

## Politeness Strategies in English and Armenian: Directness vs. Indirectness

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Socio-cultural variables like authority, gender, age, social distance and situational settings are supposed to influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of politeness strategies used to realize various speech acts. As the influence of these variables may differ from one culture to another, these variations are relevant factors for a person's intercultural communication competence, viewed as his capacity to communicate appropriately and effectively in a foreign language. One dimension of communication style that has been identified, studied, and used to describe communication differences between speakers of different cultures is the direct/indirect dimension. Gudykunst defines this dimension as the "extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit communication" (Gudykunst 1983:49). A direct style of communication refers to explicitly stating one's feelings, wants, and needs; the speaker says what he or she means. An indirect style, on the other hand, refers to "verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation" (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey 1988:100).

Interrelation between the notions of indirectness and politeness has generated much discussion among pragmaticians (such as Brown and Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Searle 1976). Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) made a strong connection between the two notions, arguing that a higher degree of indirectness shows more politeness. That is, the more the speaker risks loss of face in performing an act such as a request, the more indirect the strategy he or she uses to be polite. In their model, politeness means to minimize the threat of face loss incurred by performing the act, and indirectness is a strategy used to achieve the goal. According to their ranking of possible strategies for achieving this goal, the "bald on record" strategy (i.e. using no mitigating politeness strategies) is most direct and least polite; "positive politeness" (addressing the hearer's need to be valued as a group member) comes next; "negative politeness" (attending to the speaker's need to be free from imposition by others) is more indirect and polite; and lastly, the "off record" strategy (i.e. avoiding unequivocal formulation of a face-threatening act through use of hints) is the most indirect and polite (Brown and Levinson 1978: 74).

Leech maintained the same parallel relation between indirectness and politeness, offering two rationales: first, indirectness increases the degree of optionality, and second, when a speech act is more indirect, its force tends to be diminished and more tentative (Leech 1983:108). The correlative relation between the two notions, however, has been seriously questioned by a number of pragmalinguists (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1987; Lakoff 1973). For example, Blum-Kulka (1987) examined the relation and found that politeness and indirectness were perceived differently by raters: whereas native speakers of both English and Hebrew rated conventionally indirect requests as most polite, they judged

hints as most indirect, but less polite. That is, conventional requests like “Could you ...?”, “Would you mind ...?” and “Why don’t you ...?” received higher politeness ratings than non-conventional indirect requests (e.g. providing reasons for the implied request). She argued that “...the pragmatic clarity of the message is an essential part of politeness” (Blum-Kulka 1987:131) and therefore a lack of pragmatic clarity could explain the lower ratings of politeness for hints.

Summarizing the notion of politeness as discussed by Lakoff (1973), Grice (1975), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Leech (1983), politeness can be considered as a communication strategy the function of which is to maintain good relationships between interlocutors. According to Grice, the Cooperative Principle consists of a series of conversation maxims that govern the mechanism to achieve the most efficient and direct way for information transmission: the core maxims are the following: be brief, say only what is relevant and nothing more, and avoid ambiguity. Lakoff proposed two rules to account for the pragmatic appropriateness of utterances: “be clear” and “be polite”. Leech posits that the Politeness Principle is the necessary complement of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, because the Cooperative Principle in itself cannot explain why people are often so indirect in expressing what they mean. Leech emphasizes the social function of politeness, stating that the Politeness Principle has a higher regulative role than the Cooperative Principle, since its function is “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place” (Leech 1983:82).

Finally, the best-known politeness theory is Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) elaboration of the concept in the strategies of positive and negative politeness. The basic assumption in their theory is that certain speech acts, such as orders and requests, are “intrinsically impolite”, because by making a request, a speaker automatically threatens the hearer’s freedom of action, his wish not to be imposed upon, which is called his “negative face”. A hearer can interpret a request as an intrusive infringement on his freedom of action. Politeness strategies are used to minimize the threat that is intrinsically present in a request, because a speaker will generally feel the need to maintain good social relationships. The framework built up by Brown and Levinson has been an important contribution to the understanding of universal politeness phenomena.

