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Features of request strategies in Chinese

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Introduction

As Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989:1 point out, speech acts are "one of the most compelling notions in the study of language use". The *Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project* (*CCSARP;* Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984) analyses two speech acts: requests and apologies across a range of languages and cultures to investigate whether there are universal pragmatic principles in speech act realisation, and what the characteristics of those universals might be.

Concerning requests, one of the most significant findings of the *CCSARP* was that all languages studied overwhelmingly preferred conventionally indirect request strategies (e.g. *Could I borrow your notes?; Would you mind moving your car?*).

However, there remains a distinct Western bias in the *CCSARP:* all of the languages and varieties studied (except Hebrew) are either Germanic or Romance, and all of the cultures studied are either Western or heavily influenced by Western culture.

Therefore, in this article I will focus on the strategy types of making requests classified in *CCSARP* to analyse the linguistic features in Chinese speakers' speech act realisation in the hope that further evidence can be found to support claims for a universal category of conventionally indirect requests.

1. Mood derivable

Imperatives are the grammatical forms of the utterances of this type. In most cases in English, the imperative signals that the utterance is an order, and its unmodified form is only supposed to be used by a speaker who has power over the hearer; otherwise, it can be considered very impolite. In this sense, this strategy is the least preferred means of making a request in

English. However, in Chinese it is the most proper and efficient way of making a request. Song 1994 presented a report of her research on imperatives in requests from Chinese. Her study reveals that the Chinese speakers of the People's Republic of China "consistently display a preference for direct request forms." (p. 491) The most distinctive feature of the linguistic realisation of requests are the application of basic action verbs that indicate the desired action directly e.g. *dài* 'bring', *ná* 'get, take', *gěi wǒ kànkàn* 'show me', *jiè wǒ* 'lend me', etc. The directives of the following two examples sound natural and elaborately polite in everyday face to face interaction.

1. *Dài* nǐ érzi yìqǐ lái.
   bring you son together come
   Come with your son.

2. Bǎ gāngbǐ *jiè* wǒ yòng-yòng.
   BA[1] pen lend me use-use
   Lend me the pen.

In English, the choice of a modal verb form such as *would* instead of *will*, *could* instead of *can*, etc., can show the degree of politeness, while Chinese modal verbs lack such functions since they do not have tenses as in English. Therefore, it is found that in Chinese, politeness effects are achieved by the use of the mitigating lexical term *qǐng* 'please', and tags such as *kěyǐ ma, kě bù kěyǐ, xíng ma, xíng bù xíng,* which are used to make a proper request.

3. *Qǐng* bǎ mén guān shàng.
   please BA door close up
   Please close the door.

4. *Qǐng* bǎ mén guān shàng *kěyǐ ma* / *kě bù kěyǐ* /
   please BA door close up can Q can not can

   xíng ma / *xíng bù xíng?*
   can Q can not can
   Please close the door, can you / can't you?

Since *qǐng* reflects the attitude of upfront sincerity of the requester, such requests are also tentative, lacking in confidence when tags are applied. One

[1]The following abbreviations are used:

BA	object-marking preposition	CSC	complex stative construction
CL	classifier	Q	question
CRS	currently relevant state		

would use them when one is genuinely not sure whether the addressee would do what is requested. Sometimes, these tags are perceived with different implication in different contexts. Take *xíng bù xíng* for instance. It could be used in anger or impatience and when it is changed to *bù xíng ma,* a sarcastic mood is added.

A more sincere query can also be acquired by other polite markers such as *bāng* 'help' and *máfán nǐ* 'bother you'.

5. *Qǐng* nǐ *bāng* wǒ chá yì chá.
   please you help me check one check
   Please help me have a check.

6. *Máfán nǐ*, *qǐng* nǐ *bāng* wǒ chá yì chá.
   bother you, please you help me check one check
   Sorry to bother you. Please help me have a check.

