes to me once, please? (Edited English version)	Could you straighten up the pantry <u>a bit</u> ?
Subjectivizer	<i>Ngo5 seong2 man6 haa5 caak1 jim6 sing4 zik1</i> (Cantonese transcription) I want ask test result. (Literal English version) I want to ask about the test results. (Edited English version)	The pantry's a mess! <u>I think</u> it needs to be cleaned.
Downtoner	<i>Ngo5 seong2 tung4 nei5 ze3 caam1 haau2 syu2 bei2 ngo5 aa1.</i> (Cantonese transcription) I want you borrow reference book to me PRT. (Literal English version) I want to borrow a reference book from you PRT. (Edited English version)	Could I <u>possibly</u> take this home?
Appealer	<i>Ze3 bun2 bat1 gei3 bei2 ngo5, duk1 m4</i>	---

	<p><i>duk1 aa1?</i> (Cantonese transcription) Lend notebook to me, is it okay aa1? (Literal English version) Lend your notebook to me, is it okay aa1? (Edited English version)</p>	
Lexical upgraders		
Intensifier	<p><i>Ngo5 jung6 jyun4 jat1 ding6 zeon2 faai3 waan4 bei2 nei5.</i> I finish use must return very quick to you. (Literal English version) I must return it to you after use. (Edited English version)</p>	The pantry is <u>really</u> messy.
Time intensifier	<p><i>Gam3 wu1 zou1 faai3 di1 zap6 faan1 hou3 keoi5 nei1.</i> (Cantonese transcription) So dirty, quick tidy up PRT. (Literal English version) It's so dirty, tidy it up quickly PRT. (Edited English version)</p>	May I use your pen <u>for a minute</u> ?

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