

Negotiating Face and Making Requests: Speech Changes and Imposition

Senior English Language Fellow John Mark King

www.jorabek.com

One of the most important skills our students learn is how to use language differently in different situations and with different people. Speeches are not like telephone conversations. Essays are not like newspaper articles. And an email written to a friend is not like an email written to a professor.

The way in which we use language is the most important and effective tool we have for establishing the nature of our relationships with others. Strategies of deference and respect look very different from those of solidarity and intimacy. Our use of language is how we maintain our identity and membership in different discourse groups. It is also how we get what we want from others, whether they be our friends, our bosses or our teachers. Thus, in order to be successful communicators, our students need practice using these strategies.

In English, clarity and brevity often come first. But it is also important to use grammatical structures that convey respect and politeness. This is even more true when making requests and, depending on the relationship between the sender and recipient, politeness strategies can change drastically if the request is considered an imposition.

Such politeness strategies are called strategies of *Independence*. They establish distance between interlocutors and show that the person being given respect has greater choice and power. Thus, such strategies require a different register, or style of communication. Such strategies include:

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| a. Modal verbs | d. Uncommon vocabulary |
| b. Buried requests | e. Escape routes |
| c. Honorifics | f. Lengthy explanation |

In contrast *Involvement* strategies show solidarity and kinship or togetherness by using less formal language and more direct, ambiguous speech. This means not couching requests in formal language, but also relying on shared knowledge to negotiate meaning. Involvement strategies can be:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| a. Imperative verbs | d. Colloquial language |
| b. Basic vocabulary | e. First names |
| c. Little or no explanation | |

These strategies are not easy to predict. We always use both at the same time. A speaker can use a variety of strategies in one request depending on their relationship and the level of imposition. For example, a person may use more involvement strategies with a close friend than with a coworker even though the level of imposition may be the same. Likewise, more independence strategies may be used for a request of low imposition if the other person is a boss or stranger.

Activity 1

With your groupmates, write a list of as many strategies of involvement and independence (formal and informal) that you can think of. They can be grammatical structures, vocabulary or specific phrases. Then, complete the following activity.

In your group, create three different mini dialogs with two speakers who are close friends. One speaker in your dialog is making a request for money from the other person. Your situations are similar and contain the same people in each, but there is one difference:

Dialog 1: Asking for 200 rubles

Dialog 2: Asking for 2000 rubles

Dialog 3: Asking for 20,000 rubles

Create your dialogs so that the person making the request uses different strategies of involvement and independence to make it more likely that his/her request will be successful.

Activity 2

You are a student in a university English class. You will not be able to come to class this week because you have to take your brother to the airport. You need to **find out about the homework** either from your professor or a classmate. Write two brief email messages to get this information, one to your professor and one to your classmate. How will they be different?

Message No. 1:

From:

To: Prof. King

Message No. 2:

From:

To: Sergey Sokolov