However, the choice of expressions is heavily dependent on the scale of social distance. The higher the scale of familiarity and kinship, the more appropriate the use of conventionally direct requests.

Furthermore, internal modifiers are commonly used as the basic lexicon for expressing normative politeness in making a request, and a series of terms of address are normally applied to show politeness. Appropriate use of address terms is considered good manners and a means of insurance of having the request realized, while their absence could possibly often result in social sanctions.

7. Lǎo dàyé, *qǐng wèn*, Běihǎi gōngyuánr zài nǎr?
   old grandpa, please ask, North Sea park at where
   Old grandpa, may I ask where is North Sea park, please?

8. Nǐ néng gàosù wǒ Běihǎi gōngyuánr zài nǎr ma?
   you can tell me North Sea park at where Q
   Can you tell me where North Sea park is?

To a Chinese addressee, the utterance of example 7, a direct request, is perceived to be polite. In addition to a proper address form use, a polite expression *qǐng wèn* is added as an internal modifier. Example 8, which is a conventionally indirect request formula both in Chinese and English, is regarded as lacking in politeness in Chinese. Even if *excuse me* were applied in the front as English often does, it still does not help, since *duìbùqǐ* 'excuse me' in Chinese is used as an internal modifier only in certain contexts.

2. Performatives

In Chinese, the performative verbs which convey requestive intent range from explicitly marking the utterance as an order to marking the utterance as a sincere plea or even to the extent of begging: *mìnglìng* 'order', *ràng* 'let', *jiào* 'call', *yāoqiú* 'ask', *qǐngqiú* 'please ask', *kěnqiú* 'sincerely ask', *qiú* 'beg/ask', *qǐqiú* 'pleadingly ask', *qiúqiú* 'beg', etc.

9. Wǒ *mìnglìng* nǐ líkāi.
   I order you leave
   I order you to leave.

This utterance is a very direct order that is only normally practised by officers to soldiers. Even orders issued by authority figures will not be uttered in this way unless there is an unpleasant atmosphere between the speaker and the hearer.

10. Wǒ *ràng/jiào* nǐ jìnlái.
    I let/call you come in
    I ask/order you to come in.

ràng and *jiào* are basically equal in meaning and more often used in spoken Chinese. They can be either an order or an insistent request which implies impatience when it is uttered in a certain manner.

11. Wǒ *yāoqiú* jǐnzǎo wánchéng zhè xiàng gōngzuò.
    I ask early finish this type work
    I am asking you to finish this work as early as possible.

yāoqiú is an authority's license to make a request to hearers from lower ranks. It conveys an order with politeness, and also sounds professionally decisive.

12. Wǒ *qǐngqiú* dàjiā ānjìng.
    I please-ask everybody quiet
    I kindly request everybody to be quiet.

There is no patent for *qǐngqiú* but when it is used by the speaker who has a lower position, it shows the requester's proper politeness with awareness of his/her position and, at the same time, it is a sincere request which implies urgent need.

13. Wǒ *qiú* nǐ jiè diǎn qián.
    I beg/ask you borrow some money
    I ask you to lend me some money.

qiú is the most common basic form of all in making a request in this strategy. In its unmodified form it can be a very common request without any extra effort or a pleading with desperation. Which is the correct understanding depends completely upon the context and the kind of request; that is, whether it is a big one or a minor one.

14. Wǒ *kěnqiú* nǐ zài gěi wǒ yí cì jīhuì.
    I sincerely ask you again give me one time opportunity.
    I sincerely ask you to give me another opportunity.

When it is uttered by a speaker who has a higher position, it shows the speaker's modesty and sincerity. When the speaker has a lower position, then it conveys a strong sense of pleading.

15. Bú yào guǎn wǒ. Wǒ *qiúqiú* nǐ *le.*
    not want control me. I beg-beg you CRS
    Leave me alone. I am begging you now.

The double application of *qiú* can either convey a mood of begging with sincerity or a mood of impatience when the request has been rejected or ignored several times.

When the speaker wants to be more polite, while still wishing to signal coldness and a lack of intimacy, a performatively used verb *qǐng* can be used to convey the implication.

16. Wǒ *qǐng* nǐ bú yào dǎrǎo wǒ.
    I please you not want interfere me
    I am asking you not to interfere with me.

In a sense, the bare performative functions as a distance-building device in Chinese just as an interrogative directive does in English.

The above shows that Chinese has more performative verbs than English to convey requestive intent, and they vary much in mood from context to context.

3. Hedged performatives

In English, hedged performatives are used to soften the bare requests with performative verbs used in order to show politeness. However, in Chinese, this practice has more the effect of showing uncertainty and necessity than politeness:

17. Wǒ hěn xiǎng ràng nǐ bǎ zhè shì gàosù wǒ.
    I very think ask you BA this matter tell me
    I would like to ask you to tell me this matter.

18. Wǒ xiǎng ràng/qiú nǐ bāng wǒ gè māng (xíng má?)
    I think ask/beg you help me CL busy (can Q)
    I am thinking of asking you to give me a hand (can you?)

19. Wǒ bìxū ràng nǐ gǎi diào zhè huài xíguàn.
    I must let you change fall this bad habit
    I must let you refrain from this bad habit.

All three examples show that hedged performatives are still under the speaker-based conditions as performatives. Example 17, probably not exactly the same as the English translation, shows the extra meaning that the speaker is interested in knowing the matter but is not sure whether the hearer would like to recount it. Example 18 conveys the same extra meaning as example 17, but when the tag *xíng ma?* is added (which is grammatically impossible in English, I assume), it turns into a hearer-based condition, which conveys more uncertainty from the speaker. Example 19 is actually realized as an advice or warning by the speech act of making a request, which, on the surface, seems to be a necessity for the speaker but actually is based on the interests of the hearer or of both parties.

4. Obligation statements

Chinese has the structures with *yīnggāi/gāi, bìxū, bù dé bù* and *děi* which find equivalents in English as *should, must* and *have to* to involve moral obligation, obligation stemming from a source outside the speaker and obligation imposed by the speaker:

20. Nǐ *yīnggāi/gāi* bāng tā yì bǎ.
    you should help him one handful
    You should give him a hand.

Here *yīnggāi/gāi* imposes moral obligation from the speaker who is also supposed to have a degree of authority. *gāi* is a short form of *yīnggāi* and is more often used in spoken Chinese. However, one difference between Chinese *yinggai* and English *should* is that the former can also be considered as an expression in the category of suggestory formulae when it is a hearer-based condition, such as *nǐ yīnggāi ràng tā huàngē dìfāng* (You should ask him to move to another place.)

21. Nǐ *bìxū* (gěi wǒ) zǎo diǎn huílái.
    you must (give me) early bit come back
    You must come back early (for me).

Bìxū often expresses obligation imposed by the speaker. When it is used with its modifier *gěi wǒ*, the obligation becomes an order usually from parent to child.

22. Nǐ *děi* / *bù dé bù* kuài diǎnr.
    you have to / not have to not fast bit
    You have to hurry up.

Like *gāi*, *děi* is the short form of *bù dé bù*, both of which are the equivalents of *have to* in their forms but only *děi* is found to be used normally in this category, even though it is more a spoken form than a written one. *Bù dé bù* is more often used in descriptive statements to refer to one's obligation.

5. Want statements

This category covers statements of speaker's needs, demands, wishes and desires.

23. Wǒ *xūyào* yì běn zìdiǎn.
    I need one CL dictionary
    I need a dictionary.

24. Wǒ *xiǎng* hē bēi chá.
    I think drink glass tea
    I want to drink a glass of tea.

25. Wǒ *xiǎng yào* nǐ lái gàosù wǒ.
    I think want you come tell me
    I want you to tell me this.

26. Wǒ *xīwàng* nǐ zìjǐ zuò.
    I hope you self do
    I hope you can do it yourself.

27. *Rúguǒ* nǐ ràng wǒ zuò, wǒ huì zuò de gèng hǎo.
    if you let me do, I can do CSC even good
    If you let me do this thing, I can do it better.