One method of examining communication style is to use small and comparable units of discourse. Speech acts have been used for this purpose (e.g. Rose 1992). The term “speech act” has been defined as a minimal unit of discourse (Searle 1969) and as a basic and functional unit of communication (Cohen 1995). Examples of speech acts include giving and responding to compliments, asking questions, apologizing, leave-taking, making introductions, and giving refusals. In the present study, **requests** were chosen, since, as we stated above, they involve abundant exercise of politeness strategies because of their intrinsic character of intrusive imposition. A comparison was made in the use of politeness strategies in request situations, by American and Armenian speakers whose production in their native languages was compared with the aim of identifying differences and similarities. Data analysis revealed both similarities and differences between the use of politeness strategies in the two languages.

According to the findings, in both languages politeness strategies used in forming requests can be classified into the following three types:

- (a) Direct or bald on record requests:  
e.g. *Open the window.*
- (b) Conventional indirect requests:  
e.g. *Would you mind opening the window, please?*
- (c) Non-conventional indirect requests:  
e.g. *It's hot in here.*

The findings revealed that the conventional indirect strategy is by far the most frequently used strategy type both in Armenian and in English. As is obvious, interrogatives were the most preferred form in both languages. This is clearly accounted for by the fact that interrogatives give the hearer an *option* to exercise the choice, thus, mitigating the imposition or the force of the request. In the great majority of request realisations, both English and Armenian, speakers chose a strategy by which reference is made to a preparatory condition, by posing a question about the hearer's possibility or ability to carry out the requested act (will you...?, could you...? կարո՞ղ ես..., կոզնե՞ս...).

Another similarity between the use of politeness strategies in the two cultures is the following: the higher the degree of imposition, the more politeness strategies were employed both in English and Armenian. In this study two situations with different degrees of imposition were used, both from a workplace setting, namely at an international organization's office in Armenia: one which was assessed as a **request with low imposition** on the interlocutor and the other which was assessed as a **request with high imposition** on the interlocutor. The results showed that more politeness strategies were employed both in English and in Armenian when the degree of imposition increased.

It appears, however, that within the similarities in politeness strategies there are differences in conventions of form; these differences constitute important nuances when interpreting the comparisons between English and Armenian data. For instance, conventional indirectness, the most frequently used politeness strategy in both cultures, is realized in substantially different ways by Armenian and English speakers.

One notable difference between English and Armenian in the use of conventional indirect strategies is the absence of certain conventionalised fixed forms of one language in the other language. Let us discuss some examples.

Asking for the reason why the hearer does not do an action, "Why don't you ...?", or the forms "I wonder if you could...?", "I would appreciate it if you would...", "How about...?" are among the most frequently used forms in the group of conventional indirect requests in English. For example:

- Why don't you help me a little bit?*
- I wonder if you could open this.*
- I would appreciate it if you would open the window.*
- How about helping me?*

However, these formulae have no equivalents in Armenian, at least not as requests, so there is simply no cross-cultural convention of means. Notably the above-mentioned forms have their equivalentlinguistic forms in Armenian, but they are used with a *different* illocutionary force.

For example, the one by which the reason for not doing the requested act is asked “Why don’t you...?” is most commonly used as either a request for information or a suggestion or an invitation in Armenian: e.g. «Ինչու՞ չես դիմում նրան», (request for information or suggestion), or «Ինչու՞ չեք մոտենում սեղանին» (invitation). In English an answer in which “the reason why not...?” is given will be inappropriate, whereas in Armenian an answer providing the requested information or an answer to the proposed suggestion is quite appropriate. The form “I wonder if you could open this” will be more likely to be interpreted as a genuine enquiry about the hearer’s ability to open something rather than a request «Տեսնես դու կկարողանա՞ս սա բացել». The “how about ...” form in Armenian «Ի՞նչ կստես...» is more often interpreted as an enquiry for opinion, and the form “I would appreciate it if...” can be interpreted as a mere statement.

Certain differences between the results of the Armenian and English usage were revealed also in the **direct or bald-on-record** strategy. For example, more direct requests were employed by the Armenian than the American within speakers of equal status and friendly relations, or so to say “in-group members”. The Armenian culture is referred to as a predominantly collectivistic culture as opposed to the American individualistic society, and thus group solidarity among friends and relatives is highly valued: hence, positive politeness and going bald-on-record are employed as politeness strategies. The use of direct strategies can show that the speaker and the hearer are not distant. The use of direct requests among equals tends to strengthen the bond of solidarity between them. It appears that in the American society, negative politeness is often preferred, because distance is highly valued in such relationships.

