

## THE POLITENESS OF IMPERATIVE REQUESTS IN GREEK AND IN ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The interrelationship of culture and language, and the necessity to study them both for a better understanding of linguistic behaviour has been emphasized by various scholars, notably Gumperz and Hymes. The rules of politeness, that is, rules which determine appropriate behaviour, are one of the aspects of culture clearly reflected in language. This has to be fully understood before we can make any sense of stereotypic comments concerning the degree of politeness of certain groups; and such comments are not at all uncommon. For instance, Leech (1983:84) lists a number of them, namely that Russians and Poles are never polite, and also that the Chinese and the Japanese are very polite compared to Europeans. Lakoff (1972:908) also contends that English sounds "harsh" or "impolite" to the Japanese. Blum-Kulka (1982:31) similarly states that Israelis are stereotyped as lacking politeness. House and Kasper (1981:158) also point out that German learners of English are often considered impolite. A similar, widespread belief that Greeks are impolite or at least less polite than the English is shared by some Greeks and foreigners alike. This study is an attempt to raise and discuss some of the reasons which underlie this impression.

First of all, is it really true that some ethnic groups are more or less polite than others? Is politeness, after all, a universal concept with identical connotations in every culture? If we could be sure that politeness is a single concept shared by all human beings, then judgements concerning degrees of politeness could be objective. Since there is evidence that this is not the case, such stereotypes are interesting and useful only in that they point to a situation which is worthy of examination. Such impressions and stereotypes clearly stem from deeply ingrained socio-cultural differences which are

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I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues B. Dendrinos, A. Halls and R. Halls who generously gave me of their time and made detailed and insightful comments for the final version. I would note, however, that lack of time and energy are the only reasons why I have failed to expand the paper to incorporate all their proposals.

manifested in both verbal and non-verbal behaviour. As Hudson (1980:73) argues "many of the properties of language... are also properties of culture in general". To be able to make correct judgements and reach valid conclusions "one has to know the social structure in which the forms of utterance occur and the cultural values which inform that structure" (see Hymes, 1986:80). Consequently, no nation can be objectively considered more or less polite than any other, but only polite in a different, culturally specific way.

## 2. The concept of "politeness"

The fact that politeness is viewed and manifested differently in different cultures has been emphasized by Brown and Levinson (1978:258) who assert that "there are endless daily reminders of the social/cultural relativity of politeness and of norms of acceptable interaction". In their extensive essay "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena", Brown and Levinson (1978) provide an insightful account of the different ways in which people can express their politeness. They develop a theory of politeness where linguistic devices are realisations of specific politeness strategies. Following Goffman's views on deference or politeness in behaviour in general, they have proposed a linguistic theory in which the concept of "face" is central. This concept is the kernel element in folk notions of politeness in both Greek and English societies. Brown and Levinson assume that all adult interactants have, and also know each other to have, "face" which they define as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself". "Face" is something that is emotionally invested and can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must, therefore, be constantly attended to in interaction. It is in the mutual interest of both participants, in most interactions, to try to maintain each other's face. Brown and Levinson distinguish two components of face, that is, "negative face" and "positive face", which are two related aspects of the same entity and refer to two basic desires or wants of any individual in any interaction.

"negative face" refers to the "want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others".

"positive face" refers to the "want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others".

Brown and Levinson say that, although the notion is universal, "the content of face will differ in different cultures", and they elaborate on this by saying that there will be differences as to "what the exact limits are to personal territories, and what the publicly relevant content of personality consists in" (1978:66-67). I believe that a fundamental difference between Greek and English politeness has to do with this content of face. The limits to

personal territories seem to be looser among individuals who belong to the same ingroup for Greeks. Furthermore, the notion of face in Greece seems to include not only the desire of a person to be admired, liked and ratified by at least some others, but also a strong desire that the people s/he is closely related to are also admired, liked and ratified by those others. The actions of every member of the ingroup are most strongly reflected in the other's face. And the behaviour of other, closely related members of one's ingroup heavily contributes to the overall picture of every individual's face. These speculations are supported by the views of Triandis and Vassiliou (1972), Herzfeld (1980, 1983 & 1984) and others who have emphasized the importance of the '(e)ðiki' — 'kseni' (ingroup: insiders — outgroup: outsiders) distinction for Greek society<sup>2</sup>.

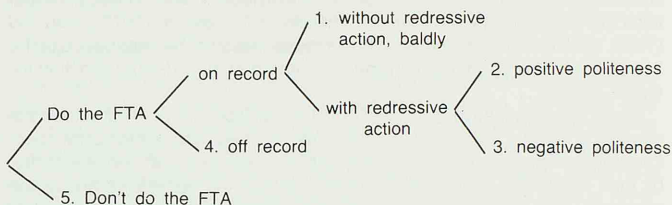
Some communicative activities entail imposition on both or either the speaker's or the addressee's face, that is, they are intrinsically face-threatening activities (FTAs). Face-threatening activities are "those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker". Acts that appear to impede the addressee's independence of movement and freedom of action threaten his/her negative face, whereas, those which appear to disapprove of his/her wants threaten his/her positive face. Examples of the former might be orders and requests, suggestions, advice, etc., whereas, those of the latter might be expressions of disapproval or disagreement, etc. Thanks, acceptance of thanks, or offers, etc. threaten the speaker's negative face, in that s/he accepts a debt and humbles his/her own face. Apologies (i.e. regretting a prior FTA), acceptance of compliments, etc., threaten the speaker's positive face, in that s/he may feel that s/he has to play them down or compliment in turn.

