INDIRECTNESS AND POLITENESS IN REQUESTS: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

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The aim of this paper is to re-examine the notions of indirectness and politeness as applied to requests. It is argued that (contrary to current theories of politeness) the two notions do not represent parallel dimensions; indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness. The relationship between the two was examined in a series of experiments designed to tap native speakers' perceptions of politeness and indirectness in Hebrew and English. The results indicate that the two notions are perceived as different from each other: The most indirect request strategies were not judged as the most polite. The strategies rated as the most polite, on a scale of politeness, were conventional indirect requests (‘on record’ indirectness); the strategies rated as the most indirect, on a scale of indirectness, were hints used for requests (‘off record’ indirectness). These results are interpreted in the framework of a suggested model for politeness. The thrust of the argument is that a certain adherence to the pragmatic clarity of the message is an essential part of politeness. Politeness is defined as the interactional balance achieved between two needs: The need for pragmatic clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness. This balance is achieved in the case of conventional indirectness, which indeed received the highest ratings for politeness. Tipping the balance in favor of either pragmatic clarity or non-coerciveness will decrease politeness; thus, direct strategies can be perceived as impolite because they indicate a lack of concern with face, and non-conventional indirect strategies (hints) can be perceived as impolite because they indicate a lack of concern for pragmatic clarity.

1. Introduction

My aim in the following is to re-examine the notions of indirectness and politeness as applied to requests. In the literature on politeness and indirectness, it is often argued that the two notions represent scalable, parallel dimensions. Thus, for example, Leech (1983: 108) suggests that given the same propositional content, it is possible to increase the degree of politeness by using a more and more indirect kind of illocution. Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b)

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because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be".

I shall argue that at least for requests, such claims need to be modified by distinguishing between two types of indirectness: conventional and non-conventional. Politeness seems to be associated with the former but not necessarily with the latter. In particular, I shall argue that politeness and indirectness are linked in the case of conventional indirectness, but not always in the case of non-conventional indirectness. Furthermore, it might very well be the case that the nature of the association will change across cultures. These arguments will be supported by results from a series of rating experiments designed to test native speakers' perceptions of politeness and indirectness in English and Hebrew.

2. The study

2.1. Background of the study

The need to study perceptions of indirectness and politeness from a cross-cultural perspective was originally motivated by work carried out within a project investigating realization patterns of requests and apologies in different languages (the CCSARP project). CCSARP studies requests and apologies in eight different languages, using the same coding scheme for the analysis of observed variation in both speech acts. The goals of the project are to look for intra-lingual, situational, as well as cross-linguistic variation in the use of these two speech acts. The use of the same coding scheme for the analysis of patterns in different languages is meant to ensure cross-linguistic comparability.

For requests, one of the central categories on the coding scheme is the classification of request patterns in terms of a scale of nine mutually exclusive strategy types. The scale is postulated to represent a cross-culturally valid scale of indirectness. Applying this scale to the analysis of observed variation in requests across several languages raises a number of issues, two of which will be addressed here. The first issue concerns the cross-cultural validity of this scale: How do we know that given request patterns are perceived as similarly direct or indirect across the languages studied? The experiments measuring perceptions of indirectness in requests reported here were designed to check whether native speakers' intuitions indeed confirm the psycholinguistic validity of the postulated scale across different languages.

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1 CCSARP stands for Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns. The languages studied are Hebrew (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain), Danish (Færch and Kasper), British English (Thomas), American English (Wolfson and Rintell), German (House-Edmondson and Vollmer), Canadian French (Weizman) and Australian English (Ventola). For details of the study see Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), and Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (forthcoming).
The interpretation of observed cross-cultural variation in the use of requests raises a second issue: How do we know that the categorization in terms of directness carries cross-culturally equivalent social meanings? In other words, do similar levels of directness in different languages necessarily carry the same social meaning? Could direct patterns be considered polite in a given situation in one culture but impolite in the same situation in another? The experiments in perceptions of politeness were designed as an attempt to answer these questions.

