

# POLITENESS IN REQUESTS: SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS RELEVANT FOR INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

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*The major aim of this article is to analyze the relationship between indirectness and politeness in requests. The research project supporting the findings of the paper was undertaken in order to find out to what extent politeness and indirectness are viewed as overlapping or mutually excluding categories by Romanians compared to other nationalities, such as the British and the Hebrew. Another inherent goal of the paper is to provide an example of the socio linguistics instruments that can be employed in the investigation of the differences and similarities likely to emerge in intercultural encounters. Thus, we believe that only through similar research undertaken in the fields contributing to the emerging field of interculturality one can actually trespass the theoretical assumptions and move on to the identification of the right tools and means through which intercultural discourse to be approached at a pragmatic level and thus better understood and taught in educational establishments.*

**Key words:** *social linguistics, requests, politeness, indirectness, intercultural relationships, interculturality*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the issues of major concern when it comes to intercultural encounters is the socio linguistic discourse of politeness. Even though at a theoretical and practical level extensive research in the field has already been conducted (Leech, 1983: 108, S. Blum-Kulka: 1987, Yong-Ju Rue, Grace Qiao Zhang:

2008, Maria Elena Placencia: 2007, Carmen Taleghani-Nikazm: 2006), little research has been conducted so far into the politeness discourse of Romanians as compared to other nations. Therefore, we believe that this article may contribute to a research niche neglected so far and, hopefully, provide a theoretical and practical framework for further investigations into the field of polite

requests. Moreover, we would like to emphasize the importance of taking such a specific approach when it comes to understanding intercultural relationships from a socio linguistic perspective. Thus, what generally is viewed as common sense knowledge and hence prone to misunderstandings may become substantiated information and assumptions contributing to a better approach to intercultural encounters between Romanians and other nations.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Before presenting the research project supporting the aim(s) of this article, our undertaking needs some background to the issue of politeness in requests through indirect strategies. Thus, in the literature on politeness and indirectness, it is often argued that the two notions represent parallel dimensions. For instance, Leech (1983:108) suggests that given the same propositional context, it is possible *“to increase the degree of politeness by using a more and more indirect kind of illocution. Illocutions tend to be more polite because they increase the degree of optionality and because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be”*. On the other hand, S. Blum-Kulka (1987) believes that, at least for requests, such claims as those upheld by Leech, need to be modified by distinguishing between two types of indirectness: conventional and non-conventional, the concept of politeness being associated with the former

*“but not necessarily with the latter”* (1987:132) [1]. Further on, from the same study we find out that for S. Blum-Kulka politeness represents the interactional balance achieved between two needs: the need for pragmatic clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness. Thus, this balance seems to be achieved, in Blum-Kulka’s opinion, in the case of conventional indirectness.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Starting from this theoretical background, we tried to find out whether Romanians associate politeness with conventional indirectness, as Blum Kulka asserts, or they consider non-conventional indirectness as more polite. Moreover, we tried to identify if there are any similarities between the answers of the Romanian respondents and those of Blum Kulka’s respondents.

## **4. METHODOLOGY, SURVEY QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE DESCRIPTION**

In order to attain these objectives, we used the method called *“the discourse completion test”* (DCT). This method basically consists in creating a certain situation, where respondents are asked to engage in a conversation about a certain ordinary problem. The researcher gives the participants the first part of the conversation along with a description of the situation and asks the informant to complete this situation by supplying a continuation.

The situation designed for our research was as follows:

*“You are asked by your teacher to make some reading notes of the last novel you were supposed to read. You come to school next day and realize that you forgot to do that. You need those reading notes, so you try to get them from your colleagues. What do you say?”*

The next step we took consisted in providing the respondents a typology of request patterns, listed in **Table 1** [2], a typology that follows the classifications of request strategies on scales of indirectness achieved by Searle (1975), Ervin-Trip (1976), Blum-Kulka (1982). The scale is based on postulating degrees of illocutionary transparency. This means that, the more “indirect” the mode of realization, the higher will be the interpretive demands on the hearer’ (1987:133). Thus, the request patterns considered as the most direct or transparent are the ones in which the request’s force is either marked syntactically, or indicated explicitly, as in Mood Derivable (1) and Performative (2). The least direct patterns are considered to be those in which requestive force is not indicated by any conventional means and hence has to be inferred, as in Hints (8). Between these two extremes there are patterns that derive their relative transparency either from conventions in the wording of the speech act, such as Hedged Performatives (3), or from conventions regarding the semantic contents which, by social conventions,

count as potential requests, such as Obligations (4), Want Statements (5), Suggestory Formulae (6) as well as the group of strategies often referred to in the literature as “conventionally indirect” (Blum-Kulka 1987 apud Searle 1975) referred to in the table as Query Preparatory (7).