Because they are able to reason from ends to means, participants in an interaction usually adopt one from among a set of strategies to avoid or minimize such face-threatening activities, in other words, they use politeness. Brown and Levinson distinguish five sets of such strategies. They all depend on the risk of loss of face, which increases as we move from smaller

2. Triandis and Vassiliou (1972), in their interesting study of the Greek national character, discuss the great importance which the ingroup [(e)ðiki] — outgroup [kseni] distinction plays in Greek society. They define the "ingroup" as one's family, relatives, friends and friends of friends. They add that guests and people who are perceived as showing concern for one are also seen as members of the ingroup. The "outgroup" consists of anyone who is not perceived as an acquaintance or as someone who is concerned with one's welfare. Acquaintances are classified more frequently in the ingroup than in the outgroup (1972:305). There is a great difference in the way Greeks behave towards their ingroup as opposed to their outgroup. "Within the ingroup the appropriate behaviors are characterized by cooperation, protection and help. Relations with members of the outgroup are essentially competitive" (1972:305). Members of the same ingroup will most often employ informality and positive politeness strategies and they will save formality and negative politeness (or no politeness at all) for members of their outgroup depending on its status.

to higher numbers (see diagram below). The greater the risk the more polite the strategy. The degree of risk is determined by three social variables which according to Brown and Levinson are the following:

- i. the *social distance* between participants
- ii. the *relative power* between them
- iii. the *ranking of impositions* in the particular culture.



**Figure 1.** Possible strategies for doing FTAs (From Brown and Levinson, 1978:65).

At the two extremes (i.e. 1 and 5) politeness is rather irrelevant. Their first category of strategies is what they call “bald on record” which is employed when there is no risk involved. Redressive action (i.e. action that attempts to counter-act the potential face damage of the FTA) is not necessary because they are performed by interactants who are on very intimate terms or because other demands override face concerns, as in cases of great urgency. The second category is called “positive politeness” strategies and the third one “negative politeness” strategies. Strategies of positive politeness are essentially “approach based” and are directed towards the addressee’s positive face, and strategies of negative politeness are essentially “avoidance based” and are directed towards the addressee’s negative face. These two sets of strategies include the majority of linguistic devices used in everyday interactions.

Clear examples of positive politeness strategies are expressions of interest in and approval of the addressee, use of in-group identity markers, the giving of reasons and also the giving of gifts, in the form of goods, sympathy, understanding and cooperation. Examples of negative politeness strategies, which are characterised by formality and restraint, are expressions of linguistic and non-linguistic deference, use of a variety of hedges on the force of the speech act, questioning rather than asserting, use of impersonalising devices and other mitigating mechanisms.

The fourth category of politeness strategies is called “off record”. This



means that the utterance used is ambiguous (formulated as a hint or metaphor, for instance), and the decision as to its interpretation is left to the addressee, because the risk of loss of face is great. For instance, if you say, "I'm out of cash, I forgot to go to the bank", the utterance might be interpreted as a simple statement of fact, or a request for cash. Their fifth category includes those cases in which the risk of loss of face is so great that nothing is broached.

Positive politeness is less obvious, because when we talk or think of politeness what immediately springs to mind is negative politeness, which is our familiar formal politeness, as Brown and Levinson have pointed out. This has led to the assumption that negative politeness is more fundamental than positive politeness, a point which is directly voiced by Leech (1983:133) who claims that there is a more general law which states that negative politeness (avoidance of discord) is a more serious consideration than positive politeness (seeking concord).

The distinction between positive and negative politeness subsequently leads to another interesting distinction, that of positive and negative politeness societies<sup>3</sup>, which even with its "immense crudity" as Brown and Levinson (1978:250) put it, can shed very considerable light on the difference between cultures. Brown and Levinson (op. cit.) say that England can be considered a negative politeness society as compared to America. It is my contention that Greece is also a positive politeness society as compared to England.

