

**REQUESTS IN LEARNERS' DICTIONARIES: THEIR ROLE IN
FOREIGN LANGUAGE USERS' PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND
META-PRAGMATIC AWARENESS¹**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the presentation of request realisation strategies in three major learner dictionaries, namely the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995), the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1995) and the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (1995). In so doing, we have followed research analysing pragmatic items in ELT materials (Boxer and Pickering, 1995; Meier, 1997; Alcón and Tricker, 2000), on the one hand, and studies on the presentation of pragmatic information in dictionaries (Zgusta, 1988; Nuccorini, 1993) on the other. Our analysis of request acts linguistic formulations in dictionaries was conducted on the basis of Trosborg's taxonomies of request strategies and request head act modification (1995) and on Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's Maxim of congruence (1991). Results show that in line with previous studies on the presentation of pragmatic information in other ELT materials, dictionaries present pragmatic items without relating them to their actual context of language use. Furthermore, contrary to Nuccorini's

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assumption (1993), we have found that information about request acts in dictionaries may not be wide enough for foreign language learners to promote their ability to use the target language appropriately.

Key words: requests, interlanguage pragmatics, dictionary skills.

1. Introduction

One of the main differences between second and foreign language learners relies on their chances to be exposed to the target language. Following Alcón (2000), foreign language learners may be exposed to either provided or generated input. The latter one refers to the interaction that takes place in the classroom, while provided input involves teachers' talk, textbooks and other ELT materials that learners are exposed to during their learning process. In fact, the quality and amount of input given to students affects their communicative competence, and consequently, their grammatical and pragmatic competence in the target language. For the purposes of the present paper, we shall focus on the presentation of pragmatic information in one particular source of provided input that has not received much attention, that of dictionaries. Bearing our main aim in mind, we will first consider research devoted to examining pragmatic information in ELT materials. Secondly, we will account for research examining pragmatic information in dictionaries.

Most studies on those pragmatic items that language learners may be exposed to have focused on ELT materials. We have particularly considered studies by Alcón and Tricker (2000), Bardovi-Harlig et alii (1991), Meier (1997) and Boxer and Pickering (1995). Alcón and Tricker (2000) analysed the use of the discourse marker *well* in some English coursebooks and compared its occurrence in transcripts from American films. As reported by their findings, ELT materials did not present interactive features of *well* which are assumed to encourage natural speech production. Despite the fact that the discourse marker was present in some dialogues and texts in different units, no special attention was drawn onto it. The lack of precise information with respect to the use of pragmatic items is also reported by Bardovi-Harlig et alii's study (1991) on closings. They

examined twenty ELT textbooks and they found that only twelve contained complete examples. However, closings occurrence did not correspond to their treatment in these sources.

Focusing on speech acts presentation, which is also our main concern in the present study, Meier (1997) criticises existing ELT materials for their inappropriate description of speech acts occurrence in actual language use. This author particularly refers to the arbitrary selection of some linguistic realisations. For instance, as far as we are concerned, several English textbooks include *Can you* as an example of requestive behaviour but they do not include other strategies nor do they pay attention to internal or external modifiers (see Trosborg, 1995; Sifianou, 1999), which constitute a very important part of the request move. According to Meier (1997), this type of presentation promotes learners' failure and does not account for those situational variables that affect speech acts use in real life encounters, like the role of status distance or the degree of imposition in a request.

Social strategies are also missing in the ELT materials analysed by Boxer and Pickering (1995). These authors examined the presentation of complaints in four American and three British function-oriented textbooks. All these pedagogical materials dealt with direct complaints, however indirect complaining was not tackled despite the fact that in natural conversations indirect complaints are more frequent than direct complaints. These findings are in line with Billmyer, Jakar and Lee's results (1989) who surveyed the occurrence of compliments and apologies in TESOL coursebooks and pointed out the artificial and decontextualised treatment of these acts in the analysed pedagogical sources.

