A STUDY OF REQUESTS
IN ENGLISH, RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN*

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1. *Introduction*

To begin with, I think that the equation "pragmatics is meaning minus truth conditions" is not a very happy generalisation, because grammar and pragmatic principles strongly interact to determine content of utterances (cf. Kempson 1988:141). I would also slightly alter Leech's (1983:12) statement that grammar and pragmatics interact via semantics. It would, perhaps, be more appropriate to say that meaning is the product of interaction between broadly understood grammar and pragmatics.

Another point to be emphasized is that pragmatics cannot go far, if it is concerned with language in the so-called Saussueran sense. It has more prospects dealing with particular languages, especially languages (and cultures) in contact.

Also, it is worth pointing out that present publications in English produce the impression that sociolinguistics and pragmalinguistics were rather new phenomena originating in the United States and Western Europe.

In a recent publication Likhachev (1993) draws on an article by S.A. Askoldov-Alekseiev published in Russia in 1928. The main idea of that article was that a language stores and represents the "conceptual sphere" of the nation. In other words, a language codes, accumulates and represents a nation's mentality and culture, and it can be understood and properly used only in the context of that mentality and that culture.

Another Russian linguist wrote in 1923 that there is a trade-off between the apperceptive masses of interacting individuals and the degree of elaborateness and grammatical completeness of their utterances. He also pointed out the behavioural character of speech in conversation (Yakubinsky 1986:17, 58).

So, unless special attention is drawn to the differences in the conceptual worlds of native speakers of two languages, a person trying to communicate in what is

his or her second language may fail to switch to a register appropriate in the given situation for native speakers of that language.

Also, native speakers should be aware of the fact, that people speaking their language may have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and that even if they speak fluently, they might not be able to display verbal behaviour typical of a native speaker in the given situation. Consider the following examples.

English and American travellers sometimes complained to me that Russian and Ukrainian guides were rude. Similarly, a British Council assistant, who was a teacher of English at Kharkov University and a learner of Russian, once commented that in the university buffet the students spoke rudely to the woman who served behind the counter (they spoke Russian). One reason they sounded so to her might have been that she did not remember, that in Russian there is a form of the imperative ending in "- tie", which is polite enough for a request and does not always have to be appended with the Russian equivalent of "please". The other reason might have been the difference in intonation used for requests in English and in Russian.

Linguistic and cultural difference often cause defects in communication, and teachers and learners of foreign languages should be made aware of these differences. Yet, as bilingual linguists testify, one can master the pronunciation and the lexicon of a foreign language, but it would be an impossible task to get rid of the customary semantic links and associations acquired with the native language and become both bilingual and bicultural. Where then should we look for a way out?

It is heard sometimes that pragmalinguistics is a bridge between linguistics and language teaching. For teaching foreign languages that bridge would be contrastive pragmalinguistic studies. Studies of this kind are necessary to get linguistics to the higher, interpretative level. From this angle the idea of a language as an adaptable system for storing and drawing on the conceptual mass of the nation is rather appealing.

2. Experiments

The subjects were native speakers of English, Russian and Ukrainian. They were asked to roleplay in response to questions that set particular interactional contexts. In English, the questions sounded as follows:

(1)   You need a pen. Ask your friend for a pen.
(2)   You are in your boss's office. Ask his permission to use his telephone.

Anticipating some questions regarding the validity of the results of our investigation, I would like to dwell a little more on the organisation of the experiments. In our case native speakers of English were only available for a short time, so there could not be any observations in natural settings.

Besides, even researchers who have the opportunity to make such observations often resort to the use of questionnaires. It is interesting, that a group of American and Japanese linguists not only used a similar method, they actually asked almost identical questions (cf. Dorodnych 1981 and Hill et al. 1986). The coincidence is

rather significant and reflects the need for comparing similar speech acts in similar settings on different language material.

The purpose of our first questionnaire, which included the questions above, was to study variation in British and American English.