I am not implying here that societies as a whole can be clearly grouped into either positive or negative ones. It is true, as Brown and Levinson point out, that complex stratified societies will exhibit both kinds of politeness, with upper-classes most probably having a negative politeness ethos and lower-classes a positive politeness ethos. Similarly, it is widely reported that women tend to value positive politeness strategies and informality more than men. (See, for instance, Harris 1984 on speech patterns in an Egyptian village, and Keenan 1974 in Malagasy). On this issue Brown and Levinson (1978:251) maintain that "this distinction between positive- and negative-politeness emphases not only marks class from class in hierarchical

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3. Scollon and Scollon (1981:175 & 1983:167) say that they prefer to call the positive politeness system "solidarity politeness" because of its emphasis on the common ground between the participants and the negative politeness system "deference politeness", because of its emphasis on deference and formality and furthermore in order to avoid possible negative connotations in using the word "negative". Similarly, Tannen (1981:385 & 1984a:15) expresses concern for possible unintended value judgements and proposes instead the terms "community" and "independence" respectively. Although I think there is some validity to their arguments (especially the last, since the term "negative" will most probably invoke unpleasant connotations), I disagree with the idea of inventing new terms for already well-established concepts in the relevant literature, because this can very easily lead to confusion.

societies, but also marks different kinds of social roles from one another. Thus we suspect that, in most cultures, women among women have a tendency to use more elaborate positive-politeness strategies than do men among men".

Nevertheless, I believe that we can distinguish societies according to the ethos predominant in daily interactions, both verbal and non-verbal. In this sense then perhaps we could say that societies cannot be distinguished as either absolutely positive or absolutely negative, but rather as relatively more positive or negative according to which type of ethos is given more play in daily encounters. And this is what I mean when I refer to positive and negative politeness societies.

Bearing in mind that positive and negative politeness interact in intricate ways, I will try to investigate if, and to what extent, their linguistic manifestations present themselves in the data I have collected from both languages.<sup>4</sup> If indeed it is the case that, on the one hand, linguistic realisations of positive politeness strategies prevail in my Greek data, and on the other, linguistic realisations of negative politeness prevail in my English data then I believe that this can be a major justification of my hypothesis, that Greece is a positive politeness society as compared to England which is a negative politeness society. Furthermore, this will vindicate my broader hypothesis that Greeks are not less polite than the English, but polite in a different way, due to a different conception of what polite verbal and non-verbal behaviour is, which largely derives from differing cultural norms and values.

### 3. The notion of "request"

I will restrict myself here to the examination of requests manifested with imperatives. Before proceeding, I would like to note some interesting points which are perhaps fundamental in explaining the varying conception and realisation of requests in general in the two cultures.

Requests can be grouped into two broad categories, namely, requests for action and requests for information. In a sense all questions are requests,

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4. My data come from a variety of sources, such as contemporary Greek and English plays, discourse completion tests and material I collected from participant and non-participant observation. To facilitate the reader's tracing of the source of the data I have used the author's name, the year of publication and the page number for the examples taken from plays. The notation (NB) means that the example is an authentic utterance taken from the notebook I used to write down data. There are few contrived examples, used in cases where a convenient illustration on the issue discussed was needed. These examples bear no label. The Greek examples are followed by a word-for-word and/or a freer translation where it was thought of as necessary.

since they require some sort of action, even if that is a simple answer. Their main common characteristic in English is that they can all be reported with "ask" rather than "tell". The verb "ask" means, among other things, both "request" and "inquire", (see Green, 1975:140). By contrast, in Greek, requests for information are reported with the verb "roto" which means "ask", "inquire", and requests for action with "zito" which means "ask for", and possibly with "leo" meaning "tell" and "say", but not with "roto" (=ask).

The above distinction covers requests which are seen as part of the normal, everyday tasks people who live or work together perform for each other, such as opening and closing doors, or asking the time, as well as tasks related to socially determined roles, such as cooking seen as a woman's duty. Such requests tend to be structurally simple and unembellished. If, however, the request for action or information is seen as something not related to simple or socially determined duties, or if there are status differences between the interlocutors, then the request itself is more elaborate and it is reported with the verb "parakalo" which means something like "request very politely". Furthermore, there is no single word in Greek which can render the meaning of the word "request". For those rather formal cases in which the verb "request" is explicitly stated in English, the verb "parakalo" would be the most appropriate in Greek. For instance, "I requested her to let me in, if she wouldn't mind coming down to the door" would be best rendered as "tin parakalesa na...".

Clearly, then, such differences cannot be viewed as idiosyncratic peculiarities of the languages, but should rather be interpreted as revealing the different conceptions that native speakers have of the social meanings and functions their linguistic actions have (see Verschueren, 1981). As Hudson (1980:111) puts it "concepts used in classifying speech-acts will be typical of cultural concepts". Thus, the English term "request" embraces a lot more actions than the Greek rough equivalent "paraklisi" which falls towards the more formal end of the requesting continuum.

Requests are often considered a very good example of speech acts which imply intrusion on the addressee's territory which limits his/her freedom of action. In other words, they are face-threatening activities, threatening the addressee's negative face. Every language affords its speakers a variety of grammatical possibilities from which to choose, in order to avoid or minimize the impact of this face-threat. Requests in both languages can be realised linguistically with imperatives, interrogatives, negative-interrogatives and even declaratives. Sometimes elliptical forms are also found. The gross structural patterns for the expression of requests seem to be the same, but there are differences in their frequency and the kind of modification they accept. The following examples illustrate this.