Although some research has been devoted to analyse dictionary entries, few studies have been conducted in order to fully examine the presentation of specific pragmatic issues in learners' dictionaries. The inclusion of pragmatic information in dictionaries has been frequently analysed from the point of view of the dictionary micro- and macrostructure, that is, as a discussion on how and when to include pragmatic information, whether inside specific entries, in usage notes or in special separate pages

included in the dictionary (Tickoo, 1989; Zgusta, 1988). An exception is Nuccorini (1993), who particularly analyses general explicit and implicit pragmatic information in three major learners' dictionaries, those of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1987), the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary* and the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1987). The author provides a detailed description of pragmatic information in these three dictionaries contained in their usage notes and definitions. She also comments on some usage notes on pragmatic topics including requests. These notes include some information about politeness issues that distinguish various directness to indirectness levels related to the interactants' relationship. According to the author, dictionaries present useful and explicit information for foreign language learners in terms of appropriateness and effectiveness in language use. Nevertheless, we should point out the fact that this author analyses not only pragmatic information with a focus on politeness, but also other issues such as the use of certain proforms and the role of sexism in language use.

Our study presented in the following sections aims at showing whether Nuccorini's (1993) conclusions on the 1987 dictionaries apply to the information of request acts in the same three major learner dictionaries in their 1995 edition. In fact this will constitute the main hypothesis of the present study.

2. Methodology

As it has been previously mentioned, our purpose is to analyse request acts information in three current learner dictionaries. For this reason we have focused on the following dictionaries as sources of provided input for foreign language learners: the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995), the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1995) and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1995). In our analysis we have considered definitions, usage notes, appendices and introductions, study pages as well as labels. In this sense we have looked not only for linguistic realisations of the requesting speech act (e.g. *can you, could you*)

but also for the definition of concepts related to its behaviour (e.g. definitions and comments on terms like *politeness*, *mitigation*, *request*).

In order to examine request information in these dictionaries we have considered Trosborg's suggested taxonomy (1995) of linguistic realisations and request acts modification, on the one hand, and Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's Maxim of Congruence (1991) on the other. Trosborg's typology of linguistic realisations (1995: 213) is best illustrated as follows:

TABLE 1. *Trosborg's suggested classification of requests realisation strategies.*

TYPE	STRATEGY	EXAMPLE
INDIRECT	1. Hint	<i>I have to be at the airport in half an hour</i>
CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT	2. Ability, willingness, permission	<i>Could you lend me your car?</i>
	3. Suggestory formulae	<i>Why don't you lend me your car?</i>
	4. Wishes	<i>I'd like to borrow...</i>
	5. Desires	<i>I need to borrow...</i>
	DIRECT	6. Obligation
	7. Performatives	<i>I would like to ask you to lend me your car</i>
	8. Imperatives, elliptical phrases	<i>Lend me your car!</i>

As denoted by the above table, Trosborg distinguishes between direct, indirect and conventionally indirect request forms on the basis of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness to directness scale, where the authors distinguish between on-record and off-record strategies. In this sense, indirect strategies or hints would correspond to Brown and Levinson's off-record strategies, which imply vagueness and opaque language use. Conventionally indirect request forms are those routinised expressions denoting polite behaviour, which may be either speaker (e.g. *I would like to borrow your pencil*) or hearer-oriented (e.g. *Would you book a room for me?*). A third subgroup of linguistic realisations is that of direct strategies including imperatives, elliptical phrases, performatives and expressions denoting obligation. This classification is also based on the work carried out by Austin (1962), Searle (1969; 1976), and later revisions provided by Brown and Levinson (1987), House and Kasper (1981) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). However, this taxonomy only accounts for one part of the request act, that of the head, since following Trosborg (1995) and Sifianou (1999), requests are made up of two main parts: the head and its peripheral elements. These last ones involve modification items which are distributed into two main groups, those referring to internal modification of the request head and those modifying the core externally, as follows (Trosborg, 1995: 211-219):

TABLE 2. *Trosborg's suggested typology of request acts modification.*

TYPE	SUBTYPE	EXAMPLE
EXTERNAL MODIFICATION	Disarmers	<i>I'm sorry to trouble you, but could you hand me the paper?</i>
INTERNAL MODIFICATION	Syntactic downgraders	You could do it for me, <i>couldn't you?</i>
	Lexical downgraders	Hand me the paper, <i>please</i>

Upgraders

I'd be *terribly* grateful if you could hand me the paper.