**Table 1:** Eight types of request strategies used in the research

<b>Descriptive category</b>	<b>Example</b>
1. Mood Derivable	Give me your lecture notes.
2. Performative	I’m asking you to give me your notes.
3. Hedged Performative	I would like to ask you to give me your notes.
4. Obligation statement	You’ll have to give me your notes
5. Want statement	I would like you to give me your notes.
6. Suggestory Formulae	How about giving me your notes?
7. Query Preparatory	Could you give me your notes?
8. Hints	I didn’t take any notes and I don’t want to get a bad mark.

This table, along with the situation presented above, was administered to ten people [3] aged between 20- 40. They were asked to rate each utterance on a one to eight point scale for either “directness” or “politeness”. Moreover, in order to ensure that judgments of directness and politeness would relate only to these strategy types we avoided both internal and external modifications, such as hedges (*i.e.* “please”), in the case of politeness strategies or justifications in the case of directness. Besides that, as the appendix makes it obvious, the eight utterances were typed randomly.

### 5. SURVEY FINDINGS

The results were as follow:

Out of the eight utterances four were pointed out as the most preferred, namely those belonging to the query preparatory category (chosen by seven respondents), to the want statement category (by two respondents) and to the hedged performatives and hints by one respondent.

In terms of directness and indirectness, and politeness, the answers provided by the respondents were somewhat similar to the previous choices. Thus, in terms of the categories mentioned above seven respondents came up with the orders below:

**Table 2:** Directness scale

Strategy type	Direct
4. Obligation statement	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
5. Want statement	
3. Hedged Performative	
2. Performative	
7. Query Preparatory	
8. Hints	
3. Hedged Performative	
	Indirect

**Table 3:** Politeness scale

Strategy type	Most polite
7. Query Preparatory	
3. Hedged Performative	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
8. Hints	
5. Want statement	
1. Mood Derivable	
2. Performative	
4. Obligation statement	
	Least polite

Two other respondents made somewhat different choices presented below:

**Table 4:** Directness scale

Strategy type	Direct
1. Mood Derivable	
2. Performative	
4. Obligation statement	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
5. Want statement	
3. Hedged Performative	
8. Hints	
7. Query Preparatory	
	Indirect

**Table 6:** Directness scale

Strategy type	Direct
1. Mood Derivable	
2. Performative	
4. Obligation statement	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
7. Query Preparatory	
5. Want statement	
3. Hedged Performative	
8. Hints	
	Indirect

**Table 5:** Politeness scale

Strategy type	Most polite
3. Hedged Performative	
7. Query Preparatory	
8. Hints	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
5. Want statement	
4. Obligation statement	
2. Performative	
1. Mood Derivable	
	Least polite

**Table 7:** Politeness scale

Strategy type	Most polite
8. Hints	
3. Hedged Performative	
5. Want statement	
7. Query Preparatory	
6. Suggestory Formulae	
4. Obligation statement	
2. Performative	
1. Mood Derivable	
	Least polite

The solutions chosen by one respondent are only partially different from the others' respondents. Thus, the order is the following:

**6. DATA ANALYSIS**

It is worth underlining that only one respondent chose hedged performatives and hints as the answers favored in dealing with the situation given by the researchers correlating them both in terms of the most polite and conventional indirect

categories. Consequently, we will not take these answers into account due to their singularity. However, if the survey is to be carried out on a larger group of respondents it would be interesting to check if there are any other respondents favoring hints and hedged performatives as both the most polite and conventionally indirect strategies to be used in a certain context. If these answers will check out, then Blum Kulka's theory is to be confirmed. However, due to the limits of this research posed by the restricted sample of respondents, as well as by the restrictive situation that contextualizes only certain socio-pragmatic aspects (i.e. relationship between the language and the level of respondents' education, relationships set by the imaginary situation), we will focus on the bulk of the answers and thus ensure the reliability of the research.