maria, fere liyo      nero sto sava	(imperative)
Maria, bring a little water to Savas	(Efthemiades, 1981a:33)
boro na kaθiso?	(interrogative)
can that I sit down?	(Skourtis, 1982:24)
jani ðen pas      na feris      tin turta?	(negative-interrogative)
Jani don't you-go that you-bring the cake?	(Efthemiades, 1981a:43)
θα 'θela      ena potiri nero	(declarative)
I would want [I'd like] a glass of water	(Zioyas, 1980:66)
broc      - [kaθiste] sto      trapezi	(elliptical construction)
come on - [you-sit] at the table	(Anaynostaki, n.d.:37)
Bring me my overcoat, will you?	(imperative)
	(Orton, 1976:39)
Shall I get somethin' to eat?	(interrogative)
	(Bond, 1977:66)
Why don't you just go away?	(interrogative-negative)
	(Russel, 1985:68)
I'd like some more wine	(declarative)
	(Pinter, 1981:250)
Coffee, white, please	(elliptical construction)
	(NB)

#### 4. Imperative requests

Imperative constructions functioning as requests are more frequent in Greek, whereas interrogative constructions seem to be the most prolific group of requesting in English. Remember that the verb "request" really means "ask" in English, and consequently the strong predilection for interrogative requests is not surprising. In Greek they are common, though not as common as in English, since imperative constructions are socially acceptable to a greater extent. They also tend to be structurally simpler, because the singular/plural distinction marks a certain formality which is indicated with elaboration and indirectness in English. Imperative requests in English are often condemned as impolite. Searle (1975:64) asserts that "ordinary conversational requirements of politeness normally make it awkward to issue flat imperative sentences...". Likewise, for both Leech (1983:119), Lakoff (1977:101) and others, imperatives constitute the least polite constructions as compared to declaratives and interrogatives.



Imperatives in Greek have the force of a command, but they can also express desire and wish, whereas in English, they are connected more with commands and instructions and consequently they are thought of as less appropriate to perform requests (see Triantafillides, 1978:308; and Lyons, 1968:307, for such definitions). But what is it in imperatives, besides their definitional differences mentioned above, which renders them inappropriate requesting devices in English, but appropriate in Greek?

The Greek morphological system for marking the imperative is more elaborate than the English one. In English the imperative is an uninflected form, similar to the infinitive and the present tense indicative uninflected forms and is marked for neither aspect nor number. In Greek, on the other hand, there is a distinct morphological system marking imperatives for singular and plural, as well as perfective and imperfective aspects.<sup>5</sup> In English the understood subject of an imperative is in most cases a second person addressee, whereas in Greek, there is also a periphrastic form for a third person verb form borrowed from the subjunctive, as for instance "as *piyeni*" meaning roughly "let him/her go". In some cases we can also have a first person plural imperative, usually formed periphrastically with "as", and few verbs have their own monolectic forms for the first person plural, like "pame" meaning "let's go". This greater flexibility explains why imperatives in Greek are not exclusively related to commands, but can equally well express a wish or a desire of the speaker. Commands are usually issued directly, that is, they require a second person addressee.

What is noteworthy, however, is that the majority of requests performed with imperative constructions utilise the perfective rather than the imperfective aspect of the imperative. Mackridge (1985:123) says that "since the imperfective imperative is often used to order the immediate inception or cessation of an action, it is often felt to be less polite than the perfective". When a speaker becomes very angry or intentionally issues a command s/he will more often than not resort to the imperfective imperative. For example:

[to an acquaintance in a tense situation]

stamata (imperfective) re. Ama aniksi to stoma su ðe stamatai

stop (it) (re). Whenever opens the mouth your not stops

(Stop it. Once you open your mouth you never shut up.)

(Efthemiades, 1981a:70-71)

5. "Perfective" aspect means that the action/s delineated by the verb form is seen as a completed whole (e.g. *yrapse*), whereas "imperfective" aspect means that the action/s delineated by the verb form is seen as in progress or habitual (e.g. *yrafe*).

6. The older paradigm went as follows: "thou" and "ye" for the second person nominative singular and plural, and "thee" and "you" for the second person accusative singular and plural, respectively. Later, "you" was generalised as nominative for both singular and plural.

[husband to wife]

stamatise (perfective) se parakalo. Oxi pali ta iōja

stop (it) please. Not again the same

(NB)

(Stop it please. Don't go on)

[between friends]

vale (perfective) re sava liyo krasaki na to tsugrisume

pour (re) Sava little wine-dim. that we toast

(Efthemiades, 1981a:28)

vaze (imperfective) kراسi ke stamata...

pour wine and stop...

This is rather similar to what Wierzbicka (1985:154) reports for Polish where when a speaker becomes very angry s/he will avoid the imperative and resort to the bare infinitive. In other words, languages afford their speakers different constructions to express stronger, offensive feelings.

The plural perfective offers, of course, a further possibility for a more polite or at least more formal request. It should be noted here that the imperative is not the only mood utilised in Greek to perform requests, and thus, this perfective/imperfective distinction is not the only one marking the difference between polite and impolite discourse. Indicative and subjunctive configurations are also frequently used. The availability of such alternatives in the language partly explains why the demand for embedded imperatives and elaborate constructions is not so heavy in Greek as it is in English.