28. *Dànyuàn* nǐ míngtiān néng lái kàn wǒ.
    but-wish you tomorrow can come visit me
    If only you could come to visit me tomorrow.

Examples 23, 24, and 25 are unmodified forms of want-statements but they are not impolite as the English translations may suggest. Such forms in Chinese show a close relationship between the requester and the requestee and the indirectness which is appreciated in making a request.

On the other hand, example 26 implies a distance between the speaker and the hearer and it can also be considered as an indirect order from authority. Also, *xīwàng* can be translated as either *hope* or *wish* according to the context, since Chinese does not have various modified forms like English *would like, would rather, would prefer,* etc. Example 27 is a way of expressing a desire with sincerity or insistence when the speaker is afraid that the request may not be realized. So, in a way, it is persuasion from the speaker to ensure that the illocutionary force is workable. From the translation we can see that example 28 is subjunctive mood, which means, as in English, that the requester expresses a wish which might be fulfilled from the requester's point of view, which may also be 'subjunctive'. Therefore, it is sometimes an effective way of making a request due to the sincere character it conveys to the hearer at the same time.

6. Suggestory formulae

In this category the requester uses the 'formulae' to turn a request into a suggestion usually in the interest of both speaker and hearer. The formulae applied here seem to be the same both in Chinese and in English except that Chinese has a typical spoken form:

29. Jīn wǎn qù yóuyǒng *zěnmeyàng?*
tonight go swim how
How about going swimming tonight?

30. Nǐ *wèishénme* bù lái shàng kè?
you why not come up class
Why don't you come to class?

31. *Gànma* bú jìn lái?
do what not enter come
Why not come in?

However, unlike the English ones, the formulae in examples 29 and 30 imply that the addressee should have done what was obviously the right thing to do. They can also be 'politeness formulae' to request insistently that the addressee do something which is totally beneficial to the addressee, something which is appreciated in traditional Chinese culture: *wèishénme bú zài lái yì diǎnr?* 'Why don't you have some more?'.

7. Query preparatory

I suppose that this category contains the basic form for the most explicit realization of a request in English in which an interrogative or an interrogative-cum-conditional form is the central structure. Therefore, I would like to concentrate on certain examples drawn from English to see if they are all applicable to Chinese. The following examples are all from Green (1975:107-30):

32. a. Will you close the door please?
b. Will you close the window please?
c. Will you please take our aluminium cans to the Recycling Center?
d. Would you take out the garbage please?
e. Would you get me a glass of water?
f. Would you mind closing the window?
g. Would you like to set the table now?
h. Won't you close the window please?
i. Do you want to set the table now?
j. Why don't you clean up that mess.
k. Do you want me to get you a scotch.
l. Why don't you be nice to your brother for a change.
m. Why don't you be quiet.
n. Why don't you be a honey and start dinner now.

Not surprisingly, not every one of these utterances could be translated literally into Chinese and used as a request. In particular, literal equivalents of sentences in the frame *Why don't you* would be interpreted as a combination of a question and a criticism, rather like utterances based on the modal *Why do it* are in English (*Why paint your house purple?*) (see Gordon & Lakoff 1975:96; cf. also Wierzbicka 1988:28). In fact, a sentence such as:

33. Nǐ wèishénme bù guān shàng chuānghù?
you why not close up window
Why don't you close the window?

would imply unreasonable and stubborn behaviour on the part of the addressee ('Why haven't you done what was obviously the right thing to do – you should have done it long ago; I can't see any excuse for your failure to have done it'). The corresponding English sentence could also be interpreted in this way, but it doesn't have to be.

English has developed some special devices for expressing requests in a interrogative style. The construction *Why don't you be (ADJ)* has an interrogative form, and an interrogative component in its meaning, but is specialised in speech acts other than questions. In Chinese, the use of

interrogative forms outside the domain of questions is not as great as in English. Examples 32 a, b, c, d, e, g, h above, when translated into Chinese, are turned into tag questions plus the word *qǐng* 'please' in the front, which is considered as the most common practice in making a request.

The expression of example 32f *Would you mind* is seldom linked with an avoidance of imperative in Chinese to show moderate politeness as in English, and its frequency of appearance is extremely low. Only those speakers who are strongly influenced by the English language tend to use it. As a result, whenever it is uttered it sounds unnecessarily polite and in a way clumsy.

Thus, one could perform requests, or acts closely related to requests, by asking about the addressee's ability to do something (34).

34. Nǐ néng … ma?
Could you … ?

Pseudo-questions such as *Would you do it?, Won't you do it?, Do you want to do it?* or *Would you like to do it?* are not preferred in Chinese since they ostensibly inquire about the addresser's desires, but in fact are to be interpreted as requests. Therefore, they seem to be hypocritical. In Chinese, while indirect speech acts are the distinctive feature in most cases, anything that can be expressed directly is preferred in making a request.

Also, one could not ask people to do something by using literal Chinese equivalents of the phrases *Would you like to … please, Would you be so good as to …, Would you be so kind/gracious as to …* They seem particularly odd and amusing from a Chinese point of view.

Another interesting fact is that the flat imperative which in English cultural tradition can be felt to be offensive is not so in Chinese. When the speaker of Chinese gets really angry with the hearer but wants to show it in a polite way, he/she will often avoid the imperative and resort to the device of interrogative forms. The extreme examples of this sort are the Chinese equivalents of examples 32j-n, which are more often found sarcastic, used in anger or impatience rather than in normal conditions.

In fact the interrogative form in Chinese is dissociated from the language of courtesy and respect in such a way that the speaker can forcefully express his/her feelings apparently without attempting to get the hearer to do anything, as in the following example:

35. Nǐ wèishénme bú qù sǐ!
you why not go die

which actually is no different from the English *Why don't you all go to hell!*

This shows that the Chinese interrogative form in human interaction cannot be explained simply in terms of politeness as much as in the case of English. The interpretation of what is socially acceptable in a given culture seems to play a crucial part in this speech act.

So far we can see that differences in function are striking between the two languages in this category.

8. Strong hints

It seems to me that if the hearer has power over the speaker, the latter is usually not confident in making the request e.g. requests from child to parent, from pupil to teacher, from soldier to officer, from employee to employer, etc. In such a case strong hints tend to be applied in Chinese. I remember I attended a seminar in 1989 by a professor from Australia. He gave a report on the differences of speech act realisations between Chinese and Australian speakers by presenting examples collected from letters written by Chinese from China to a language learning programme of Radio Australia for the purpose of acquiring textbooks for the programme. He read aloud a dozen letters to the attendants of the seminar who were all Chinese students and asked them which letters they thought were the best as letters of request. The result was that almost all the students agreed that those that applied the requestive hints: 'questioning hearer's commitment', 'questioning feasibility', or 'starting potential grounders' (in Weizman's (1989) terms) at the beginning or even as the main body of the letters were the most proper ones. On the contrary, as the professor revealed, the Australian readers at the radio station were much annoyed by the letters with so many hints since it took them much longer time to understand what the writers really wanted.

As a matter of fact, illocutionary hints do tend to occur in Chinese frequently but more often on the basis of close relationship, good knowledge of the background situation and familiar knowledge between speaker and hearer. When my son was only four years old, he surprised the family members by querying for a gift from his future uncle (my sister's boy friend then) in the following way (which happened after they had been alone talking and playing games for some time):

nephew: The New Year is coming. Everybody will buy a gift for me. Will you buy one for me, too?
uncle: Yes, of course. What do you want?

nephew: You don't need to buy something big. That will cost a lot of money. Just buy me a small car (toy car). Ok?
uncle: No problem.
nephew: Mamma says it is not polite to ask for things from other people. We keep it a secret, shall we? And we are friends.
uncle: Yea. A secret just between you and me.