A comparison between the answers of the other respondents is made through the **Table no. 8.1.** and **Table no. 8.2.** below and comments are made on the findings.

As it becomes obvious from the two tables, the seven respondents that chose to deal with the situation presented by the survey in terms of query preparatory utterances prove to be constant in their choices by pointing out to the same answer as the most polite and as second in indirectness on the indirect- direct scale. In contrast, the other two respondents, although choosing want statements as the one they would personally use in a specific

situation, select as perceiving hedged performatives, query preparatory, hints and suggestory formulae as the most polite while replacing the latter with want statements when it comes to the indirectness scale.

Thus, narrowing the research findings by focusing only on the first four most polite utterances we are left with the following strategy types: Hedged Performative; Query Preparatory; Hints; Suggestory Formulae. Moreover, by contrasting the last four choices for the most indirect strategies, we are left with only three strategies, namely Hedged Performative; Hints; Query Preparatory. Thus, by applying the principle of overlapping categories, we are left with three strategies of conventional indirect politeness: Hedged Performative; Hints; Query Preparatory utterances.

## **7. RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusion to be drawn based on the findings and after the data analysis is that while most respondents (*i.e.* seven) choose the same strategy (*i.e.* query preparatory) as an individual manner of self-expression, as well as a strategy perceived equally polite and indirect, the other two respondents seem to contradict themselves. However, we cannot claim them unreliable because in our view there may be differences between what one person uses on a daily basis and what the same person perceives as adquat, acceptable in terms of polite indirect strategies.

**Table 8:** Data analysis

**8.1. Directness scale**

Strategy type/ No. of respondents: 7	Direct	Strategy type/ No. of respondents - 2	Direct
1. Mood Derivable		1. Mood Derivable	
4. Obligation statement		2. Performative	
6. Suggestory Formulae		4. Obligation statement	
5. Want statement		6. Suggestory Formulae	
3. Hedged Performative		5. Want statement	
2. Performative		3. Hedged Performative	
7. Query Preparatory		8. Hints	
8. Hints		7. Query Preparatory	
	Indirect		Indirect

**8.2. Politeness scale**

Strategy type/ No. of respondents: 7	More polite	Strategy type/ No. of respondents - 2	Direct
7. Query Preparatory		3. Hedged Performative	
3. Hedged Performative		7. Query Preparatory	
6. Suggestory Formulae		8. Hints	
8. Hints		6. Suggestory Formulae	
5. Want statement		5. Want statement	
1. Mood Derivable		4. Obligation statement	
2. Performative		2. Performative	
4. Obligation statement		1. Mood Derivable	
	Less polite		Indirect

Consequently, the current paper proposes two possible directions of investigation. One of them should be focused on the relationship between what a person believes to be polite in a certain situation and what the same person perceives as polite. Thus, such an investigation should be focused on the differences/ similarities between individual choice on one hand, and societal and linguistic norms as taught in school or within family on the other hand.

The second direction of future research should focus on checking the findings of the current research against a larger group of Romanian respondents. However, based on our findings according to which Hedged Performative; Hints; Query Preparatory utterances we will try in the next paragraphs to draw a comparison with Blum Kulka’s findings about the British’ and Jews’ usage of conventional indirect polite strategies.

## **8. POLITE REQUESTS IN ROMANIAN, ENGLISH AND HEBREW**

In terms of query preparatory utterances in all three languages the latter are viewed as conventional indirect polite strategies and are ranked in the first two positions. However, if Romanians list the same category either on the seventh or the eighth position on the directness scale, for Hebrew the utterances appear on the sixth position, whereas in English they appear on the fifth position. Thus, the conclusion could be that Romanians are more likely to use conventional indirect strategies than other nationalities (at least in terms of perception of what things should be like until further research proves otherwise).

Hedged performatives as polite strategies are ranked second in Hebrew, and first or second in Romanian. Unlike these two languages, English ranks them on the fourth position. Once again, Romanian and Hebrew rank these utterances as to their directness/ indirectness on the sixth position, whereas English on the fifth. This second type of utterances seem to point out to similarities between Hebrew and Romanian, an aspect which is to be researched in detail in the future.

As for the last type of utterances, hints, Romanian overlaps with Hebrew and English in terms of politeness, in all three languages hints being perceived as the most indirect strategies. However, the slight differences between the three languages appear when it comes to politeness. Thus,

Romanian places such utterances on the third or fourth position; Hebrew on the fourth or fifth position and English on the second or third position. As it is obvious, in this respect, Romanian seems again to overlap with Hebrew.