Another difference between Greek and English imperative usage, which also accounts for the fact that more imperatives were found in Greek, is the following. In cases in which the requested item was coffee, drinks, food, etc. and the interactants were close friends, relatives or couples, especially in household environments, there was a strong predilection for imperative constructions in Greek, whereas more elaborate constructions were common in English. Furthermore, such requests were less frequent in my English data as a whole, which perhaps implies that the risk of loss of face is perceived as great and for this reason the English choose not to do the face-threatening activity at all. For example:

[husband to wife]

ðose mu ta tsiyara

give me the cigarettes

(Skourtis, 1976:42)

[between sisters]

maritsa! vale mu liyo akoma

Maritsa! pour me a little more

(Anaynostaki, n.d.:13)

How can we account for such a finding? Can we accept that in such cases we have status or power differences? Or can we suggest that Greeks very often act as bullies, assuming power differences which do not exist, and issuing commands? Or, furthermore, that they are simply impolite and inconsiderate of other people? Any such claims would be preposterous and an escape route from a deeper issue.

Any, even cursory, observation of the household behaviour of many, especially older, couples in the Greek society, reveals that there are still strong, built-in attitudes towards the different tasks allocated for each member of the household. Thus, setting the table, making coffee, and all sorts of domestic tasks are still seen as the woman's responsibility. Thus, imperatives here cannot be seen as orders, since both participants tacitly agree with this kind of social order. As Leech (1983:219) maintains, the difference between a command and a request is that whereas in issuing the former the speaker assumes that the addressee will comply, in issuing the latter the speaker assumes or "purports to assume" that the outcome will be successful only if the addressee agrees to conform. Such requests are rather reminders of a duty, expressing the desire of the speaker, which can often be seen as a desire of the addressee, since compliance means conforming to his/her more general duties. Could we then say that what we really have here is a sex discriminating power difference? I believe that such a claim cannot be justified for two reasons. Firstly, because when the host is not a woman but a man, imperatives are also used. Thus, they appear to be role-dependent duties rather than sex-dependent ones, although the fact that mainly women act as hosts makes them appear to be receiving most of this kind of imperatives. Secondly, imperatives are reciprocally used, whereas in situations where there are power differences we cannot expect this kind of reciprocity. Imperatives would have been employed downwards, but not upwards, and clearly this is not the case here. For example:

M: fere to konjak (Efthemiades, 1981b:123)  
bring the cognac

F: ðoz' mu ki emena  
give me too

This use seems to be related to the looser limits of personal territories among Greeks, mentioned earlier, and is in accord with Goffman's (1967) notion of "free goods". By this he means those material goods which can be used by another person without special permission. This notion can be extended to cover goods which can be seen as not exclusively belonging to the addressee, or in other words, goods which can be easily shared, and asking for them does not constitute a great imposition on the addressee. The

forms more frequently used among close friends in Greek in such situations tend to be perfective imperatives. Thus, requests like “*ðose mu to alati*” (= give me the salt) are common in Greek but rather inappropriate in English. To share this kind of “small” goods is seen as a kind of social obligation, everybody willingly conforms to and expects everybody else to do the same.

This attitude appears to be similar to the “Wolof logic of etiquette” reported by Hymes (1986:79). “For a large number of possible everyday requests, the Wolof view is that participants in situations are entitled to make them in relation to what is evident in the surrounding context... If there is coffee, you are entitled to some; ask for it directly”. We could then justifiably claim that the differing requesting constructions found to be preferred in English and Greek in such contexts have nothing to do with politeness, but rather depend on differing social norms which determine social roles, rights and duties, as well as a different conception of the accessibility to goods belonging to others. This issue is also discussed by Thomas (1983:105) who maintains that “generally speaking, what an individual regards as ‘free goods’ varies according to relationships and situation... Cross-culturally too, perceptions of what constitutes ‘free’ or ‘nearly free’ goods differ”.

#### 4.1. Modification

I would like to add a few points now concerning the kind of modification which characterises imperative requesting constructions in the two languages. The main mitigating device used with imperatives, and indeed any requesting construction in Greek, except perhaps the very formal and elaborate ones, is the use of diminutives and expressions meaning “a little”. The highly developed system of diminutives enables the speaker to decrease the force of the request, not by sounding tentative, but by minimizing the item requested and thus the imposition on the addressee. This implies a kind of optimism as to the likelihood of compliance by the addressee, since the smaller the request the more likely it is to succeed. For example:

[between friends]

(NB)

vale *liyi* musikula  
put on a little music-dim.

[on the phone]

(NB)

perimenete ena leptaki  
wait a minute-dim.

Although “a little” and “*liyo*” can be used in English and in Greek respectively to modify requests, it seems that “*liyo*” is more flexible and can modify, besides nouns, a variety of verbs implying a partial action and thus smaller imposition. For example:



anikse liyo to paraθiro (NB)  
open a little the window

θα me voiθisis na ftjakso liyo ta malja mu?  
will you help me to set a little my hair? (Kambanellis, 1978:211)

na peraso liyo? (NB)  
can that I pass a little?