2.2. Experiments 1–4

Two types of experiments were set up: the first aimed at tapping perceptions of indirectness, the second at tapping perceptions of politeness. In both types of experiments, we used the typology of request patterns developed within the CCSARP project. Examples of these types, drawn from the English data, are listed in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Mood Derivable</td>
<td>Clean up the kitchen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Move your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performative</td>
<td>I'm asking you to move your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hedged Performative</td>
<td>I would like to ask you to move your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Obligation Statement</td>
<td>You'll have to move your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Want Statement</td>
<td>I would like you to clean the kitchen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want you to move your car.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Suggestory Formulae</td>
<td>How about cleaning up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why don't you come and clean up the mess you made last night?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Query Preparatory</td>
<td>Could you clean up the mess in kitchen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would you mind moving your car?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Strong Hints (A)</td>
<td>You've left the kitchen in a right mess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Mild Hints (B)</td>
<td>We don't want any crowding (as a request to move the car).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The typology of request patterns listed in table 1 follows from previous classifications of request strategies on scales of indirectness (Searle (1975), Ervin-Tripp (1976), House and Kasper (1981), Blum-Kulka (1982), Blum-Kulka, Danet and Gerson (1985)). The scale is based on postulating degrees of illocutionary transparency. In other words, the concept of (in)directness, when applied to speech acts, is taken to equal the relative length of the inferential path needed to arrive at an utterance's illocutionary point. Thus, the more 'indirect' the mode of realization, the higher will be the interpretive demands on the hearer. In the case of requests, probably more than in other speech
acts, it is possible to identify the devices that distinguish between levels of indirectness.

The request patterns considered as the most direct or transparent are the ones in which requestive force is either marked syntactically, or indicated explicitly, as in Mood Derivables (imperatives) (1) and Performatives (2). The least direct patterns are considered to be those in which requestive force is not indicated by any conventional verbal means and hence has to be inferred, as in Hints (8) as (9). In between these two extremes are patterns that derive their relative transparency either from conventions in the wording of the speech act, such as Hedged Performatives (3), or from conventions regarding the semantic contents which, by social convention, count as potential requests, such as Obligation and Want Statements (4) and (5) and Suggestory Formulae (6). In Clark's (1979) terminology, the former can be seen as characterized by convention of form (choice of the wording) and the latter by convention of means (choice of semantic device). The group of strategies often referred to in the literature as 'conventionally indirect' (Searle (1975), Morgan (1978)), referred to in table 1 as Query Preparatory, are characterized both by conventions of means (since there are strong conventions regarding the kinds of contextual features habitually referred to in any language for making the request) and conventions of form (compare 'can you' to 'are you able to').

Four groups of native speakers of Hebrew and English participated in the experiments. In experiment 1, 56 subjects rated the directness of 45 Hebrew request realizations, five tokens of each of the nine strategy types presented in table 1. In experiment 2, a parallel set of request realizations in English (9 × 5) was rated on directness by 24 native speakers. In experiments 3 and 4, two other groups of native speakers of Hebrew and English (32 for Hebrew and 24 for English) rated the same 45 utterances as to their level of politeness.

The 45 utterances included in each language version (Hebrew and English) were drawn from request data collected by the use of the CCSARP project discourse completion test. The test elicited request patterns in five different situations: A student asking a room-mate to clean up the kitchen, a student asking a fellow student for some lecture notes, a neighbor asking for a ride home, a policeman asking a driver to move her car, and a professor asking a student to present his paper a week earlier than scheduled. The same situations were used in the rating experiments. In all four experiments, subjects were presented with a description of the situation, followed by nine utterances, each representing a different strategy type. Subjects were asked to rate each utterance on a nine point scale for either 'directness' or 'politeness'. In cases where a given strategy type did not appear in the CCSARP data, it was made

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2 Weizman (1985) has developed a further classification of hints by taking into account two dimensions: differences in levels of explicitness in reference to the elements needed for the implementation of the act (e.g. degrees of 'propositional opacity') as well as differences in levels of pragmatic opacity (e.g. degree of 'illocutionary opacity').
up by the researcher to complete the list of nine. To ensure that judgments of directness and politeness would relate only to 'strategy type', utterances drawn from actual use were 'stripped' of both internal and external modifications, such as hedges or politeness markers ('please') for the former and reasons and justifications for the latter. The test utterances were typed on five pages, each page containing the description of a situation followed by nine request realizations. The nine realizations were typed in random order, and the five mimeographed sheets were stapled in random order for each subject. All subjects were University students, either Israelis (native speakers of Hebrew) or Americans participating in a summer program at the Hebrew University (native English speakers).