If we restrict the categories that are ranked as both the most polite and the most indirect, in Hebrew we are left with Hints, Query Preparatory and Hedged Performatives, whereas in English with Query Preparatory, Hints, Hedged Performatives, Suggestory. Comparing the situation with Romanian, English introduces a category that we left aside in this research since it was selected only by two respondents out of ten.

## **9. FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

Thus, a conclusion that we could draw is that Romanian is pretty close to Hebrew in terms of the linguistic strategies employed. However, the current research also points out to the fact that in Romanian we are more likely to encounter conventional indirect polite strategies compared to Hebrew and English. In this respect, we cannot claim though too much originality of the findings due to the restricted sample of respondents. But if further research will confirm these findings, then this research could be considered a pioneer in the field of applied linguistics and pragmatics. Moreover, we emphasize the idea that only through such research one can actually cover in a scientific manner a part of the challenging field of interculturality, and more specifically of intercultural encounters at the level of linguistic discourse markers.

## ENDNOTES

[1] According to Blum Kulka (131), an example of a non-conventional indirect strategy is represented by the category of hints, characterized by lack of pragmatic clarity whereas conventional indirectness is also called “on record” indirectness.

[2] The descriptive categories are similar with those used by Blum Kulka due to the purpose of this paper, i.e. to draw a parallel between three nationalities based on the aforementioned theoretician’s findings and this research findings.

[3] Since the respondents were Romanians, and the purpose of the research was to investigate the connection between politeness and indirectness in the Romanian language, the questionnaire was administered in Romanian and the translation tried to be as close as possible to the literal meaning of the English expressions.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX

## QUESTIONNAIRE

Age:

Education:

Imagine you are in the following situation:

You are asked by your teacher to make some reading notes of the last novel you were supposed to read. You come to school next day and realize that you forgot to do that. You need those reading notes, so you try to get them from your colleagues. What do you say?

Choose from the list below the sentence that seems most appropriate.

1. *You'll have to give me your notes. (Va trebui sa-mi dai fisele tale.)*

2. *Could you give me your notes? (Imi poti da fisele tale?)*

3. *Give me your lecture notes. (Da-mi fisele tale)*

4. *I didn't take any notes and I don't want to get a bad mark. (Nu mi-am facut fisele si o sa iau o nota proasta)*

5. *I would like to ask you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa te rog sa-mi dai fisele tale)*

6. *I would like you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa-mi dai fisele tale.)*

7. *How about giving me your notes? (Ce-ar fi sa-mi dai fisele tale?)*

8. *I'm asking you to give me your notes (Iti cer sa-mi dai fisele tale.)*

In the tables below you have the same sentences as above. Number them from 1 to 8.

In Table A, order the sentences on a scale from 1 to 8, where 1 represents the most direct sentence possible and 8 the most indirect one.

In Table B, order the sentences on a scale from 1 to 8, where 1 represents the the most polite sentence and 8 the least polite.

**Table A**

	Direct
a) You'll have to give me your notes. (Va trebui sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
b) Could you give me your notes? (Imi poti da fisele tale?)	
c) Give me your lecture notes. (Da-mi fisele tale)	
d) I didn't take any notes and I don't want to get a bad mark. (Nu mi-am facut fisele si o sa iau o nota proasta)	
e) I would like to ask you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa te rog sa-mi dai fisele tale)	
f) I would like you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
g) How about giving me your notes? (Ce-ar fi sa-mi dai fisele tale?)	
h) I'm asking you to give me your notes (Iti cer sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
	Indirect

**Table B**

	Most polite
a) You'll have to give me your notes. (Va trebui sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
b) Could you give me your notes? (Imi poti da fisele tale?)	
c) Give me your lecture notes. (Da-mi fisele tale)	
d) I didn't take any notes and I don't want to get a bad mark. (Nu mi-am facut fisele si o sa iau o nota proasta)	
e) I would like to ask you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa te rog sa-mi dai fisele tale)	
f) I would like you to give me your notes. (As vrea sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
g) How about giving me your notes? (Ce-ar fi sa-mi dai fisele tale?)	
h) I'm asking you to give me your notes (Iti cer sa-mi dai fisele tale.)	
	Least polite