These do not mean that the requester wants the window ajar or her hair half-done, etc. It is a kind of informal variant of "parakalo" (=please), although it can sometimes be used along with it. Its positional mobility is similar to that of "please" and supports the claim. In other words, it can be used sentence medially and sentence-finally, but can rarely be used in initial position, where it functions more as an attention-getter. But even "please" in initial position can be thought of more as an attention-getter or an apology for the interruption, as Ervin-Tripp (1976:48) notes. In other words, it functions differently from the medial or postposed "please". The use of "liyo" seems to be very similar to what Brown and Levinson (1978:144 & 182) report for Tamil and Malagasy, where the words for "please" literally mean "a little".

Terms of address are frequently encountered with imperative requests and requests in general. They are usually redundant in that the addressee very often knows from the context, linguistic and extra-linguistic, that the request is directed to him/her. Nevertheless, they appear to be necessary parts of most requests, in either their full form or in a diminutive form, and they are sometimes preceded by semantically empty lexical items, such as "vre", "re" and "moré". These can also be used by themselves as address terms. The possessive pronoun "mu" meaning "my" can follow most forms of address as in "Kosta mu" (= my Kostas), "manula mu" (= my mother-dim), etc., whereas in English this kind of use seems to be more restricted to a few set expressions such as "my dear". Obviously this kind of use does not imply possession. It functions in the same way as the above-mentioned empty lexical items to enhance affection, belongingness or familiarity. Brown and Levinson acknowledge both the use of diminutives and familiar address terms as in-group identity markers and consider them characteristics of positive politeness.

By contrast, imperatives in English are very often attenuated with question tags. The system of question tags is highly developed in English, and tags can take a variety of forms and perform a variety of functions. The meaning of a question tag depends, to a great extent, on its intonation. The highly developed system of modal verbs has perhaps contributed to such a formal variety of tags in English, which is not true of other languages such as Greek, Hebrew (Blum-Kulka, 1982 & 1983) and Polish (Wierzbicka, 1985). For example:

leave it there, will you? / could you?

One could imagine a number of alternative possibilities. In Greek the only possibility in a similar example could be "endaxi" meaning "O.K.", a kind of token, rather than real, tag. In most cases English tags enable the speaker to mitigate the force of his/her request by sounding more tentative and less committed. By contrast, the Greek token tags invite the addressee's involvement and thus agreement and compliance. Lakoff (1975) claims that women use more tags than men, exactly because they enable them to avoid commitment and thus conflict.

#### 4.2. Paralinguistic phenomena

Before concluding I would like to point out that differences between the two cultures can also be detected at a different level, that of paralinguistic features. These include differences in suprasegmental phonology, facial expression, and gestural and postural systems. These features will not be analysed in any detail since they do not fall in the scope of this study whose concern is strictly linguistic. It is, however, acknowledged that such phenomena are important for the correct interpretation, or for the misinterpretation of the meaning of any utterance. It appears that the unmarked function of paralinguistic features is to reinforce and supplement the information contained in the utterance, whereas the marked function contradicts that information. Since research is rather limited in this area, it will undoubtedly be interesting for future investigation.

Even an "inherently" impolite utterance, such as "Get out of here", when uttered softly or whispered, can lose its force provided that the addressee grasps the intended and not just the actual message. An intended request with the inappropriate intonation, irrespective of its grammatical structure and modification, may not emerge as a request, and may even sound like an order.

Interactants who do not share the same socio-cultural background are prone to such mismatches of linguistic and paralinguistic information, which can cause confusion, nervousness and anger. An interesting illustration of this is presented by Gumperz (1982:173). He carried out research at Heathrow airport and reported the misunderstanding and misjudgement caused, just because Asian women staff in a cafeteria asked their customers if they wanted "gravy" with their food with falling intonation at the end, instead of rising, question intonation. This essential difference in the expected intonation pattern evoked negative reactions on the part of the customers, and this resulted in accusations of unproved rudeness being levelled against the women, who clearly had no such intentions.

Generally speaking, English speakers tend to save loudness for cases in which they are angry, whereas the Greeks tend to speak louder, especially

when dealing with interesting or controversial issues. In other words, Greek conversational volume often strikes English people as too loud, so, when the unaccustomed English hear Greeks conversing, they usually think that they are involved in a heated argument or a fight, even though this obviously cannot always be the case. It simply indicates involvement and enthusiasm, part of the vitality and liveliness of the race. The importance of such differences is eloquently presented by Tannen (1984b:192), who contends that "tiny differences in intonation and prosody can throw an interaction completely off without the speakers knowing what caused the problem".

The frequency and kind of facial expression, gesticulation and of non-verbal behaviour in general will also differ in the two cultures, because as Lyons (1977:66) observes "both the vocal and non-vocal phenomena are to a considerable extent learned rather than instinctive and differ from language to language (or, perhaps one should say, from culture to culture)". Research, in these aspects of communication, is almost non-existent (see Dendrinos, 1986).