Besides, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1991) propose a maxim of congruence that focuses on predicting the use of speech acts on the part of the speaker, on the basis of the role attributed to him/her in the conversation. Following this idea the authors also present what they term Status Preserving Strategies which explain the global notion of their maxim. We believe that this maxim provides the sociocultural features underlying speech acts production that should be present in any pedagogical text, especially if it is aimed at foreign language learners who have no contact with the target language culture. The maxim of congruence states that a given speaker will employ request realisation according to his/her expected role in the conversation and on the basis of social distance between him/her and his/her interlocutor. Status preserving strategies defining this maxim of congruence are the following ones:

(1) Appear congruent, use the form of a congruent speech act where possible, (2) Mark your contribution linguistically, use mitigators, (3) Do not begin with a noncongruent contribution, (4) Avoid frequent noncongruent turns, (5) Be brief, (6) Use appropriate content (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991: 281).

3. Results

The presentation of pragmatic information in dictionaries may be carried out through different information means. One of them is the inclusion of such information in usage guides, appendices, introductions to dictionaries or explanatory charts. Pragmatic information may also appear in a more or less extended way after the corresponding entry in what is usually called a Usage or Language Notes. Another way to present information close to the entry

but not nested in its body is by means of an extra column indicating special pragmatic uses of one or several senses of a word(s). The extra column (a device which characterises Collins dictionaries) may also include information on the frequency of use of one lexical item according to the corpus that has been used to compile the dictionary. The use of corpus in dictionary making affects not only frequency information but also monitors the choice of examples and other kinds of information provided in dictionary entries such as collocations.

Regarding conventionally indirect strategies, we have particularly focused on information provided under the following realisations: *can*, *could*, *would*, *will*, *need to*, *have to*, *may*, *might* and also under the following terms: indirect, suggestion, wish, desire, permission, ability, willingness. Direct strategies have been surveyed on the basis of items like *have to*, *must*, *obligation*, *imperative*, *performative*, while indirect request realisations have been analysed considering entries such as hints and indirect. Apart from request heads realisations, we have also regarded request modification thereby accounting for those terms signalled by Trosborg (1995) and specified above in table 2, which we have searched within request realisations definitions (e.g. external modification devices) and as independent entities (e.g. lexical internal modification instances).

3.1 Request act information in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE)*.

Findings from this analysis show that few instances of request realisations definitions, labels or usage notes are related to that speech act behaviour. In fact, the only items that are associated with request making are those of *can*, *could*, *ask*, *mind (would you)*, *will*, *would*, and the relationship raised by their definitions does not go far beyond the idea that "they are used in making polite requests".

Example (1)

COULD: (used to be polite when you are asking someone of something) Could you pay this check into the bank for me tomorrow?

Similarly request modification is merely illustrated by the definition of two items: *please* and *just*. When examining description of more general concepts like those of request and politeness, we have not found further specific information in request acts behaviour, except for a very general definition denoting that "they are ways of asking somebody to do something politely", or "speaking in a way that is appropriate to the social situation" (LDCE, 1995: 1089, 1204).

In LDCE pragmatic information is presented in explanatory charts with natural examples from the Longman corpus network rather than in dictionary guides and word senses are arranged by order of frequency. A distinction is made between the frequency of spoken and written tokens, where the label *spoken* indicates a phrase that is typically used in speech, rather than in writing. Thus, the interjection *please* is more frequently used in spoken English than it is in written English (among 1000 most frequent words in spoken language and among the 2000 most frequent words in written language). This is also expressed in usage notes accompanying the items *can*, *request*, *ask*, *mind* or *need*.