Before considering the results, it should be noted that the obtained scales represent perceptions of 'indirectness' and 'politeness' as applied to 'one illocution only (namely, requests) with utterances judged relative to each other within a given context and as confined to one dimension of variation in requests, namely strategy type. The last point is especially important because it means that I am focusing on the relationship between indirectness and politeness here only as it is expressed by variation in choice of strategy, disregarding the possible (even highly probable) effect on perceptions of politeness and indirectness that could come from other sources of variation, such as the use of external and internal modifications.

3. Results and discussion

For each of the scales, a mean value was obtained for each of the 45 utterances and then for each of the 9 strategies. The rank ordering of the strategies as presented in tables 2 and 3 served as the basis for correlational analysis. The results of this analysis support the cross-cultural validity of the 'directness'

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2 The distinction between 'external' and 'internal' modifications (Frerch and Kasper (1984)) has been applied to the analysis of request patterns in the CCSARP project as follows: For every sequence that realizes a request, the minimal part that can potentially serve to realize the act is considered the HEAD ACT. Other linguistic elements present are analyzed in terms of their relation to the HEAD ACT as either external or internal modifications. External modifications are elements added to the syntactic unit realizing the HEAD ACT, ('I have run out of cash. Could you lend me..') and internal modifications are elements added within that unit ('Could you by any chance lend me..').

4 Modifications represent a further dimension that might affect perceptions of both directness and politeness. For example, the addition of 'please' to a conventionally indirect request automatically raises its level of directness by making its requestive force transparent. This role of 'please' as a disambiguating factor, as suggested by Fraser (1973), has been confirmed by native speakers' judgements of sentences with and without 'please' (Blum-Kulka (in press)). Presumably the addition of 'please' would affect politeness levels universally, for all strategies in all languages. For other modifications, there might be language specific constraints.
scale. The obtained rank ordering significantly correlates with the expected one: for Hebrew, \( r = 0.80 \) (\( p < 0.005 \)) and for English \( r = 0.88 \) (\( p < 0.001 \)).

The data from the four scales were also analyzed by means of a \( 2 \times 2 \) ANOVA. The factors were language (English/Hebrew) by type of scale (Directness/Politeness). The mean value for each utterance served as the dependent variable. The results indicated a type-of-scale main effect: \( F = 2.707, p < 0.001 \). No language main effect was detected nor was there any interaction effect. These results show agreement between speakers of the two languages in distinguishing between the concepts of directness and politeness. In both English and Hebrew, politeness is perceived differently from indirectness.

The distinction between ‘directness’ and ‘politeness’ in both Hebrew and English is further confirmed by the rank-orderings of the strategies in the two types of scales. In both languages the most direct strategy (Mood Derivable) is considered the least polite, with a mean value of 1.5 in Hebrew and 1.6 in English. On the other hand, the strategy judged highest on the scale of indirectness (Hints) is not perceived as the most polite. The highest level of politeness in both Hebrew and English is achieved by the use of conventional indirectness, represented in the experiments by Query Preparatory (‘can you’) questions. The Query Preparatory questions are systematically rated as the most polite in all five situations (\( X = 7.08 \) in Hebrew and 7.10 in English). The distinction between perceptions of directness and politeness is also reflected by the lack of significant correlations between the two scales in both languages.

In order to check the reliability of the scales, utterance means for each scale separately were also submitted to an analysis of variance in which both strategy type (1–9) and situation (1–5) were treated as random effects. For the scales in Hebrew, both factors were significant at \( p < 0.001 \) level. For the scales in English, only the effect of strategy was significant, at \( p < 0.001 \). However, in all four scales the interaction between the two factors was significant: (1) Hebrew-directness scale, \( F = 2.96, p < 0.001 \); (2) Hebrew-politeness, \( F = 8.91, p < 0.001 \); (3) English-directness scale, \( F = 2.00, p < 0.001 \), and (4) English-politeness, \( F = 10.1, p < 0.001 \). This result indicates that the strategy-type means differ reliably from each other; perceptions of directness and politeness seem to represent scalable dimensions, as predicted. However, it should be noted that these perceptions may be affected by the context in which the utterance appears, in ways that have not been identified yet.

3.1. The directness scales

The ratings for directness, as seen in table 2, confirm our expectation that irrespective of language, in both English and Hebrew, Mood Derivables (imperatives) are perceived as the most direct and Hints as the least direct. If divided into a three step interval scale, further agreement can be seen on the types of strategies included in each group in both Hebrew and English. Group
A, the most direct, includes Mood Derivables, Want Statements, Obligation Statements, and Performatives. Group B includes Suggestory Formulae, Hedged Performatives, and Query Preparatories. The third group, C, is comprised of the two types of Hints only. Hints are perceived as distinctly more indirect than all other types; the increase in mean values from group B to C is as high as 2.51 in Hebrew and 2.32 in English.

Table 2
Directness scales in Hebrew and English: mean directness ratings for nine request types in five situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Category mean</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Category mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood Derivable</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Mood Derivable</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want Statements</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>Obligation Statements</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obligation Statements</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Performatives</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performatives</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>Want Statements</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestory</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Hedged Performatives</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedged Performatives</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Query Preparatory</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Query Preparatory</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>Suggestory</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hints (A)</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Hints (A)</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hints (B)</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Hints (B)</td>
<td>6.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Politeness scales in Hebrew and English: mean politeness ratings for nine request types in five situations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Category mean</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Category mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Query Preparatory</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>Query Preparatory</td>
<td>7.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedged Performatives</td>
<td>6.34</td>
<td>Hints (B)</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performatives</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>Hints (A)</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hints (B)</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>Hedged Performatives</td>
<td>5.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hints (A)</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>Suggestory</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestory</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>Performatives</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obligation Statements</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>Want Statements</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want Statements</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Obligation Statements</td>
<td>2.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood Derivable</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>Mood Derivable</td>
<td>2.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most polite

Least polite
Reversals from the expected rank ordering for individual strategies in both Hebrew and English seem to be motivated by the following factors:

(1) **Conventions of means.** We expected Performatives and Hedged Performatives to be included in group A (as can be seen by their position on table 1 as strategies 2 and 3), and Want and Obligation Statements in group B (4 and 5 in table 1), since we assumed that overt marking of requestive force by mood or by IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device) plays a more important role in motivating directness than the semantic device used. The results suggest that actually the two factors are equally important. Obligation Statements and Want Statements are positioned in Group A and are considered, in both languages, as more direct than Hedged Performatives; in Hebrew, as even more direct than Performatives. Thus, the conventions of means by which one can make a request by reference to the hearer's obligation to do the act and by reference to speaker's wish that the act be done seem strong enough, for both speakers of Hebrew and English, to justify a relatively high positioning of these strategies on the scale of directness.

(2) **Language specific conventions of form and means.** Suggestory Formulae were expected to figure as number 6 on the postulated 9 point scale of indirectness. They were rated by Hebrew speakers as more direct (as the 5th strategy) while English speakers perceived them as much less direct (the 7th strategy on the scale). This cross-linguistic difference in the rating is probably due to a difference in degree of conventionality of both means and form. In Hebrew the pattern 'tlay + future' ('perhaps' + future) belongs to the group of highly conventionalized indirect request patterns (such as 'can you' questions), which are characterized both by conventions of means and by conventions of form. None of these conventions seem to hold strongly for suggestions similar to 'how about doing it' or 'why don't you do it' in English.

(3) **Linguistic factors.** The ratings show a difference in the relative position granted to Want Statements in English and Hebrew. While in both languages they are included in Group A, Hebrew speakers position them as the second most direct strategy (after imperatives), with a mean of 1.5, while for English they figure as the fourth in directness, with a mean of 2.5. This difference in rating seems to be due to linguistic factors. In Hebrew, Want Statements habitually take the form of 'ani roca seta'ase', literally, 'I want you to do (x)', while in English they are habitually phrased as 'I would like you to do (x)'. The questionnaire presented the conventional variant in each language. The use of the modal in English seems to obscure illocutionary intent, and hence caused a lower directness rating in English.

### 3.2. The politeness scales

The rating of strategies on the Politeness scale, as shown in table 3, reveals cross-linguistic agreement at the end-points of the scale, and disagreement on
the relative position of given strategies in between. The least polite in both Hebrew and English are Mood Derivables, Obligation Statements, and Want Statements. This finding is in line with results from previous ranking experiments in English. Fraser and Nolen (1981), for example, found Obligation Statements to be ranked as the lowest on deference, followed by Mood Derivables, and Clark and Schunk (1980) found that negatively phrased Obligation Statements were the least polite of all strategies. The polite end of the scale, in both Hebrew and English, is comprised of the Query Preparatory strategies. Such 'can you' questions were also ranked relatively high on Fraser and Nolen's scale of deference and on Clark and Schunk's scale of politeness, and were preceded by strategies not included in the present experiments.

The results show a marked disagreement between Hebrew and English speakers on the relative politeness granted to Hints. In English, Hints follow Query Preparatories as the next most polite strategy. In Hebrew, Hints receive a relatively lower ranking: They are considered more impolite than Hedged Performatives and even Performatives. Partly, these differences in the ratings can be attributed to linguistic factors. In Hebrew, the verb levakeš 'to ask' and the adverb bevakasš 'please' are derived from the same root; thus, the use of the performative already marks the pattern for politeness (Blum-Kulka, Danet and Gerson (1985)). This difference in form explains only the relatively high ranking granted to Performatives and Hedged Performatives, but not the relatively low ranking granted to Hints. In sum, English speakers consider hinting a polite way of making a request, though less polite than conventional forms, while Hebrew speakers do not find hinting very polite. I would like to suggest that the explanation for these findings should be sought within a theory of politeness along the lines proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), provided the theory allows both for a possible disengagement of indirectness from politeness at the end-points of the indirectness scale, and for potential cross-cultural variation at the interim point(s) of this disengagement. This possibility is further developed in the next section.

4. Implications for theories of politeness

Brown and Levinson's model predicts a strong link between politeness and indirectness, based on a hierarchical model of politeness strategies. Given a face-threatening act, such as a request, according to this model the speaker has

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5 Fraser and Nolen (1981) view 'deference' as the conveying of the appropriate status level, which in turn is associated with politeness, though in their view politeness includes other aspects of behavior.

6 The impoliteness associated with reference to obligation has also been noted by Labov and Fanshel (1977) who claim that (in their terms) references to obligation and willingness always tend to be more 'aggravating' than references to willingness and ability.
the following options: (1) to do the act baldly, 'on record', without redress; (2) to use positive redressive action, i.e. to 'give face' by indicating in some way solidarity with the hearer ('positive politeness'); (3) to use negative redressive action, by using mechanisms which leave the addressee an 'out' and permit him or her to feel non-coerced and respected ('negative politeness'); and finally (4), the speaker may choose to go 'off record', i.e. to perform the act in a way that will enable him or her to avoid taking responsibility for doing it. The model posits a scale of directness from the on record pragmatically transparent ways of doing an act, to the off record, pragmatically opaque ways of doing it, via both negative and positive politeness strategies. It also predicts that the more imposing, face-threatening a given act, the higher in number (i.e. the more indirect) will be the strategy chosen by the speaker (Brown and Levinson (1978)). Given an inherently face-threatening act, such as requesting, the degree of indirectness by which it is expressed will count as an indicator of the effort invested in minimizing the threat, which in turn equals politeness. Hence, on this view, politeness is basically a function of redressive action, with the latter having a correlative relationship with indirectness.