A well-known difference between the Greeks and English is the kind of head movement to express dissent. An Englishman will move his/her head from side to side, whereas a Greek will throw it back. The Greeks, like most Mediterranean peoples, seem to gesticulate more than the English, sit or stand closer to one another when conversing and use far more facial expressions, thus complementing their verbal behaviour. Tannen (1983:366) contends that the frequent use of gesture and facial expression in Greek is related to the frequent use of ellipsis (which is a positive politeness device). As Hudson (1980:134), quoting Abercrombie, states "we speak with our vocal organs, but we converse with our entire bodies". Thus, politeness can neither be reduced to form nor be restricted to the linguistic medium. Informative communication is mainly verbal, whereas rapport communication involves a lot of non-verbal behaviour.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion it appears that, in both Greek and English, imperative requests are mitigated, but with different softening devices, which clearly reflect different values. The use, or even overuse of diminutives in Greek indicates some kind of affection towards the item requested and a kind of optimism that the addressee shares the same view and that s/he will conform to the request. Furthermore, terms of address are more frequently used in Greek than in English. I could mention as an indication of this, that in one of the situations in my data elicited through discourse completion tests, no terms of address were found in English, whereas there were a few in the Greek ones. Both these kinds of mitigation are directed towards the addressee's positive face.



By contrast, tags which are preferred in English, imply tentativeness on the part of the speaker and a kind of pessimism that the addressee might not be willing to conform. This kind of mitigation is directed towards the addressee's negative face. Thus, the main difference underlying these softening devices is distance/non-imposition versus intimacy/involvement. Distance is a positive cultural value in England, and it could be argued that the absence of the singular "you"<sup>6</sup> pronoun in the language, among other things, points to that, reflecting distance and consideration for the freedom of the individual. By contrast, distance in Greek reflects formality and estrangement.

Brown and Levinson (1978:131) draw a distinction between "optimistic" and "pessimistic" ways of doing face threatening activities, and add that this is "perhaps the most dramatic difference between positive-politeness and negative-politeness ways of doing FTAs". These principles of polite optimism and polite pessimism could be extended to cover not only mitigating devices, but also the structures themselves. Thus, imperatives can be seen as devices indicating the optimism that the addressee is willing to carry out the act requested by the speaker. This kind of presumed willingness and cooperation springs from the social rule which prescribes it as the duty or even the obligation of every individual to help the other members of his/her ingroup. Thus, both structural and mitigating preferences justify, I believe, my claim that the Greek society is a positive politeness society as compared to the negative politeness English society.

What should be borne in mind is that no structure as such is inherently polite or impolite. A number of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors determine the degree of politeness encoded and these are bound to differ from culture to culture. How people behave verbally at a given point is the natural, polite way of behaving, if it conforms to the expectations of the addressee. If participants do not share the same socio-cultural expectations, then misinterpretations and misjudgements can easily arise. Thus, I believe, it becomes clear that cross-cultural comparisons of what is polite and what is impolite are bound to be wrong if participants do not share or are not conversant with their respective socio-cultural backgrounds. The English will make judgements concerning Greeks based on their expectations of what is appropriate and polite behaviour, and consequently their judgements will be skewed. Being a negative politeness society, where politeness is closely associated with formality, they will consider Greeks impolite and perhaps inconsiderate of other people. By the same token, the Greeks will make judgements concerning the English based on their expectations. Being a positive politeness society they will judge the English as too formal, cold and distant and perhaps hypocritical rather than polite.

This account is not, of course, exhaustive but it is, I believe, indicative and



lends support to my aforementioned hypothesis concerning the politeness of the Greeks. I would like to briefly add here that further support emerged from the investigation of how the concept of politeness is visualised in the two societies. The results were revealing and in accord with Brown and Levinson's observation that positive politeness is free-ranging, whereas negative politeness is specific and focussed. More specifically, whereas for the English, politeness is a very specific and clearly defined concept, for the Greeks it is much wider and addressed to alter's wants in general rather than to a specific want.

Further investigation might shed considerable light on the sources of similar stereotypic comments concerning the degree of politeness of other societies, because it seems that societies which have been stereotyped as less polite most probably correspond to positive politeness societies, and vice versa. A better understanding of these issues will most probably help improve inter-cultural relationships and eliminate misunderstandings and negative stereotypings.

## 6. Teaching implications

The issues raised and discussed in this paper may present many pitfalls for the foreign language learner. Adequate knowledge of subtle grammatical distinctions and slight lexical nuances will enable the learner to speak fluently and to understand what is being said, but not necessarily to speak appropriately and understand exactly what is meant or implied. Getting the right message across is not always easy, even within the same culture, because there are many differences among individuals; after all, "the style is the man". The problem, however, can become enormous or even insuperable, when people from different cultures come into contact, especially when the relationship is characterised by status difference and/or lack of friendship and intimacy.

The foreign language teacher is, thus, placed in a very delicate position, because s/he is not justified in teaching the language without considering the culture in which it is used. Unintentionally, s/he can throw his/her students into unpleasant and sometimes embarrassing situations. Failure to grasp the deeper cultural differences which determine surface forms, as well as failure to appreciate the different conventions which govern politeness strategies is the source of what Thomas (1983) calls "cross-cultural pragmatic failure", and can lead to serious misjudgements and misunderstandings.