In 1991-92 the subjects were Americans, Russians and Ukrainians speaking their native languages. The main purpose was to compare verbal behaviour of Americans, Russians and Ukrainians in similar interactions. Another purpose, of less importance, was to see if there were any changes in American usage (first the questionnaire was used in 1970-75 and then 16 years later).

3. Results

There is less to say about the results relating to the second purpose, so they will be discussed first.

It seems that there really have been some changes. The utterances representing informal and formal requests now show more uses of "can" (1.7 in situation 1; 3.8 times in situation 2), and fewer uses of "may" (3.7 times less in situation 1 and 20% less in situation 2). The share of imperative forms in situation 1 has grown, but not very significantly (from 11.5% to 18.7%).

The number of respondents in both experiments was not great enough to be strongly representative of real usage, yet it seems that there is a trend towards liberalisation of communication rules, as "may" associates with asymmetry of social statuses or roles of interlocutors, while "can" associates with their symmetry.

Now let us concentrate on the comparative study of verbal behaviour in English, Russian, and Ukrainian language communities.

The numbers of respondents were 31 speakers of American English, 43 speakers of Russian, and 52 speakers of Ukrainian. The numbers of responses do not always correspond to the numbers of respondents because some subjects gave more than one response, while others refrained from answering.

It seems best to first discuss the responses of members of the three groups separately, then do the comparison and offer some conclusions.

Americans

Situation 1 (informal request)

The responses are presented in actual numbers and in percentages.

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
can	13	40.62
could	4	12.50
may	3	9.38
might	–	–
imperative form	6	18.75
other forms	6	18.75
Total		100%

Table 1

The imperative form in English is normally associated with commands, but in this situation they were requests, which is supported by a respondent's comment "not demanding" after giving the form "Gimme a pen".

It is perhaps necessary to have a closer look at what are called "other forms" above. They were all questions like: "Got a pen?", "You have a pen?", "Hey, gotta pen?". The response "Lemme borrow a pen, willya?" I included with imperatives.

Situation 2 (formal request)

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
can	5	16.67
could	3	10.00
may	11	36.67
might	1	3.33
imperative form	–	–
mind	6	20.00
other forms	4	13.33
Total	30	100%

Table 2

In the asymmetric situation the share of "may" is significantly greater than in the symmetric one. Noticeable also is the appearance of requests of the type "Do you mind if I use the phone?" One of them was even more polite as it contained the forms, which I call "subjunctive":"Would you mind if I made a quick call on your phone?".

The "other forms" were:

"Mike, I'm going to use your phone."

"I'm using the phone, OK?"

"I have to make a phone call, because I promised to call my brother."

"Mr. Green, your telephone is the only one working today. If I don't make my call now, the firm will lose a million dollars."

The examples show that social distance between the boss and his worker may vary considerably.

In the situation 2 there were more utterances containing apologetic elements and explanations as to the reason for the request compared with situation 1.

Russians

Situation 1 (informal)

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
imperative form	10	23.26
imperative + pozhaluista (please)	24	55.81
mozhesh (can you)	1	2.32
nie mog by	1	2.32

mozhno (it is allowed)	2	4.65
other forms	5	11.64
Total	43	100%

Table 3

There is no English equivalent of the structure "nie mog by". Literally, it would be "couldn't you", but the great difference is that the Russian "nie mog by" is not insistent or challenging, it is more tentative than "mog by" (could you) and therefore more polite. Of course, in Russian "mog by" is used with the pronoun for the second person singular "ty", unmarked for politeness (as opposed to "Vy", which is the polite second person pronoun addressed to one person or more). It is not easy to suggest English equivalents for "mozhno". Literally, it is something like "Is it allowed to ...?"

The "other forms" were:

Two instances of "Ja woźmu ruchku" (literally, "I will take/I am going to take your pen").

Two instances of "U tiebia ruchki niet?" (the closest English translation would be something like "You haven't got a pen, have you?").

One instance of "U tiebia ruchki nie najdiotsa?" which in English would be something like "You won't have a pen on you, will you?"