Brown and Levinson's model is claimed to be universally valid; cross-cultural variation is allowed in the preferences between options 2 and 3, namely between orientation towards positive politeness and negative politeness, but not in the correlation posited between levels of indirectness and levels of politeness. The cross-cultural variation possibility has since been strengthened by empirical work; our study of the language of requesting in Israeli society suggests that Israel basically is a solidarity-politeness oriented society, hence differing in attitude to politeness from the allegedly negative politeness oriented societies, such as Japan and probably England (Blum-Kulka, Danet and Gerson (1985)). The arguments put forward by Wierzbicka (1985) on the basis of Polish examples point to a similar cultural divergence along the positive–negative politeness dichotomy. The experiments conducted in the present study bear on the second, more general claim: The suggestion that the concept of politeness is linked to indirectness in general, irrespective of language. I shall take issue with this claim, on the basis of the results of the rating experiments which show no linear relationship between indirectness and politeness, at least for the strategies tested. It should be noted that my argument bypasses the issue of the relative politeness of positive politeness, since by limiting the experiments to 'strategy types', we have excluded modifications that might have marked the requests for positive politeness. Hence (rephrased in Brown and Levinson's terms) the issue is whether option 1 (direct, Group A strategies), option 3 (indirect, group B strategies) and option 4 (indirect, group C strategies) follow the same rank order for politeness. The results show that they do not: The highest level of politeness in both Hebrew and English is achieved by option 3 and not by option 4 strategies. I would like to propose an explanation for these results, based on the following arguments:
In requests, a distinction should be drawn between two basic types of indirectness, each requiring a different process of interpretation.

Considerations of the length of the inferential process required for interpretation play an important part in the assessment of the degree of imposition involved in making the request in a specific way.

Lengthening the inferential path beyond 'reasonable limits' increases the degree of imposition and hence decreases the level of politeness.

The norms dictating what constitutes 'reasonable limits' are subject to situational and cultural constraints.

Minimization of the imposition involved in lengthening the inferential process beyond reasonable limits, namely, moving down on the indirectness scale, is as essential a component of politeness as other forms of minimization.

(A) The two types of indirectness. The two types of indirectness in requests can be distinguished by the criterion of conventionality. One the one hand, we have the class of the much discussed group of conventional indirectness (Gordon and Lakoff (1975), Searle (1975), Brown and Levinson (1978), Morgan (1978)). Conventional indirect requests realize the act by systematic reference to some precondition needed for its realization, and share across languages the property of potential pragmatic ambiguity between requestive meaning and literal meaning. It seems to be the case that only in the speech act of requesting does conventionalization acts on both the propositional content of the utterance (the types of preconditions evoked systematically in any given language) and the actual choice of linguistic element ('can' versus 'be able'). Non-conventional indirectness, on the other hand, is by definition open-ended both in terms of propositional content and linguistic form, as well as of pragmatic force. Thus, there are no formal limitations (except those dictated by Gricean type conversational maxims) neither on the kinds of hints one might use to make a request, nor on the range of pragmatic forces that might be carried by any non-conventionally indirect utterance. Thus, non-conventional indirectness in requests is not different from other types of indirectness in discourse, namely, utterances that convey something more or different from their literal meaning.

It follows that the processes of interpretation involved might differ with variation in type of indirectness. It is by now well-established that in all interpretations of indirectness in discourse, the hearer must match information encoded in properties of the utterance with relevant features of the pragmatic context (Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), Dascal (1983)). What is less clear is the

7 What constitutes 'reasonable limits' is probably subject to constraints on at least three different levels: (1) illocutionary (choice of illocution), (2) situational (social parameters) and (3) cultural. The first two dimensions need a careful re-examination, which is beyond the scope of this paper. The effect of cultural factors will be discussed briefly below.
relative role played by these two factors, as subject to both linguistic and contextual variation. In requests, conventional indirectness seems distinct from non-conventional indirectness by a shift in the balance between these two factors. In conventional indirectness, properties of the utterance play the more dominant role, while in non-conventional indirectness pragmatic context is probably as, if not more, important. If my hypothesis is correct, then the difference between conventional and non-conventional requests will be manifested by focus of interpretation. Given an appropriate context, and given a conventional request of the 'salt passing' variety, hearers will tend to focus on the requestive interpretation. If the requestive interpretation is found not to match the pragmatic context, or if the hearer or speaker deliberately choose to opt out, then either or both can revert to a second, literal interpretation. By this proposal, in the group of conventional indirect requests which are characterized both by a conventionality of form (linguistic devices used) and conventionality of means (choice of semantic content referred to), both levels of meaning are co-present and accessible at all times. Yet, other things being equal, it is the requestive interpretation which is the dominant one. On the other hand, when no conventionality of means or form is involved, (i.e. the request is of the 'off record' variety), and the context is not a standard requesting one, the hearer must first compute the literal meaning of the utterance, attempt to match that with relevant features of the pragmatic context, and (in the case of incongruity) derive the indirect requestive meaning. Thus, the difference in focus will manifest itself in the relative length of the inferential process involved. The advantage of this proposal is that it can explain the peculiarity of conventional indirectness in requests (which does not seem to have a parallel in any other speech act) in that the forms included are by definition always potentially interpretable on two different, but specific levels. On the other hand, as noted by Brown and Levinson (1978), 'off