3.2 Request act information in the *Oxford Dictionary of Current English (ODCE)*.

The *ODCE* also provides little information on request acts behaviour. Terms explicitly related to request formulations in this source are: *ask*, *would*, *will*, *can*, and *could*. As in *LDCE*, their definitions merely point to the idea that "they are used in making requests for information, help or permission".

Example (2)

CAN: (indicating requests for permission to do something) Can I read your newspaper?; (indicating requests for help) Can you help me with this box?

The information presented under the entry *request* refers to ways of asking politely for something and no clues on request acts are included. Regarding request modification the authors of this dictionary present a link between the particle *please* and request formulations, but no other instance on request modification neither external nor internal is made explicit. As it has been reported before, we have not only focused on dictionary entries, labels or usage notes in our analysis, but we have also considered appendices and study pages. This dictionary includes a study page with a list of polite expressions used in making requests. Despite the fact that five expressions are listed, no connection is drawn between these and requests making, or between them and other definitions presented in the dictionary. The information contained in this study page is a bit confusing since the headings are followed by a few phrases expressing politeness instead of the situation or the sense that the user may want to convey. Hence, they are designed for decoding but not so much for encoding information, while both processes are necessary in producing requests. Although the page contains different politeness devices, we are not informed about issues underlying request use. No mention is made about modification devices in this page. Furthermore, the entries for *politeness* or *please* do not cross-reference to the Study page. Usage notes on request are also very brief. One is placed under *ask* and makes a contrast between this verb and other performatives (i.e. *beg*, *entreat*, *implore* and *beseech*). The usage note under *can* only provides information for the sense of ability and to ask for and give permission, thus not relating the concept to request acts.

3.3 Request act information in the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (CCELD)*

Definitions of terms denoting a relationship with request realisation formulae in the *CCELD* correspond to the following items: *can*, *would*, *will* and *could*. Although these definitions point out the use of these particles in requests making, they do not specify the fact that there are other possible realisations for producing requests, thus no relationship among the above terms is provided.

Example (3)

WOULD: (you use would when you are politely asking someone to do something) Would you come here a moment please?

Definitions corresponding to the terms *request* and *politeness* also present a partial description and no clear relationship with the speech act behaviour, since they just refer to "asking someone to do something politely" or to "behaving in a socially correct way". With regards to modification, as in the case of the other two dictionaries analysed, the word *please* is the only one in which the definition relates to request making. However, we should also state that request instances in this dictionary definitions also include other sorts of modification, both external and internal, although they are not dealt with.

An interesting feature in *CCELD* is the use of frequency bands orienting the user on which words are most frequently used in the English language. Thus, we observe how the words *can*, *could*, *would* and *will* are used more frequently than *request* or *please* in general. An interesting improvement for this information would be to include the frequency of word senses. In the case of requests, for instance, we do not know if the use of *could* is more frequent when used to express ability or when used to make a polite request.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Taking our results into account, we may state that our hypothesis formulated on the basis of Nuccorini's study (1993) is not supported. According to this author, pragmatic information in dictionaries is wide enough for foreign language learners to foster their ability to use the target language appropriately. Nevertheless, we have seen that, as predicted by prior studies on the presentation of pragmatic issues in ELT materials, the analysed dictionaries show a decontextualised presentation of request acts and an arbitrary selection of particular structures used in their realisation.

Regarding the presentation of pragmatic information in general, we may say that if requests are used more frequently in the spoken language or in a different way to the written language, this should be reflected in the examples or explanations provided, especially if the dictionary is compiled from corpus data. However, this distinction is not clear in most dictionaries and the features of spoken discourse are seldom reflected in the information provided. One of the features of spoken requests relates to their peripheral elements (or modification devices). This involves reformulation, repetition or the use of downgraders and grounders in introducing the request act (see Trosborg's typology in table 2 above). Despite the fact that these modification devices accompanying the request head are very frequent in natural language use, they have been largely ignored in dictionaries. Thus, examples of real use as the following would reflect special features of spoken language, and a further explanation accompanying them either in definitions, usage notes or study charts would surely help learners become aware of effective and appropriate request acts production.

Example (4)

- (a) Mhm Mhm Can you just run through some of that
- (b) I suppose you could ... can you ... can you explain what
- (c) Session now for the moment erm can you describe the learning methods
- (d) So can you like can you give me an example of how it
- (e) Right... about why. Can you I mean d # I know it's hard to think back erm can # you think back though

Another suggestion regarding the presentation of pragmatic information in dictionaries relates to the macro-structural organisation of the information access routes. As explained in Nuccorini (1993: 215-218), the coding of pragmatic features in a dictionary may be implicit in the dictionary definitions and examples or in labels indicating degrees of formality (also as brief comments suggesting that saying something in a particular way would be polite or impolite). They may also be included separately in other parts of

the dictionary such as explicative notes at the end of the entry, explanatory charts or a more extended discussion in introductions or appendices discussing particular pragmatic features. Implicit information of pragmatic features is more difficult for the learner unless he/she is trained to interpret this kind of information. However, even if learners are not trained to deal with pragmatic information in dictionaries, the presentation of examples with such pragmatic content will always provide the dictionary user with a more reliable example of usage.

Presenting pragmatic information in places such as appendices, dictionary introduction or other front matter, implies a different kind of explanation. While the information in entries is usually brief and could be overlooked by the inexperienced user, extended information is easier to follow in a discursive form as is usually presented in the introductions or appendices of dictionaries, and sometimes in explanatory charts. The disadvantage of explicit information is that learners rarely access a dictionary in order to consult theoretical information: most of the time dictionaries are consulted in order to find word sense or equivalents in the user's L1 (Bejoint 1981). The user, thus, will not probably approach the dictionary in order to know the different strategies used to make requests but rather will come across the information when trying to verify that *can*, *can you*, *would*, *etc.* are the right words to convey a certain message. The fact that users (specially language learners) do not generally exploit all the information given in dictionaries is sometimes due to the lack of teacher training programs on dictionary skills which may lead to the lack of explicit instruction in the classroom. Two complementary solutions can be proposed for this problem: one is a call for explicit dictionary skills teaching, the other is the co-ordination of implicit and explicit pragmatic information by means of cross-references from one to the other.

Regarding requests information, the *OALD* provides a guide for pragmatics which includes an explanation on what kind of information should the user expect when the label pragmatics appears in a separate column next to the looked-up word. The comments in this section are not a complete explanation of one or several pragmatic features: they only provide

the reader with a general idea of what is meant by pragmatics. This is in marked contrast with, for instance, grammatical appendices which are meant to deal briefly but thoroughly with one grammatical issue. Thus, we would not expect to find an appendix on irregular verbs in which only a few examples are given, such information would appear in the front matter which acts as a map of the different information routes a user may follow.

If we pay attention to the Pragmatics section in the *CCELD* dictionary, we are told how language is used to give an order, persuade or advise but all the examples provided illustrate the use of lexical verbs (*suppose, advise, hate, ask*) and not the use of modals which is also a frequent language device for giving advice. In fact, the example under "suppose" makes also use of a modal as part of the request but the user is not informed on the frequency of modals as parts of requests. Likewise, this dictionary does not include information about the way modals are used differently according to the speaker-hearer relationship (one would select a different modal when talking to one's boss than when talking to a friend).

Finally, the *LDCE* opts for providing information inside the entries and in usage notes that follow them. This seems to be a more pedagogical approach or at least easier for the user to cope with. This source also includes certain frequency bands that state that items like those of *can you* or *could you* appear as the most frequently used. This is a striking finding since no further details are included and they would provide learners with additional clues to understand the use of such linguistic realisations illustrating requests behaviour in English.

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