It will probably not be amiss to mention here, that even though the Russians made mostly utterances constructed as imperative sentences, they used more softeners. Apart from "pozhaluista" (please), they explained why they did not have a pen of their own, or asked if their friend had a pen. One respondent used a request with introductory "izwini" (excuse me). Explanations and apologies were not used by the American respondents in this situation.

Situation 2 (formal)

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
mozhno	18	42.85
razrieshytie (allow me, let me)	9	21.45
razrieshytie pozhaluista (will you please allow me, let me)	1	2.38
Vy nie razrieshytie	4	9.52
Vy nie pozwolitie	3	7.14
Vy mnie pozwolitie (Will you allow me)	2	4.76
Ja mogu (can I)	2	4.76
Mogu li ja (can I)	2	4.76
Total	42	100%

Table 4

Note that all the verbs having the boss as the agent of the action end with the polite "-tie".

The utterances by the Russian respondents often begin with an apology:

– izwinitie	13	31%
– izwinitie pozhalujsta	7	16.67%
– prostitie	2	4.67%
– ja proshu proschenia	1	2.38%

or contain a reason for the request:

– mnie nuzhno srochno pozwonit' (I have to make an urgent call)	11	26.19%

or contain a promise of gratitude:

– ja budu ochień blagodarien	2	4.76%

or ask if the boss is expecting a telephone call:

– Vy nie zhdiotie zwonka	2	2.38%

or appeal to the boss's kindness:

– budtie dobry	1	2.38%
– Vy ochień dobry	1	2.38%

or ask if it would disturb the boss if the person makes a call from the boss's office:

– ja Vam nie pomieshaju jesli pozwoniu	1	3.38%

In fact, 40 respondents out of 42 used one of the above devices to demostrate their respect for the boss.

Ukrainians

Situation 1 (informal)

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
daj, bud' laska (kindly give me)	40.00	80.00
pozych, bud' laska (kindly lend me)	2	4.00
imperative	2	4.00
dozwol (allow me, let me)	2	4.00
ty ne zmozhesh (you won't be able, will you)	2	4.00
other forms	2	4.00
Total	50	100%

Table 5

Only two Ukrainian respondents used the imperative "daj" (give) without any softeners. The "other forms" were in fact the same question asked by two respondents: "U tebe je avtoruchka?" (Have you got a pen?).

Situation 2 (formal)

Requests containing	Number	Percentage
mozhna (it is allowed)	16	30.80
chy ne mozhna (it is not allowed, is it)	4	7.70
dozwolte (allow me)	10	19.20
dozwolte, bud'te laskovi (kindly allow me)	8	15.40
Vy ne dozwolite	6	11.50
Vy ne dozwolili b	2	3.85
Vy dozwolite	2	3.85
other forms	4	7.70
Total	52	100%

Table 6

Again, it is very difficult to find any construction in English which would correspond to Ukrainian negative interrogatives. Literally, "Vy ne dozvolite ...?" is something like "You will not allow me, will you?" and "Vy ne dozwolliby b ...?" – "You wouldn't allow me, would you?". As to their illocutionary force, they are close to "Will you please let me ...?" and "Would you please let me ...? ".

"Dozwolte" is an imperative, but it is a "polite" imperative and it associates with the polite address "Vy" (cf. German "Sie"). Besides, the lexical meaning of "dozwolte" (allow) places the addressee above the speaker.

The other forms of this table are as follows:

"Ja z vashogo dozwolu skorystujuś " (With your permission I will use)

"Vy ne proty shchob ja podzwonyw z Vashogo kabinetu?" (Do you mind if I make a call from your office?)

57.70% Ukrainian respondents began their requests with apologies: "Vybachte, bud' laska" – 23%, "Vybachte" – 23%, "Probachte" – 3.85%, "Probachte, bud' laska" 3.85%, "Pereproshuju" 3.85%.

26.90% respondents stressed the necessity of the telephone call – "duzhe potribno"; 3.85% promised not to disturb the boss long – "Ja zavazhaty Vam ne budu"; 15.38%. expressed gratitude even before permission was given – "diakuju", "velyke spasybi".