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8 Within psychology, there have been different proposals for describing the process by which indirect requests, in general, might be understood. Gibbs (1979) proposes an 'idiomatic process', by which in understanding an indirect request in context a person need not construct the literal interpretation before deriving requestive force. On the other hand, Clark and Lucy (1975) and Clark (1979) have proposed two different versions of 'multiple processes', both of which assume that literal meaning plays a role in the interpretation of indirect requests. Being limited to the interpretation of conventional indirectness, my 'focus' hypothesis offers a third possibility.

9 The notion of 'standard situations' is one of the parameters used by Hoppe-Graff, Hermann, Winterhoff-Spurk and Mangold (1985) in experiments designed to predict a request's level of directness. Hoppe-Graff et al. note that in standard recurring situations, requests can be highly indirect without the risk of misunderstanding. It follows that conventionality of situation can act similarly to other types of conventionality in ensuring that the requestive interpretation becomes the default option.

10 By 'specific', I mean limited in illocutionary range, which by necessity includes the potential of a requestive interpretation. Thus, though a negatively phrased 'couldn't you' question, for example, might be intended (and interpreted) as a reprimand only (such as 'couldn't you be more tidy'), it still carries the requestive meaning potential.
record', non-conventional indirectness is not different from any other kind of indirectness in discourse, and its process of interpretation should be sought within psychological and pragmatic theories of inferencing (Clark (1978), Sperber and Wilson (1982), Dascal (1983)).

There is some empirical evidence to support the above proposal. Clark (1979) found that conventionality of form matters: in responding to information-seeking questions, phrased either as 'can you tell me' or as 'are you able to tell me', respondents were more likely to comply with the request for information only (and disregard the literal meaning) when the conventional 'can you' form was used. In the rating experiments reported here, the request patterns were presented following a description of a specific situation, and were judged relative to each other. The finding that under these conditions conventional indirect strategies were rated as being much closer to the direct pole of the directness scale than to the indirect pole (with a mean of 3.0 in Hebrew and 2.7 in English) supports this hypothesis. Since in context, the requestive interpretation dominates, these patterns are perceived in both languages as relatively illocutionary transparent ('direct').

Further support is provided by the way informants assign interpretations to such sentences out of context. In an experiment aimed at assessing the effect of discourse markers (such as 'by any chance' and 'please') on the interpretation of conventional requests, informants were asked to choose between (a) a requestive, (b) a question (literal), and (c) an ambiguous ('both interpretations possible') reading for a list of conventional indirect strategies. As predicted by the 'focus' hypothesis, sentences like 'can you open the window' (as opposed to sentences like 'can you please open the window') were assigned systematically, both in English and in Hebrew, by half of the informants an ambiguous (c) interpretation, which changed to complete agreement on a requestive (a) interpretation with the addition of 'please' (Blum-Kulka (in press)). It seems to be the case that although we still lack empirical evidence for the full effect of conventionality on processing, both theoretical considerations and empirical evidence support positing a continuum, in which conventionality acts as a shortcircuiting device on length of inferential processing.

(B) Degree of imposition and length of inferential process. Speakers of English and Hebrew join in using conventional indirectness as the most polite way to make a request. This result means that between two postulated inferential processes, the shorter one is considered the more polite. However, it also should be noted that the shortest path, namely the use of direct strategies is deemed impolite. Thus the most polite way of making a request is by appearing to be indirect without burdening the hearer with the actual cost

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11 The highest rate for indirectness is 7.1 for Hebrew and 6.4 for English. In both languages, these ratings were assigned to Hints.
of true indirectness. Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that conventional indirectness encodes the clash between the need to go 'on record', e.g. to convey requestive force, and the need to avoid appearing coercive. By using a conventionally indirect form, the speaker relies on conventionality to carry the requestive force and on the form's inherent pragmatic ambiguity for avoiding coerciveness. But by this analysis, the politeness of conventional indirectness is still derived from its indirectness, since the need to go on record and the need to avoid coerciveness are seen as opposed to each other. I am arguing for a different explanation: the politeness of conventional indirectness is derived from the interactional balance between pragmatic clarity and apparent noncoerciveness achieved by these strategies. By this argument the need for pragmatic clarity, as proposed by R. Lakoff (1973) is an important element in politeness. This need can be derived from Grice's (1975) Maxim of Manner, as interpreted by Leech (1983). Leech interprets the Maxim of Manner to apply to the propositional level of utterances as well as to their illocutionary point. In line with this interpretation, the submaxim of pragmatic clarity can be phrased as follows: Do not obscure your illocutionary point beyond reasonable limits, or more than necessary by face-saving constraints. Alternatively: 'weigh the imposition involved in being coercive against the imposition involved in cognitively burdening the hearer and making it difficult for him or her to guess your meaning'.

Thus, it seems to me that the length of the required inferencing path figures in the estimation of the cost for the hearer, and hence affects politeness. Politeness in this view is motivated both by the need to adhere to the submaxim of pragmatic clarity and the need to minimize the threat to face. The highest levels of politeness are achieved when both needs can be satisfied simultaneously, as in the case of conventional indirectness. It follows that tipping the balance in favor of either pragmatic clarity or the appearance of non-coerciveness might be perceived as impolite. Thus, direct, explicit strategies have a high chance of being perceived as impolite (and were rated as such) due to the fact that they testify to the dominance of pragmatic clarity concerns over those of face-saving. On the other hand, highly indirect strategies might also be perceived as lacking in politeness, because they testify to a lack of concern for pragmatic clarity, in this case superseded by considerations of non-coerciveness. This explains why informants in both English and Hebrew did not rate Hints as the most polite, despite the fact that they are the most indirect.

(C) Constraints operating on the choice of the level of pragmatic clarity. Brown and Levinson allow for other wants besides face wants to become part

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12 The first type of imposition has been discussed by Brown and Levinson (1978). The second type, namely imposition by cognitive burdening, follows from the submaxim of pragmatic clarity.
of politeness considerations subject to cross-cultural variation: "cultures may differ in the degree to which wants other than face wants (such as the need for efficiency, or for the expression of power) are allowed to supersede face wants. If there is a norm of sincerity, for example, sincere disapproval is less of a face threatening act than it would be in societies not having such a legitimation of non-face wants. Norms in this way enter into cultural definitions of R [i.e., imposition]" (Brown and Levinson (1978: 254)). In terms of this model, the relatively low politeness rating granted to hints by the Israeli informants would be explainable by cultural norms. And indeed, speakers of Hebrew attach a high value to 'sincerity' in speech. In her ethnographic study of the ethos of directness in Israeli society, Katriel (forthcoming) shows that the notion of dugri 'direct, straight' talk, is positively associated with concepts such as sincerity (truthful expression), naturalness (simplicity, spontaneity), solidarity, and anti-style, thus legitimizing a conscious suspension of face concerns. In American culture, on the other hand, though there is a concern for clarity of expression ('plain talk') this concern does not seem to extend to pragmatic clarity, thus allowing face-maintaining consideration to play a more central role in interaction. Accordingly, Americans granted the Hints in our experiments a higher politeness value than did the Israelis.

(D) Politeness and minimization. The thrust of the argument presented is that a certain adherence to pragmatic clarity is as essential for the successful achievement of interactional balance as is maintaining face. This argument can have a weaker or a stronger version. The weaker version calls for a 'cultural relativity' type of explanation: Cultures differ in the relative importance attached to pragmatic clarity, and thus on a very general level, there will be cross-cultural differences in the degree to which considerations of clarity are allowed to dominate and affect notions of politeness. The stronger version claims potential universality; by this version, minimization of the inferential path (to avoid imposing by cognitive burdening) is essential for achieving interactional balance. Hence the need to preserve pragmatic clarity is inherent in politeness. To prove whether one or the other of these versions is correct, we need to investigate cross-culturally the types of phenomena associated with moving away from indirectness in speech, namely, balance what we know about the factors motivating the avoidance of directness with those motivating the avoidance of indirectness.

References