Such hints are also often used as adequate support for the more direct requests. For example, when students ask for leave from their teachers, they either start by stating the conditions which indicate their reasons for making the requests or never forget to add adequate supports, which are, in fact, always supposed to be given by the teachers.

9. Mild hints

There are two commonly used formulae in Chinese for making a request with hints. They are so often used that I wonder if they should be categorised as mild hints or strong hints. However, they are utterances that make no reference to the request proper but are to be interpreted as requests by context' (*CCSARP* 18)

36. ... zài (jiā) ma?
    in (home) Q
    Is/Are ... in?

37. Nǐ máng ma?
    you busy Q
    Are you busy?

The first formula is used in telephone calls and common speech act conditions whenever the hearer is not the person that the speaker wants to talk to. The English equivalent formula in expressing this illocutionary point should be *May I speak to ...*, which, on the contrary, belongs to the top scale of directness in making a request. The second formula does not give any hint of what kind of a request the speaker would make while being aware that a request is surely to come, so that the hearer, anxious to know what request it is, sometimes even replies directly with a question instead of an answer: *shénme shì ba?* (literally: 'what matter?')

The last two categories show to a certain extent that indirect communication is preferred in Chinese. The intention is as Yum 1988:383 writes: "indirect communication helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and the face of each party intact".

Conclusion

The most distinctive feature of the linguistic realisation of requests in Chinese is the application of basic action verbs that indicate the desired action directly. As a result, Chinese finds imperatives the most proper and efficient way of making a request. On the contrary, imperatives are the least used in English in making a request. Due to this difference, the Chinese *qǐng* 'please' has a stronger sense of politeness and is more often used to achieve the politeness effects than any other modal verbs similar to the English ones such as *would* or *could*. Furthermore, certain common expressions in English such as *Would you mind* are seldom linked with avoidance of imperative in Chinese to show moderate politeness. There are also some other interesting facts found in Chinese which prove that certain linguistic strategies in this particular speech act are either unavailable in or inapplicable to English. On the basis of all the differences discussed in this paper, we can see clear evidence that Chinese does not fit into the universal category of conventionally indirect requests claimed by *CCSARP*.

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Gestures in spatial descriptions

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Introduction

Most studies of gesture production to date have been based on analyses of narrative discourse in face-to-face interaction. Issues such as the relationship between gesture types and the content of speech, as well as the distribution of particular gesture types across given narrative sequences have been investigated. Depictive gestures, e.g., are frequent where the content concerns the description of concrete objects or actions at a narrative level (McNeill 1992). Little is known about the gesture production in other discourse types, however. Just as different discourse genres have oral characteristics, they are likely to result in different gestural characteristics.

In this small-scale study, a preliminary analysis is presented of the gestures produced during a spatial description task during which interlocutors were prevented from seeing each other. This paper will discuss the impact of the discourse type on the use of specific gesture types, especially on deictic gestures. In addition, the traditional issue of why speakers gesticulate at all will be briefly addressed in relation to the question of how visibility conditions affect speakers' gesture production.

The data

An experiment was designed in which a drawer was assigned the task of reproducing a stimulus picture. The drawer was not allowed to see the picture, but had to rely solely on the oral description of the picture provided by a describer. The describer and the drawer were separated by a screen such that the drawer could neither see the stimulus picture nor the describer. All communication of (spatial) information was thus restricted to the oral channel. The interlocutors were encouraged to interact freely, however, asking questions of clarification, etc. The stimulus picture represented an unknown object, a 'pachydermobile', or a vehicle in the shape of an elephant (Maple 1983). A five minute limit was imposed for the comple-