Knowledge of the cultural differences which determine linguistic realisations seems indispensable to the acquisition of socio-cultural competence in the foreign language. Further research should be conducted before we are able to give any definitive answers to questions concerning the acquisition of socio-cultural competence which will enable learners to become successful

conversationalists in the foreign language. There is also another issue which complicates the situation a little further. Cultural norms are deeply ingrained into everybody and thus resistant to change. They appear to be so natural, reasonable and universal, that it becomes extremely difficult to realise and make others realise that they are culturally specific. Tannen (1982:229) reports an interesting example of a professional man of Greek origin living in the States. He was occasionally bewildered by the fact that he was more indirect than most Americans. He had inherited this Greek characteristic although he did not speak any Greek.

Given the serious lack of research in this area of socio-cultural competence we can only suggest at this stage that lists of possible areas of difficulty for drilling and memorisation are not a solution. In any case, there is considerable variation in the degree of socio-cultural competence even within the same community, not just one, single way of behaving appropriately.

Class discussions motivated by appropriate teaching materials seem to be more apt, because they will increase students' awareness of the variety of the issues involved and may help improve their performance. Films and literature, especially plays, can also serve as an excellent, interesting source of cultural information. But at this stage and with the means available, the language teacher can only assist his/her students in becoming aware of the different ways of behaving both verbally and non-verbally. Such awareness does not mean that cultural differences will be reduced. (This is not the target of the language teacher in any case). It simply means that teachers will furnish their students with adequate knowledge which will facilitate their prediction and acceptance of these cultural differences and will increase their flexibility and tolerance to cross-cultural variation. Even if learners are not prepared to conform fully to norms, different from their own, because they find them odd or exaggerated, they will at least be able to identify the sources of possible problems. Consequently, fluent, non-native speakers will be able to avoid appearing impolite, hypocritical or ironical, and also to make less biased judgements of others, because they will have gained the ability to grasp the true significance of what they hear, and may therefore behave appropriately.

Language and culture are intricately interrelated. Certain features of linguistic structure, such as honorifics or diminutives appear to reflect cultural aspects directly, others do so indirectly. Changes in the cultural system will influence the linguistic system and vice-versa.

Thus, language teachers who ignore the social structure and the cultural values of the society in which the language is used do their students the service of teaching them a different code with which to communicate. They do them the disservice of reducing the possibilities of successful, satisfying and pleasant communication.

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## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Μαρία Σηφιανού, *Η έκφραση της ευγένειας στις παρακλήσεις (requests) με προστακτική*

Το άρθρο αυτό επιχειρεί να μελετήσει τη χρήση της προστακτικής στις παρακλήσεις (requests) και να υποστηρίξει ότι η συχνότερη χρήση τους στα Ελληνικά απ' ότι στα Αγγλικά δεν έχει σχέση με κάποιο μειωμένο βαθμό ευγένειας με τον οποίο είναι συνδεδεμένες.

Πρώτα παρουσιάζεται σύντομα ένα θεωρητικό μοντέλο για την ανάλυση της ευγένειας σύμφωνα με το οποίο δύο είναι οι βασικές και γενικές μορφές που μπορεί να πάρει η ευγένεια. Επίσης συζητάται η ιδιαιτερότητα τού όρου παράκληση (request) στα Ελληνικά σε σχέση με τα Αγγλικά.

Στη συνέχεια γίνεται αναλυτική εξέταση παρακλήσεων (requests) με προστακτική. Πέρα από τις βασικές μορφολογικές διαφορές και τις διαφορές στον ορισμό της προστακτικής στα Ελληνικά και τα Αγγλικά εντοπίζονται και διαφορές στα στοιχεία που προσδιορίζουν τα βασικά μέρη εκφοράς της γλωσσικής αυτής πράξης.

Υποστηρίζεται ότι οι διαφορές που παρατηρούνται μπορούν να ερμηνεύσουν τόσο τη μεγαλύτερη συχνότητα στη χρήση της προστακτικής στις Ελληνικές παρακλήσεις (requests) όσο και τις διαφορές στο γενικότερο πλαίσιο επικοινωνίας (context) μέσα στο οποίο χρησιμοποιούνται.

Έτσι αποδεικνύεται ότι οι διαφορές που παρατηρούνται δεν οφείλονται σε μικρότερο ή μεγαλύτερο βαθμό ευγένειας, αλλά στις διαφορετικές μορφές ευγένειας μέσα στις οποίες λειτουργούν οι συνομιλητές στις δύο κοινωνίες. Είναι δηλαδή αποτέλεσμα διαφορετικών γλωσσικών και κοινωνικοπολιτιστικών δομών.

Στο τέλος προστίθενται κάποιες σκέψεις για το βασικό ρόλο που παίζει η ευαισθητοποίηση των μαθητών σε θέματα κοινωνικοπολιτιστικών διαφορών, στη σωστή εκμάθηση της ξένης γλώσσας.