4. Comparison

The first conclusion one can make looking at the responses of the speakers of English, Russian, and Ukrainian is that in each in the language communities they represent there is a clear distinction of registers for informal and formal communication reflecting similarity of the rules of social behaviour.

The most obvious difference is that Russians and Ukrainians use far more imperative forms both in informal and formal situations. Yet, in formal situations the imperative has a special polite form, which is plural addressed to a single person (cf. the German "Geben Sie mir, bitte"). The appearance of casual imperative form always signal a more close relationship between the employee and the boss in both Russian and Ukrainian.

Another difference is the significant share of modal verbs of possibility in informal (62.50%) and formal (66.67%) situations in American responses. The share of modal verbs and predicative elements expressing possibility is much less significant in the responses of Russians and Ukrainians for the informal situation (9.30% and 4% respectively). In the formal situation the share of these modal elements rises to 52.37% with the Russians and to 38.50% with the Ukrainians. These responses clearly show that role or status asymmetry in Russian and Ukrainian is indicated by the predicative elements "mozhno" and "mozhna", respectively.

The greater use of apologies and other softeners by the Russians and Ukrainians is compared with the Americans in the formal situations shows that the arsenal of polite forms they use is not smaller than that of native speakers of English.

It may be informative to compare the syntactic structures used to make a request. These will be presented in the form of a table.

Syntactic constructions	Americans		Russians		Ukrainians	
	informal	formal	informal	formal	informal	formal
Interrogative	59.37	53.34	13.94	57.13	7.60	34.65
Interrogative with subjunctive	12.50	13.33	–	–	–	–
Interrogative with a conditional clause	–	20.00	–	2.38	–	3.85
Negative – interrogative	–	–	–	16.66	–	19.20
Negative interrogative with subjunctive	–	–	2.32	–	–	3.85
Declarative	3.13	13.33	4.65	–	–	3.85
Imperative	18.75	–	79.00	–	88.60	–
Imperative with "let", "razrieshitie", "dozwolte"	3.13	–	–	23.83	3.80	34.60

Table 7

What hits the eye is the use of negative-interrogative structures to make a polite request in Russian and Ukrainian. Understandably, our American respondents did not use this type of structure as it expresses disbelief and/or insistence.

The absence of interrogatives with verb in the subjunctive in the columns for Russians and Ukrainians has an explanation: their subjunctive forms were used in negative – interrogative constructions, though not very often.

The absence of requests with "let" in formal situations might mean that they are not specially marked for politeness, whereas "razrieshytie" and "dozwolte" are polite not only because of the "polite" inflection but also because of their lexical meaning.

The American – Japanese experiment (Hill et al. 1986) showed a great difference in the freedom of choice between the speakers of American English and the speakers of Japanese. While the Americans used about 20 variants in one situation, the Japanese responded with 1 or 2.

It is interesting to compare the numbers of variants in our experiments.

In the earlier experiment, there were 10 variants for the English and 8 variants for the Americans in the informal situation, and 17 and 9, respectively, in the formal situation.

In the more recent experiment, in the informal situation the Americans used 10, the Russians 8 and the Ukrainians 9 variants. If we add the accompanying structures (apologies, explanations) whose number was greater with the Russians and Ukrainians, then the overall numbers of variants would differ even less.

Although the principles ruling verbal behaviour of the representatives of the three language communities in the situations discussed above may be considered similar, there are considerable differences in the use of lexical, morphological and syntactic means.

These differences should be remembered when using English, Russian or Ukrainian as a second language to communicate with their native speakers.

For example, Russians and Ukrainians should remember not to use negative interrogatives when making a request; to use more interrogatives with "will", "can" or "may" instead of imperatives in informal situations; to use more subjunctives, especially in formal situations; not to overuse "let". They should be made aware that polite forms in informal communication may be understood as markers of social or psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee.

Finally, there are significant differences in the intonation used for requests in English on the one hand, and in Russian and Ukrainian on the other. These differences were not studied here in depth but their importance can hardly be overestimated.

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