Additionally, in Armenian the use of a performative (to ask) is quite common among the forms of direct request, for example «Խնդրում եմ քեզ այդ մասին էլ մի խոսիր», whereas this form (I ask you...) is practically absent in English usage. Another common request form in Armenian is the use of a performative verb in a conditional sentence within a conventional indirect strategy: e.g.

- Մար, որ քեզ խնդրեմ, այդ e-mail-ն ինչ կուղարկե՞ս: or
- Որ չեզ շար խնդրեմ, իրեն մի բան կփոխանցե՞ք:

No equivalent of this form has been observed in English.

And lastly, we would like to make a few observations on differences in politeness patterns within the group of **non-conventional indirect requests** (e.g. It’s hot).

**Need** statements are among the most frequently observed formulae of non-conventional indirect requests in English. In an office setting they are mostly used by speakers of higher status making requests of the hearers of lower status. E.g.

*We'll need this letter translated by the end of the day, please.  
I'll need the figures for the meeting. Do you mind?*

This formula would be more likely to be interpreted as an order if not for the mitigating words “please”, and “Do you mind?”. Notably, the equivalent Armenian form («Մեզ պետք է...», or «Ինձ անհրաժեշտ է...») is hardly ever used as an indirect strategy to make a request and the explanation could be the fact that in Armenian this form is typically not followed by most of the mitigating words commonly used in Armenian requests, such as «խնդրում եմ», «էլի», «լավ»<sup>1</sup>. The data showed that in Armenian need statements are frequently used in a workplace setting, and notably in both directions – high status - low status and low status - high status, but the illocutionary force of the respective speech acts is mostly that of a *direct need* statement, e.g.

- *Տախի թուղքը վերջացել է, թուղք պետք է գնենք:* (employee to employer).

There is clearly no request implied in this statement.

To sum up, speakers of both Armenian and English employ the three main politeness strategies (direct, conventional indirect and non-conventional indirect) identified above, with conventional indirect strategy prevailing in speech. However, the patterns and formulae entertained for the same strategy considerably vary in each language.

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### **Ուղղակի/անուղղակի քաղաքավարական ռազմավարություններն անգլերենում և հայերենում**

Սույն աշխատանքում փորձ է արվել կատարել հայերեն և անգլերեն լեզուներում կիրառվող քաղաքավարական ռազմավարությունների գուգադրական վերլուծություն՝ որպես հիմք ընդունելով ուղղակիության / անուղղակիության գործոնը: Անուղղակի արտահայտման և քաղաքավարության հասկացության միջև կապը բազմաթիվ քննարկումների նյութ է եղել լեզվագործաբանների շրջանում (տես՝ Brown and Levinson 1987; Lakoff 1973; Leech 1983; Searle 1976), որոնց մեծ մասը շեշտել է նշված հասկացությունների սերտ փոխկապակցվածությունը՝ նշելով, որ անուղղակիության ավելի բարձր աստիճանը ենթադրում է առավել քաղաքավարություն: Որպես ուսումնասիրության նյութ է ընտրվել խնդրանքի խոսողական ակտը: Ուսումնասիրության արդյունքներն ի հայտ են բերել մի շարք մեանություններ և տարբերություններ երկու լեզուներում խնդրանքի արտահայտման քաղաքավարական ռազմավարությունների կիրառման միջև: Մասնավորապես, երկու լեզուներում էլ կիրառվում են նույն երեք հիմնական ռազմավարությունները. ուղղակի, կոնվենցիոնալ (կամ՝ կադապարված) անուղղակի և ոչ կոնվենցիոնալ անուղղակի խնդրանքի ձևերը: Ըստ որում, թե՛ հայերենում և թե՛ անգլերենում մեծապես գերակշռում է կոնվենցիոնալ անուղղակի ռազմավարությունը, մասնավորապես՝ հարցական նախադասությամբ կազմված կադապարների կիրառմամբ: Սակայն, երկու լեզուներում ռազմավարությունների մեանությունների հետ մեկտեղ, բազմաթիվ տարբերություններ և անհամապատասխանություններ են դիտվել դրանց արտահայտման ձևերի՝ քաղաքավարական կառույցների և կադապարների միջև: