A Comparative Study of Certainty and Conventional Indirectness: Evidence from British English and Peninsular Spanish

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This article presents the results of an exploratory empirical study into the perception of conventionally indirect requests in British English and Peninsular Spanish, given the high incidence of the pragmatic category over others in its encoding of politeness in both related and unrelated languages (cf. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). More specifically, the article focuses on the similarities and differences between Britons and Spaniards with regard to the speaker’s assumed expectations of compliance in choosing from the conventionally indirect spectrum. In other words, the focus is on how (un)certain the speaker was that the addressee would comply with the request when s/he chose a particular conventionally indirect request. The data for this study were collected via an open role play, post-performance interviews and questionnaires. The results obtained show that, in comparable situations, the Spaniards were generally more certain that the addressee would comply with the request than the Britons. It is argued that conventional indirectness appears to reflect different social meanings in English and Spanish and that such differences should be taken into account when analysing the realization patterns of pragmatic categories in language.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the results of an exploratory study into the perception of conventionally indirect requests, also known as structurally indirect requests, in British English and Peninsular Spanish. The study has been motivated by the common factor found in previous request studies, namely, the high incidence of and, in most cases, the preference for, conventional indirectness over other requestive strategies in related and unrelated languages (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989). Using native speaker intuition as a starting point, this study sets out, therefore, to investigate whether conventionally indirect requests mean the same to speakers of English and Spanish.
The first part of the paper provides a description of conventional indirectness, a discussion of the motivations underlying the use of the strategy and a description of the construct used in the study (2.1). The second part contains a discussion of the construct operationalization through an account of the methodology employed, namely, role plays, interviews and questionnaires (3). This is then followed by the analysis of the main findings of the interviews and questionnaire I (4). As a large amount of data were collected, this paper deals only with the main outcomes. The remaining findings (questionnaire II) will be discussed in future articles.

2. CONVENTIONAL INDIRECTNESS

Most studies of indirectness relate mainly to requests since they exhibit a rich variety of the phenomenon. Within the category of indirectness, conventional indirectness has been the most preferred requestive strategy in a number of (contrastive) speech act studies, including related and unrelated languages, such as English, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), Tamil, Tzetal (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), English and Greek (Sifianou 1992), Indonesian (Hassall 1999), and English and Spanish (García 1996; Márquez Reiter 1997, 2000; Placencia 1998; Vázquez Orta 1996) to mention a few.

2.1. Characterization of conventional indirectness

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) describe the conventionally indirect level as ‘strategies that realise the act by reference to contextual preconditions necessary for its performance, as conventionalised in the language’ (p. 47). These preconditions concern the hearer’s ability, wish, desire, and willingness to perform the act. Preconditions of ability are conventionally phrased with modals as in ‘can/could’, those of wishing with ‘would like/want/I’d rather’, those of willingness with ‘would you be willing’ (Searle 1975). Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) further add that ‘conventional indirectness is associated with ambiguity at the utterance’s level and characterised by pragmatic duality’ (p. 45). In other words, the range of ambiguity tends to be limited to two specific interpretations.

With respect to pragmatic ambiguity, Clark (1979) characterizes indirect speech acts by a number of properties, namely multiplicity of meanings, logical priority of meanings, rationality, conventionality, politeness and purposefulness. Of particular interest to this study is conventionality, defined by the co-existence of ‘conventions of means’ and ‘conventions of form’, also known as ‘conventions of language’ and ‘conventions of usage’ (Morgan 1978), respectively. ‘Conventions of means’ refers to the type of sentences which are standardly used as indirect requests and specifies a semantic device by which an indirect speech act can be performed. In order to request something from the addressee, one such convention in English and Spanish
is to question certain preconditions such as the hearer’s ability or willingness to perform the act. On the other hand, conventions of form are conventions about the wording of indirect speech acts. They describe the use of ‘can you’ as a conventionalized form of expressing a request in English as opposed to ‘are you able to’.2

On examining conventionally indirect requests in a variety of languages, namely, English, French, Hebrew, and Spanish, Blum-Kulka (1989) notes that all share the pragmatic properties of conventional indirectness. She argues, however, that the ‘universality’ of the strategy ‘should be regarded as a matter of shared pragmatic properties, rather than as a matter of cross-linguistic equivalence in form and usage’ (Blum-Kulka 1989: 37). In other words, while the above languages share pragmatic duality, a characteristic of conventionally indirect requests, they also show differences in the choice and frequency of conventions of means and form. Thus, while a convention of means, such as a suggestory formula (‘Why don’t you + VP’) or questioning the hearer’s willingness or ability to perform the act (‘Would you mind + VP’, and ‘Can/could you + VP’) might be possible across languages, a particular language might show a preference for one over the others. The author also points out that ‘the more standard, formulaic, the form of the request, the higher its relative level of illocutionary transparency’ (Blum-Kulka 1989: 58). Blum-Kulka further hypothesizes that the use of standard formulaic conventionally indirect requests will be limited to those cases where ‘relative directness’3 is socially acceptable since, in these cases, it is the formulaic nature of the request which activates its interpretation. Formulaic requests are understood as a sequence of words or other meaning elements which, rather than being subject to generation, appear to be automatic and highly idiomatic (Wray and Perkins 2000: 1), as in ‘Le/te importa/ría + VERB’ in Peninsular Spanish and ‘Would you mind + VERB’ in British English.

A possible explanation for the conventionally indirect preference can be found in politeness theory, since requests of this type are generally less face-threatening than direct ones and their interpretation is more certain than that of non-conventionally indirect requests or hints (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). The strategy amalgamates the speaker’s need to convey the requestive force and the need not to appear coercive, while ensuring his/her utterance will have the right interpretation and impact, thus leading to success (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

Clark (1996), following some earlier work on conventionality and indirect requests (Francik and Clark 1985; Gibbs 1986, 1994), claims that the strategy has evolved to deal with what he calls ‘generic obstacles’, since it allows speakers to raise plausible obstacles to the request compliance and, at the same time, frame the situation in order to overcome it. Gibbs (1994: 345) illustrates this point by drawing our attention to a conventionally indirect request such as ‘Do you have the time?’ uttered to a passerby. In this case, the main obstacle in the addressee’s compliance is either that s/he has no
access to the information because s/he is not wearing a watch or that s/he simply does not know what the time is. Since the requester does not know which of these possibilities may be right, s/he frames the actual request around them. Clark (1996) argues that the vaguer the obstacle the better. By vague obstacles, he alludes to those conventions, such as the use of ‘Can/could you’ to question the hearer’s ability to perform the act, which have become standard devices for framing requestive situations.

Given Blum-Kulka’s (1989) observations and bearing in mind the results of studies into linguistic behaviour between family and friends (cf. Ervin-Tripp 1976; Wolfson 1988; Blum-Kulka 1997), where directness levels seem to be regarded as appropriate, it seems safe to assume that directness is employed when, thanks to the interlocutors’ expectations of compliance, there is no fear of loss of face. In the same vein, and taking into account Blum-Kulka’s (1989) suggestion that standard, formulaic conventionally indirect requests will be employed when ‘relative directness’ is considered to be appropriate, it could be argued that different levels of speaker certainty in the likelihood of request compliance will influence his/her linguistic choices. Thus the more certain the speaker is that his/her request will be granted, the more likely s/he will be to employ an illocutionary transparent request, that is, an automatic highly idiomatic request which makes use of the conventions of form in that language. Likewise, the less certain the speaker is that his/her request will be granted, the more likely it is that s/he will either mitigate an illocutionary transparent request or employ an illocutionary opaque request, that is, a request which is subject to generation and does not make use of a conventionalized form to express an indirect request. In other words, when the speaker does not estimate any potential face risk in requesting something from the addressee owing to the speaker’s expectations of compliance and, in those cases where ‘relative directness’ is socially appropriate, s/he will be likely to realize the request by means of a ‘relatively direct’ request (i.e. a formulaic conventionally indirect request). This in turn, will guarantee its speedy interpretation by the hearer as a request instead of as a question for information. Likewise, we would expect that when the speaker is unsure as to the request compliance and hence might deem the request as potentially face-threatening, s/he will be more likely to utter a mitigated formulaic request or a non-formulaic (mitigated) request.

The question addressed in this study is: do requests which are pragmatically equivalent in terms of their indirectness give the same degree of certainty in the likelihood of hearer compliance in English and Spanish? In other words, what are the assumed expectations of compliance by the speaker in choosing from the conventionally indirect spectrum?

A possible avenue for studying the speaker’s commitment to the belief in the likelihood of the hearer complying with the request would be an analysis of the use of modal expressions since they allow speakers to qualify their commitment to what they say. Turnbull and Saxton (1997) claim that a speaker uttering ‘I must ask you to move your car’ expresses his/her total
commitment to the necessity of the ‘state of affairs’. Likewise, a speaker who utters ‘Would you move your car?’ is not just concerned about whether his/her hearer is willing to comply with the request or not, s/he is also committing him/herself to the probability, and maybe desirability, that the hearer will do so. Similarly, an utterance such as ‘Can/could you move your car?’ not only entails a concern about the hearer’s ability to do so but shows the speaker is committed to the possibility of the state of affairs. Thus, Turnbull and Saxton (1997) make a distinction between ‘would’ and ‘can/could’; it would appear that they regard expectation of compliance as more likely following the former than the latter. They claim (1997: 148–9) that modals indicating necessity (must, have got to, need to) represent the strongest claim about the likelihood of the states of affairs occurring. Modals such as ‘will, would, should’ encode an intermediate degree of likelihood, that is to say, they indicate that the state of affairs is likely to occur, the requested event is probable. Finally, modals like ‘can, could, might, may’ are the weakest claims about the likelihood of occurrence of the requested state of affairs; they suggest that the circumstances do not prevent the event from occurring, the event is possible.

It is difficult to see how the likelihood scale proposed by Turnbull and Saxton would differentiate between ‘could’ and ‘would’ in the examples given above. The notion of ability in English can introduce the implication of willingness (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973). But even if there were a one-to-one relationship between modality and commitment to the likelihood of compliance, modality is just one element of the request: the actual wording chosen by the speaker, as well as other factors such as prosodic features, may also have an effect on it.4

To sum up, conventional indirectness appears to be the most preferred request strategy across languages in that it is generally seen as less face-threatening than direct requests and its use almost certainly guarantees the right hearer interpretation. What is more, the strategy is constituted by different lexical phrases which show differences in terms of their illocutionary transparency. The research reported below contributes further to the study of conventional indirectness in as much as it explores the possible relationship between speakers’ perceptions of request compliance and their choice of strategy.

2.2. Research questions

This study addresses several questions. First, do requests which are pragmatically equivalent reflect the same degree of speaker certainty in the likelihood of hearer compliance in English and Spanish? One way of exploring this would be to access the speaker’s mind since this is, in fact, a mentalist claim. Since accessing the speaker’s mind directly is not possible, a multi-angled data collection procedure, including self-reports on the speaker’s part, was used.
Secondly, is there a relationship between the degrees of certainty expressed by the informants and the use or non-use of standard conventionally indirect requests? More specifically, do higher expectations of request compliance lead speakers to employ formulaic requests rather than non-formulaic ones?

Thirdly, is there a relationship between certainty levels and mitigation? In other words, do requestors’ lower perceptions of request compliance by their requestees lead them to internally mitigate their requests?

3. THE STUDY

A corpus of English and Spanish conventionally indirect requests uttered in comparable social contexts was generated. In view of the lack of existing and comparable ‘natural’ corpora in which conventionally indirect requests are uttered in similar social contexts both in English and Spanish, and where there is subsequently a clear assessment of the social variables (e.g. social distance, social power, imposition, age, occupation, dialect) at play in those social contexts, an open role play was employed. In this kind of role play, the addressee knows that some interaction will take place but does not know, in advance, the speaker’s communicative goal. Comparative studies of research methods in inter-language and cross-cultural pragmatics, in particular comparisons of discourse completion tests (DCT) and role plays (cf. Rintell and Mitchell 1989; Turnbull 1997; Félix-Brasdefer 2003), have shown that DCTs generate non-representative and simplified data compared to role plays, and that data elicited by means of a DCT represent a subset of the strategies found in open role play data (i.e. Félix-Brasdefer 2003). Thus, the use of a role play will, on the one hand, allow the participants to embed their requests in a context where the turn-taking mechanism is in full operation (cf. Kasper and Dahl 1991) and where goals are negotiated while enabling the researcher to compare the requests in controlled contexts; and, on the other hand, it will yield requests which are not necessarily the result of metapragmatic judgements (cf. Golato 2003) but which are appropriate to the situation and goal where they were produced (cf. Wolfson 1976).

3.1. Sample

The open role play was constructed in English and Spanish and performed by native speakers of British English and Peninsular Spanish studying at the University of Surrey. The students were between 18 and 24 years of age. There were 23 Spaniards from Barcelona (14 females and 5 males) on a student exchange programme and 32 Britons from Surrey (19 females and 12 males). Despite the fact that the Barcelona participants were bilingual in Spanish and Catalan, their first language was Spanish. The Spaniards took part in the experiment immediately after their arrival in the UK. To ensure their collaboration and seriousness of response, all the informants were paid.
3.2. Instruments

The main data set was collected via an open role play, post-performance interviews, and a questionnaire. The open role play comprised six situations. In all six situations the social distance between the interlocutors was kept constant across the two cultures since this variable has been shown to correlate negatively with indirectness in English and Spanish requests (Márquez Reiter 2000), that is to say, the less familiar the interlocutors are with each other the more likely it is that their requests will be indirect. Social distance was understood to represent the degree of familiarity between the participants, that is, how well—though not necessarily how long—they have known each other. We have considered ‘friends’ as people who know each other well, ‘acquaintances’ as people who do not know each other well and ‘strangers’ as people who are unacquainted with each other. ‘Acquaintances’ and ‘strangers’ have been regarded as distant, unfamiliar relationships and we thus expected the participants to realize their requests indirectly in these situations. Social power and the ranking of the imposition\(^6\) were alternated in such a way that, as shown in Table 1, conventionally indirect requests in all possible combinations of social power and ranking of imposition were generated. See Appendix A for a description of the role play situations and for an illustrative example of the tasks given to the subjects in respect to their role play performance.

The open role play situations had originally been designed to study the realizations of requests and apologies in English and Spanish and a large amount of data were collected in this way (Márquez Reiter 2000). Thus, there was a qualitative assessment that the instrument is appropriate for this purpose and that it elicits requests. Notwithstanding, a different group of English and Spanish native speakers, similar to the actual population of this study, were asked to check not only the instructions, and the naturalness of the situations, but also the values assigned to the independent social variables: social distance, social power, and ranking of imposition. The results of their assessment confirmed the comparability of the role play situations.

### Table 1: Combination of social variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Social distance</th>
<th>Social power</th>
<th>Ranking of imposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Borrow book</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S &lt; H</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cover telephone calls</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S &gt; H</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Help with moving</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S = H</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Swap bus seats</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S = H</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Ask for pay advance</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S &lt; H</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Borrow laptop</td>
<td>+SD</td>
<td>S &gt; H</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S: speaker, H: hearer
as well as the values assigned to the independent variables. See Appendix B for the questionnaire administered to this effect and the results obtained for social distance, where both groups of respondents showed agreement in their assessment of this variable in the given scenarios. It will be recalled that ‘acquaintances’ and ‘strangers’ are regarded as unfamiliar relationships in this study and that, given the reported negative correlation between social distance and indirectness in English and Spanish requests, we expected the role play participants to realize their requests indirectly in the role play situations where participants are considered to be ‘acquaintances’ and/or ‘strangers’.

Following the role plays, post-performance interviews were carried out and the questionnaire administered.

The first questionnaire reproduced the six situations of the role play. Each situation was followed by the conventionally indirect head acts elicited in the role play, which the informants had to rate. External modifications, though part and parcel of the speech act, were not included in the questionnaire as our aim was to focus on the most preferred pragmatic category for realizing head acts as reported in (un)-related languages. It should be noted, however, that, during the post-performance interviews, the informants viewed the speech event in which they had participated and focused on the conventionally indirect head act. For an example of the situations, see Appendix C, where, owing to space constraints, only one situation in one of the languages is included. It should be noted, however, that both the English and Spanish informants had to rate the requests yielded in their respective languages by the role play in all six situations and not just one.

The second questionnaire (see Appendix D) was of the open-ended type and was based on the answers given during the post-performance interviews. The informants reported on their general experience of the factors that may influence request compliance, on the strategies employed in the role play situations and on their personality type, since this may affect their degree of certainty. Finally, they provided some background information: age, sex, place of birth, place of permanent abode, number of years living at that abode. It should be noted that this questionnaire is ancillary to the main data set (post-performance interviews and questionnaire I). Although it does not form part of the main findings, it was, nonetheless, included so as to provide an overall picture of the exploratory study.

3.3. Data collection procedure

Following the assessment of the role play situations (see section 3.2), yet another group of native speakers with similar characteristics to the actual population of this study participated in a piloting of the role plays, and also completed the questionnaire. The results of the pilot explored the possibility of video recording with the informants in the recording room. During the pilot, an informant walked across the room while interacting and one of the
cameras failed to record his movements. As a result, one of the CCTV cameras was re-arranged to enable the recording of this kind of movement.

A couple of days later, after the piloting of the instruments, 32 Britons and 23 Spaniards (see section 3.1) participated in the role plays and interviews, which were recorded in an observation recording suite equipped with a two-way mirror and CCTV. Four informants were recruited per set of role plays (a total of six situations). The first pair role played the first three situations, alternating the roles of requester and requestee and the second pair role played the last three situations following the same pattern as before. The aim was to avoid possible cumulative effects of the situations and to prevent the informants from getting too comfortable in their roles and from developing a natural personal relationship.

Although the informants knew in advance that their interaction would be video recorded, the cameras were inconspicuously placed. The technician who recorded the interaction was behind the mirror and could not be seen by the informants, the researcher was in the same room as the informants in order to hand them the cards with the role play situations. The informants were asked to stand in the middle of the room during their interaction, while the researcher stood in a non-obstructive corner. The role plays took an average of 8 minutes per couple. As expected, the combination of independent variables yielded only conventionally indirect requests in all the situations of the role play by all the informants.

Immediately after the completion of the role plays, the interviews were carried out. During the interviews, each pair of informants viewed the video recording of their role play performance and responded to questions about the request choices they had made. More specifically, the requestor was asked to comment on how certain s/he was, at the moment of realizing the conventionally indirect head act, that the requestee would comply, to express his/her certainty levels in terms of percentages, and to give reasons for his/her estimates. The interviews took an average of 6 minutes, were conducted in Spanish for the Spanish informants and in English for the British informants and were also video recorded.

Two weeks later, after the questionnaires had been constructed on the basis of the data generated by the role plays and the interviews, the same informants, 32 Britons and 23 Spaniards, returned to complete the questionnaires. In questionnaire I, they were asked to assess the degree of certainty of compliance the requestor had in uttering each head act by writing next to it a figure from 0 to 100 per cent. The completion of the questionnaires took an average of 25 minutes.

3.4. Data analysis procedures

The requests generated by the role play, more specifically the head acts, were first analysed according to their linguistic encoding. That is to say, a linguistic description of the lexical phrases of the conventionally indirect
strategy employed by the informants in English and Spanish was provided. The linguistic realization of the strategy was then related to the qualitative analysis of the interviews where, it will be recalled, the informants were asked to assess the degree of certainty of compliance in uttering a conventionally indirect request realized with a particular lexical phrase.

Following the above, a statistical analysis of the responses to questionnaire I was provided (see Appendix C). In this questionnaire, the respondents were asked to assess the degree of certainty of compliance based on the requests elicited in all the role play interactions.

4. THE FINDINGS

In the first part of this section, we shall discuss the results of each research question (see section 2.2).

4.1. Certainty levels in English and Spanish conventionally indirect requests

Our first question is whether requests which are pragmatically equivalent reflect the same degree of certainty in the likelihood of hearer compliance in English and Spanish. For this purpose a general linear model (analysis of variance) was used to assess the relationship between the degree of certainty expressed in questionnaire I and the realization of requests.

In the analysis, $\eta^2$ was calculated and reported, in addition to significance values, as a measure of the effect size of the independent variables on the certainty of compliance. It is increasingly important that effect size, or practical significance, is reported alongside significance ($p$) values, as relying on $p$-values alone can result in researchers making unsound claims (Kirk 1996; Wilkinson 1999). Our concern is to ensure that sound claims are made only on significant differences that genuinely reflect differences in pragmatic performance.

The analysis of variance shows a significant difference between the English and Spanish informants, as can be seen in Table 2. The difference in certainty levels between both groups of informants is significant at $p < .01$ despite $\eta^2$ for language being $.013$; that is to say, accounting for 1.3 per cent of the variance in expressed certainty. More interestingly, the results also show that $\eta^2$ for situation is $.105$; in other words, the situation accounts for almost 11 per cent of the variation in certainty. This point will be discussed below.

The statistical significant difference found between the certainty levels of both languages ($p < .01$) is supported by the responses given by both groups of informants during the post-performance interviews. It will be recalled that, with the exception of situations 2 and 5, where both groups of informants expressed similar levels of certainty, the Spanish informants were generally more certain that their requests would be granted throughout the situations of the role play.
Bearing in mind the previously discussed differences in certainty levels and $\eta^2$ for situation (10.5 per cent, see Table 2), we looked at mean certainty levels according to the language (English or Spanish) and the situation (1–6). Cohen’s D is reported as a measure of the practical significance of the differences between means, so that the effect size of the independent variable can be assessed separately from $p$-values. Table 3 shows the mean certainty ratings per situation and language.

As can be seen from Table 3, the most salient differences between the two groups of informants were found in situations 1 (borrow book from university lecturer), 3 (ask neighbour for help moving things from flat with his/her car), 4 (ask bus passenger to swap seats) and 6 (borrow laptop from work colleague). Further support for these statistical differences can be found in the responses given by the informants during the interviews.

With the exception of situation 5, where the English show slightly higher levels of certainty (5.46 against 5.24), Spanish mean certainty ratings are higher than those of the English across the situations. With respect to the effect size of the reported mean certainty ratings between the languages,
the results under Cohen’s D in Table 3 show that situations 3 and 5 have moderate effects on certainty, and situation four also has a moderate effect that is worth considering. Cohen (1988: 19–23) argues that ‘D’ can be understood as the amount of ‘non-overlap’ with another variable (language background). In this case, .38 indicates approximately 27 per cent non-overlap between languages, .45 approximately 30 per cent non-overlap, and .59 approximately 38 per cent non-overlap. These seemingly small but significant differences in means do, therefore, conceal a practical difference in the way Spanish speakers respond differently to the English speakers in these three situations. In the case of Table 3, it is clear that a small difference between the groups may in fact hide a larger effect of the variables on certainty.

The analysis of the actual language employed by both groups of informants shows that English conventionally indirect head acts in all six situations were characterized by the use of the conditional, embedded conditional sentences, embedded grounders or reasons, internal modifying devices as well as head acts of the speaker-orientated type, all of which have a softening effect on the ‘imposition’ on the addressee. This is illustrated in bold below in the extracts from the corpus. The extracts are reproduced in their entirety since, despite the fact that our aim is to examine the relationship between the most preferred pragmatic category for realizing head acts and expectations of compliance, during the interviews the informants viewed the whole role play in which they had participated, although they focused on the head act. Thus the role plays are included to provide an overall picture of the data.

**English extracts**

*Extract 1—Situation 1 (borrow book)*

1 A: ooh
2 B: hi!
3 A: Just coming to see you actually/ and...about my assignment because err::: just tried to get the book out of the library and/ it’s /shut/
4 B: /right/
5 A: and I need to get it done
6 B: err /is this going to take long I’m really in a rush at the moment
7 A: umm er... well I *was just wondering if you had the book / if I could borrow it?*
8 B: umm...
9 A: I’ll bring it back as soon as/ bring the assignment back
10 B: It’s in my office at the minute but err::: // I’ve just locked it and I’ve got a class to teach in five minutes could you:::
11 A: can I meet you at the end of the class then? / or /
12 B: / yeah/ could you come back in an hour? Would that be okay?
Extract 2—Situation 2 (swap bus seats)

1 A: Excuse me I’ve got a child with me I was wondering would it be possible if we could sit in these two seats and you could move to another place?
2 B: Umm /yep certainly I’ll just get up and move round to where there’s another space
3 A: okay

Extract 3—Situation 6 (borrow laptop computer)

1 B: is there any chance today /it err it might be possible for me to use your laptop / to do some work?
2 A: umm::: how long will you need it for?
3 B: umm::: probably about /half an hour?
4 A: okay…well I do have a lot of work to do myself but:::
5 B: I could stay and I do it in /in my lunch hour maybe…
6 A: okay
7 B: if when you’re at lunch then //could use it then /
8 A: /yeah /that’s a good idea
9 B: is that okay?
10 A: yeah /no problem

Spanish conventionally indirect requests were a lot less tentative and were generally, with the exception of situation 5, realized in the present indicative or in the conditional. They were very rarely mitigated, lacked any embedded grounders and were of the hearer-orientated type, hence throwing the ‘burden’ on the addressee, as illustrated by the extracts below from the corpus.

Spanish extracts

Extract 4—Situation 2 (answer telephone calls)

1 A: mira Pepe /que::: voy a::: salir un momento /y::: /nada /para ver si / ¿puedes atender el teléfono de mientras que me voy?/ [‘Can you answer the phone for me?’] ¿vale?
2 B: pero bueno /¿qué tengo que hacer?
3 A: tú::: /cuando::: suene el teléfono /pilla:::s pillas el teléfono /coges nota /y si quieren dejar un recado /se lo coges /para que después le pasemos la nota al jefe de si::: hay algún recado o algo
4 B: ¿y si preguntan por ti?
5 A: si preguntan por mí /les dices que estoy en el cuarto de baño/¿vale?
6 B: vale
7 A: a ver si no:::
8 B: pero::: no tardes mucho que yo tengo aquí::: /un montón de trabajo acumulado y luego me voy a comer el marrón con el /con el otro / también
9 A: vale vale /tú no te preocupes que yo estoy dentro de cinco minutos aquí
10 B: bueno /date prisa tío

Extract 5—Situation 3 (help with moving)
1 A: hola perdona /tú vives aquí al lado?/ ¿no?
2 B: sí sí yo vivo aquí
3 A: e:::h /mira /es que resulta que /que tengo que /que hacer una mudanza /tengo que llevar unas cosas a otra casa y:::// no tengo coche y /la verdad es que toda la gente que conozco con coche se me ha ido de vacaciones /o sea /que es que estoy apuradísima /¿te importaría? /¿te importaría ayudarme con la mudanza? ['Would you mind helping me move?']
4 B: Bueno /yo te ayudo /sí
5 A: ¿sí?
6 B: Sí
7 A: ¿tú tienes coche verdad? /porque /te he visto/
8 B: sí sí/ lo t:::e lo tengo aquí en la esquina pero /vamos/
9 A: /¿sí?/ no es mucho /o sea que /tampoco:::
10 B: m::: /vente no te preocupes yo te ayudo
11 A: ¿seguro?/ ay /muchísimas gracias

Extract 6—Situation 4 (swap bus seats)
1 A: e:::h /perdone /e:::h /¿no le importa sentarse /en otro lado ?! para yo poder sentarme con el niño // en el mismo asiento? ['Do you mind sitting somewhere else?']
2 B: no /no me importa /siéntese
3 A: ah /vale muchas gracias

With the exception of situations 2 (cover phone calls) and 5 (ask for pay advance), where both groups of informants showed similar levels of certainty, overall the Spanish informants expressed, during the post-performance interviews, higher levels of certainty than their British counterparts. On the one hand, the difference in the degree of certainty between the Britons and the Spaniards could be attributed to the presence of fewer tentative conventionally indirect head acts in Spanish than in English. On the other hand, it could be argued, as we do here, that their (un)tentative realization is related to cultural differences in the assumed
expectations of compliance by the speaker, and that their realization as such is a reflection of those cultural expectations. This point will be discussed in greater detail below.

When interviewed, the Spanish informants tended to attribute their certainty levels to their relationship with the interlocutor despite the fact that there was a social distance difference between the participants in all the situations. Thus, in situation 1 (borrow book from university lecturer) the Spanish informants explained that university lecturers are there to help students and that, at least in Spain, they have no problems whatsoever in facilitating materials to students; in fact they are generally ‘very friendly’ despite social distance. The Britons, however, tended to focus on the actual language used and explained that, if they asked nicely, with the necessary level of formality and politeness, they might have more of a chance. They also claimed that the lecturer might need the book him/herself and that it might not be the right moment to approach him/her since s/he could be going into a lesson or a meeting. Hence, the British answers focused on the actual ‘imposition’ of the request as well as on the language.

A similar pattern was found in the answers to questionnaire II (Appendix D). While the majority of the Spanish informants singled out familiarity with the interlocutor as one of the most important influencing factors on the degree of certainty, the British informants concentrated their answers on what they referred to as the formal, social and functional aspects of the actual language employed.

In situation 3, for example (speaker asks a neighbour s/he does not know well to help him/her to move some things out of the flat with his/her car), the Britons showed much lower levels of certainty than the Spaniards despite the fact that both groups of informants set the social distance at a similar level. The British informants expressed the view that they did not know the neighbour well and thus did not know how s/he was going to react; they also claimed that they were asking for quite a big favour of him/her. The Spanish informants, on the other hand, were a lot more certain than the British, although they also explained that they did not know the neighbour well and hence did not know how s/he was going to react. This is evidenced by the pre-request in extract 5: ‘Hola, perdona, tú vives aquí al lado, no?’ functioning as a possible form of small talk (cf. Coupland 2000) by which the speaker lets the addressee know that s/he is aware that the addressee lives in the same neighbourhood as the speaker. This is further reinforced by the choice of the deitic ‘aquí’ reflecting commonality (cf. Weissenborn and Klein 1982). Despite describing the relationship between the interlocutors as lacking confianza (reciprocal trust in a close relationship), they claimed neighbours would have a compromiso de ayudar (social duty to help) since they live in the same community and, at the end of the day, it is basic compañeroismo (solidarity). Thus, it would appear that here too their certainty level was based on their cultural expectations. According to the Spaniards,
such favours are expected from neighbours since *al fin y al cabo te los cruzas todos los días* (at the end of the day you bump into them every day). It has been suggested that, whilst most Britons might avoid ‘unnecessary’ contact with people they do not know well, such as their neighbours, because of their territorial needs for privacy and independence or negative politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), most Spaniards will favour such contact and would be expected to show *simpatía*. The word *simpatía* has no equivalent in English but refers to a permanent and desirable personal quality by which an individual is regarded as likeable, good fun to be with and even co-operative.9

In situation 6 (speaker asks a new trainee at work for the loan of his/her laptop computer), Spanish informants once again expressed higher degrees of certainty than their British counterparts. When asked to explain their certainty levels, both groups of informants claimed that the trainee may not wish to lend his/her computer since some people tend to be very apprehensive about lending their belongings. Moreover, they explained that laptop computers are usually rather pricey. Whereas the majority of Britons were fairly certain about the request compliance and justified their certainty levels on the asymmetrical relationship between the participants, claiming that they would expect a work inferior to oblige; the Spaniards expressed a different explanation for their certainty levels. According to them, a new employee wants to gain a good reputation, s/he does not wish to be seen as someone who does not like lending her/his things. They added that the trainee will try to be *simpática* and not cold. Thus, their explanations seem once again to focus on the social relationship with their interlocutor and others in their community and go back to desirable social values such as *compañerismo* and *simpatía*, as reported above. Such values have been associated with positive politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) or the need for interdependence.

In situations 2 (speaker asks a work colleague to answer the phone for him/her) and 4 (speaker asks bus passenger to swap seats with him/her), both groups of informants expressed high expectations of compliance with the Spaniards being slightly more certain than the Britons. In situation 2, the request is seen as almost non-imposing and the addressee is expected to co-operate in both cultures. With respect to situation 4, the British informants explained that they had a child in their arms and that, if they ask politely, they would expect the addressee to comply. The Spanish informants, however, justified their expectations of compliance by stating most ‘educated’10 people would move seats when asked ‘politely’ to do so. This ‘politeness’ is mainly conveyed in extract 4 by the use of a somewhat formal attention-getter in Peninsular Spanish, namely ‘Perdone’ instead of ‘Mire, Oiga, Hola’ (cf. Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro 1999) and the use of *usted* vs. the more common *tú* in this variety of Spanish (cf. Marín Marcos 1972; Ardila 2003). Very few of them mentioned the presence of the child as a possible appeasement.
In situation 5 (speaker asks for a pay advance), both the English and the Spanish expressed their uncertainty, since they claimed that they did not know the addressee well and the speaker had a bad reputation for borrowing money and for not returning it on time. This situation produced the most tentative requests in Spanish. As tentative as the Spanish requests were, mainly realized in the imperfect, their tentativeness did not surpass those of the British, who employed only impersonally-orientated head acts in this situation, thus neutralizing the agent and mitigating its impact on the addressee. This is illustrated in bold below in the extracts from the corpus:

Extract 7—Situation 5 (pay advance)

1 B: come in
2 A: hi /umm... *I was just wondering if it would be possible to have an advance on my salary?*
3 B: can I ask why?
4 A: umm /well /I’ve overspent slightly this month and don’t have any money left to pay any of my bills and I’ve it really is quite urgent
5 B: okay umm I’m not entirely sure /I’ll have to /speak to /somebody in personnel //about that/
6 A: /right /
7 B: when were you hoping to?
8 A: as soon as possible
9 B: /right /if I can get on the phone to personnel today and you can give me a number where I can contact you then I’ll /do that and contact you later /is that okay?/
10 A: /excellent /thank you very much
11 B: alright

Extract 8—Situation 5 (pay advance)

1 B: Excuse me John //*Could the next payment be moved forward and I could get it a bit sooner?*// I only /I’ve got some bills to pay and that I’m a little bit short for cash at the moment
2 A: Right umm
3 B: Is there any possibility that you could do that?
4 A: is it /do you really need it that urgently?
5 B: yeah /mean umm I’m /at the max on my overdraft at the moment I’m having trouble and err I can’t borrow off anyone else is it okay if I could get an advance
6 A: Well/ normally I wouldn’t do this but umm //as long as it doesn’t happen again
7 B: yeah I’ll make sure I’ll pay it back as soon /as/
8 A: /is/ there any other way you can get the money?
9 B: no I don’t think so /I mean I’ve tried all my friends and none of them will lend me any money so::: //
Extract 9—Situation 5 (pay advance)

1 A: m::: //hola /buenas tardes //mire /soy la chica que trabaja //en el departamento de aquí al lado y::: /quería preguntarl:::e /s:::í /porque /estoy teniendo u:::n /pequeño /u:::n /pequeño problema //que /necesito pagar u:::n /par de recibos //y... me gustaría saber si usted podía darme u:::n anticipo ['I would like to know if you could give me an advance on my salary?'] //y me lo descunta ya /del sueldo del mes que viene
2 B: ¿un recibo de qué? /d:::e casa
3 A: /d:::e /casa/
4 B: privado/
5 A: sí /privado
6 B: pues /no sé /eso debería yo hablarlo con //mi superior
7 A: sí ?? y / tardaría mucho /e:::n darme la respuesta /porque es /un poquitín urgente
8 B: hombre ?? si es:::o /e:::l superior llega esta tarde /puedo hablar con él en ese momento /y después /ir a su departamento y decírselo
9 A: pues sí
10 B: y confirmárselo
11 A: sí es tan amable
12 B: ¿le parece bien?
13 A: sí /por favor /sí es tan amable
14 B: vale
15 A: muchas gracias
16 B: perfecto
17 A: hasta luego

Extract 10—Situation 5 (pay advance)

1 A: hola /buenos días //m:::
2 B: //buenos días/
3 A: es que tengo un problema /y es que tengo que pagar una factura antes de esta semana /porque si no me quedo sin agua /sin luz /y sin teléfono // era para // saber si podía darme un anticipo ///['I came to see if you could give me an advance on my salary?'] aunque ya sé que la última vez me dijo que / que sería la última vez /pero es que / es muy importante / y no puedo pedírselo a nadie más
4 B: bueno / pase y siéntese / y y:::a / veremos lo que se puede hacer
5 A: gracias
In the case of the English requests, the actual language employed throughout the situations of the role play could be taken as an indication that the degree of certainty as such may not be reflected by the specific choice of expression. For example, the tentativeness expressed in situation 5, where both groups of informants were least certain of compliance, is not that different from the tentativeness expressed in other situations where the degree of certainty was much higher [compare extracts 1–3 with extracts 7 and 8]. The same, however, cannot be said about the Spanish requests since, as reported above, the Spanish informants expressed very low expectations of compliance in situation 5, and it is precisely this situation which yielded the most tentative requests in Spanish [compare extracts 4–6 with extracts 9 and 10]. Situation 5 presents the highest use of the imperfect so far, with more than half of the Spanish requests realized in the imperfect.

The findings so far appear to indicate that, at least for the Spaniards, there is a relationship between expectations of compliance and the actual language employed in the realization of conventionally indirect requests. It would also seem that the expectation of compliance derives from what the informants deem are the rights and obligations of a given role relationship. These rights and obligations show a clear orientation by the Spaniards towards interdependence and/or positive politeness.

For the British informants, on the other hand, the reported lack of link between expectation of compliance and tentative conventionally indirect requests, would seem to suggest that linguistic tentativeness is primarily aimed at ‘managing’ the relationship with the interlocutor. Hence, the expectations of compliance reported by them appear to be based not only on their beliefs about whether they have the right to ask and whether the addressee has got the obligation to comply, but also on the actual ‘tactfulness’ in making the request. The expected behaviour of the British informants, compared to that of their Spanish counterparts, reflects more of an orientation towards independence or negative politeness.

### 4.2. Certainty levels and formulaic requests

Our second research question was to explore what relationship, if any, exists between degrees of certainty and formulaic conventionally indirect requests.

It will be recalled that formulaic requests are highly idiomatic, illocutionarily transparent and are not subject to generation (see section 2.1). In order to establish whether the conventionally indirect head acts generated by the role play and illustrated in the extracts above were formulaic or not native speakers’ intuitions were employed. These intuitions were checked with a group of native speakers of British English and Peninsular Spanish, respectively. Their assessment confirmed our intuitions regarding the relative formulaicity of the requests.
A close analysis of the language employed throughout the situations in English and Spanish shows that there is no one-to-one relationship between modality and assumed expectations of compliance in the terms of Turnbull and Saxton (1997) discussed in section 2. Thus, we find similar levels of expectation of compliance with requests realized in the indicative and in the conditional in one situation, and higher and/or lower levels of expectation of compliance with requests realized in the conditional in a different situation. However there does appear to be a relationship between degrees of certainty and the use of formulaic requests irrespective of modality, as shown in Table 4.

The effect is significant, at \( p < .01 \). That is to say, the informants reported more certainty of compliance when realizing formulaic requests than when realizing non-formulaic ones. In other words, the more certain the informants were that the addressee would comply with the request, the more illocutionarily transparent the request was, or in Blum-Kulka’s words, the more ‘relatively direct’ the request was. Spanish formulaic requests are illustrated by extracts 4, 5, and 6 and non-formulaic ones in extracts 9 and 10.

### 4.3. Certainty levels and internal modifications

Our third research question was to explore whether requestors’ lower perceptions of request compliance by their requestees lead them to internally mitigate their requests.

Some of the most common internal modifications found in the corpus were the use of diminutives (poquito, a little), adverbs of time (‘for a while’) and hedges (‘you know’). The main purpose of (Spanish) diminutives is to convey the idea of ‘small’ or ‘little’. Their use affects the force of the utterance by downgrading it. It should be noted that diminutives do not necessarily minimize the imposition of the request but often soften the force of the utterance; to the native ear they are a sign of ‘friendliness’. On the

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**Table 4: The effect of English and Spanish formulaic requests on degree of certainty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III sum of squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>( \eta^2 )</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Corrected model</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>359.459</td>
<td>76.774</td>
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<td>.034</td>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>91941.156</td>
<td>19636.839</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.900</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formulaic requests</td>
<td>359.459</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>359.459</td>
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<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>10235.016</td>
<td>2186</td>
<td>4.682</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corrected total</td>
<td>10594.475</td>
<td>2187</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\( a \) R squared \( .034 \) (adjusted R squared \( .033 \))

---

A close analysis of the language employed throughout the situations in English and Spanish shows that there is no one-to-one relationship between modality and assumed expectations of compliance in the terms of Turnbull and Saxton (1997) discussed in section 2. Thus, we find similar levels of expectation of compliance with requests realized in the indicative and in the conditional in one situation, and higher and/or lower levels of expectation of compliance with requests realized in the conditional in a different situation. However there does appear to be a relationship between degrees of certainty and the use of formulaic requests irrespective of modality, as shown in Table 4.

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**CERTAINTY AND CONVENTIONAL INDIRECTNESS**

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other hand, adverbs of time (‘for a while’) have the function of minimizing
the imposition; whilst hedges (‘you know’) help speakers avoid a precise
propositional specification and invite the addressee to participate in the
conversation, if only metaphorically.

A quantitative analysis based on the linear model was carried out to see
if there was a significant relationship between the speaker’s degree of
certainty in the request compliance and the use of these devices. The findings
are contained in Table 5. They show a significant difference of $p < .01$ in the
certainty levels when internal modifications were employed with an $\eta^2 .04$,
that is to say, 4 per cent of the variance. In other words, the use of internal
softening devices appears to indicate a slight decrease in the degree of
certainty.

Since some of the conventionally indirect head acts were internally
modified by more than one softening device, a further statistical test was
conducted to see if there are any significant differences in certainty levels
and the number of internal modifications. Owing to the nature of the
internal modifications contained in the corpus, they could not be measured
in terms of decreasing and/or increasing mitigating effects. That is to say,
there is no way of measuring whether the use of a diminutive is a more
forceful mitigating device than a hedge. For this reason, the degree of
internal modifications was measured on a four-point scale (0–3). The scale
was estimated by adding the number of internal modifications per head act;
thus if the head act was unmodified, the request was coded as 0; if it had
only one internal modification, it was coded as 1, if it had two internal
modifications as 2, and if it had three internal modifications as 3. A maximum
of three internal modifying devices were found. The results of the test are
contained in Table 6.

As can be seen from Table 6, speakers appeared to be more certain of
request compliance when no softening devices were used. Certainty
significantly decreased with the addition of a softening device. However, the

Table 5: The effect of internal modifications and the use of the imperfect in
Spanish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III sum of squares</th>
<th>df</th>
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<th>Sig.</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
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<td>.214</td>
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<tr>
<td>Softening devices</td>
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<td>135.472</td>
<td>30.244</td>
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<td>.040</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*R squared I .056 (adjusted R squared I .053)*
addition of a second, third, or fourth softening device did not appear to reduce certainty any further.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present study have shown that speakers’ levels of expectation of compliance in the likelihood of request compliance are a factor motivating the realization of conventionally indirect requests.

There seems to be a difference between Spanish and English speakers’ perceptions of compliance when realizing conventionally indirect requests. Such difference, particularly in the case of English requests, appears to be related to the actual situational context where they were performed and not always to the language employed. However, the findings also indicate that, in both languages, there is a relationship between levels of expectation and the actual language employed in the case of formulaic and mitigated requests. It would appear that the more certain the speaker is of hearer compliance, the more likely s/he will be to utter a formulaic conventionally indirect request, and that, when the speaker is less certain of hearer compliance, s/he will be more likely to mitigate the request.

The study has also shown that ‘sameness’ of situational context in Spanish and English, understood as familiar everyday social situations with the same combination of social variables and, particularly, when social distance is kept constant, elicit the same type of pragmatic indirectness, despite differences in the expectations of compliance. The situation accounted for almost 11 per cent of the total variance in certainty between the groups, and the answers given by informants during the post-performance interviews highlight different social expectations based on different social values such as compromiso de ayudar, compañeroismo, simpatía, and confianza for the Spanish informants; and on the formality and politeness of the actual language employed in the case of the British informants. The use of the strategy seems, therefore, to reflect different social meanings in Spanish and English based on different social values.

The reporting of these values appears to point to different cultural expectations of the social roles of participants in comparable social contexts.
Bearing in mind that the same situational context elicited the same pragmatic strategy in both languages, and that the perlocutionary effect of the strategy was deemed differently according to the expected social roles participants have in both cultures, a future study would benefit from an in-depth examination of expected social roles in particular social contexts in both cultures in order to assign social meaning to the pragmatic categories employed in the field. A possible avenue for an investigation of expected social roles in given social contexts could have, as a starting point, systematic (non)participant observation of not only ‘natural’ mundane conversations but also ‘natural’ institutional talk in similar contexts in both cultures.

As explained above, conventional indirectness has proved to be the most preferred requestive strategy at the head act level in a number of (un)-related languages and as such one could argue that the strategy has an element of universality and that the ‘unquestionability’ of such perplexing similarities could be a result of linguistic ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is to some extent unavoidable since English, with its concern with indirectness, has become the ‘language parameter’ against which other languages are compared.

Whilst the English and Spanish requests employed in this study are pragmatically equivalent in that they convey the same type of indirectness, they are morphosyntactically and semantically different. Thus, the validity of the comparison as such could be disputed on the basis of dissimilar instances of the ‘formal’ realization of the strategy in both languages. We argue, however, that we are comparing the realization of one pragmatic category in both languages across comparable situations, according to the same independent social variables with a population of similar characteristics in terms, for example, of age, educational background, and future occupation.

One of the possible limitations of the study is the actual isolation of the conventionally indirect head acts, which were originally part of a speech act. It could be claimed that the certainty levels expressed by the informants in the first questionnaire are a direct result of making them focus on the head act only and that had they been presented with the whole speech event, their answers might have been different. However, the responses given by the informants during the interviews, where the informants were shown a tape of the whole speech act, and those given by the questionnaire respondents are mostly in line with each other. This would seem to provide evidence in support of the first questionnaire.

For future studies, it would also be desirable to investigate what relationship, if any, exists between perceptions of compliance and actual request refusals. It should be noted, however, that, in the case of these role plays, the conversational outcomes were never prescribed, that is to say, the informants were neither told to accept nor to refuse the requests.
Finally, the findings obtained in this exploratory study should be taken as an indication that more interdisciplinary work is needed in order to assign social meaning to the categories currently employed in the field.

(Final version received April 2004)

APPENDIX A

Role-play situations in English
1 A student asks his/her university lecturer for a book in order to finish an assignment.
2 A work colleague asks another to cover the telephone calls while s/he pops out of the office.
3 A neighbour asks another neighbour for help moving some things out of a flat.
4 A bus passenger with a child asks another passenger to swap seats with him/her.
5 An employee who has borrowed money before asks his/her manager for a pay advance.
6 At work, a colleague asks another if s/he may use his/her laptop.

Role-play situations in Spanish
1 Un estudiante universitario le pide a uno de sus profesores/as un libro prestado para terminar un trabajo.
2 Un/a compañero/a del trabajo le pide a otro/a que atienda el teléfono mientras el/la primero/a está fuera de la oficina.
3 Un/a vecino/a le pide a otro/a que le ayude a trasladar algunas cosas de su piso.
4 Un/a pasajero/a está en un autobús con un/a niño/a y le pide a otro/a que le cambie de asiento.
5 Un/a empleado/a, a quien le han prestado dinero antes, le pide a su gerente un anticipo de sueldo.
6 Un/a compañero/a de trabajo le pide a otro/a que le preste su ordenador portátil.

Example of tasks given

Situation 2—English version
Informant A: You have been an employee of a company for some time now. One of your duties is to answer the telephone. You need to pop out for a few minutes to get some things and the telephone cannot be left unattended. You go to the desk of a new trainee. What do you say to him/her?
Informant B: You are a new trainee at a company. One of the employees who is in charge of answering the telephone comes to your desk and talks to you. Respond to him/her.

Situation 2—Spanish version

Informant A: Eres empleado/a de una compañía para la cual has estado trabajando hace bastante tiempo. Una de tus responsabilidades es atender el teléfono. Tienes que salir de la oficina a buscar unas cosas por unos minutos y el teléfono no puede quedar desatendido. Te acercas al escritorio de un/a nuevo/a aprendiz. ¿Qué le dices?

Informant B: res un/a nuevo/a aprendiz en una compañía. Uno/a de los/as empleados/as que está a cargo de atender el teléfono se acerca a tu escritorio y te habla. Respóndele.

APPENDIX B

Please read the six situations described below and answer the questions by putting a tick (✓) next to the answer you think is right.

Situation 1

A university student needs to get a book from the library to finish his/her assignment on time. The library is closed and only one person he/she knows, one of his/her lecturers, has the book. When the student is walking down one of the corridors in the university, he/she bumps into the lecturer who has the book.

1 The participants are
   (a) strangers
   (b) acquaintances
   (c) friends
   (d) close friends

2 In this situation
   (a) the speaker has more power than the hearer
   (b) the hearer has more power than the speaker
   (c) the speaker and the hearer have equal power

3 The request is
   (a) very costly to the hearer
   (b) costly to the hearer
   (c) low cost to the hearer
   (d) no cost to the hearer

4 The speaker has
   (a) very high expectations that the request will be granted
   (b) high expectations that the request will be granted
   (c) low expectations that the request will be granted
   (d) no expectations that the request will be granted
Table 7: Results obtained for the degree of social distance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>British respondents</th>
<th>Spanish respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Borrow book</td>
<td>Acquaintances 30/30</td>
<td>Strangers 2/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cover telephone calls</td>
<td>Acquaintances 30/30</td>
<td>Acquaintances 28/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Help with moving</td>
<td>Strangers 2/30</td>
<td>Acquaintances 30/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Swap bus seats</td>
<td>Strangers 30/30</td>
<td>Acquaintances 29/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Ask for pay advance</td>
<td>Acquaintances 27/30</td>
<td>Acquaintances 28/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Borrow laptop</td>
<td>Acquaintances 30/30</td>
<td>Acquaintances 30/30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results obtained from this survey for the degree of social distance are given in Table 7.

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire I—English version

I. Below you will find 6 situations, for which a speaker has made requests in several different ways. How certain do you think the speaker was that his/her request would be granted in each case?

Indicate your answer by placing a percentage from the list below next to each request in the space provided. (Please note you may repeat percentages.)

- 90–100%
- 80–89%
- 70–79%
- 60–69%
- 50–59%
- 40–49%
- 30–39%
- 20–29%
- 10–19%
- 0–9%

Situation 1

A university student needs to get a book from the library to finish his/her assignment on time. The library is closed and only one person he/she knows, one of his/her lecturers, has the book. When the student is walking down one of the corridors in the university, he/she bumps into the lecturer who has the book.

(a) I was just wondering if you have the book if I could borrow it? _________
(b) I wonder if I could borrow it from you? 

(c) I was wondering whether or not I could possibly borrow it? 

(d) Can I possibly borrow it? 

(e) I was wondering if it would be possible to borrow the book from you? 

(f) Is it all right if I borrow that book—the book I need for my assignment? 

**Questionnaire I—Spanish version**

I. En las siguientes páginas encontrarás seis situaciones. Debajo de cada situación descrita encontrarás varias peticiones realizadas por un hablante. ¿Qué grado de certeza te parece que tenía el hablante de que sus peticiones le serían otorgadas en cada una de las 6 situaciones?

En el espacio correspondiente (al lado de cada petición) y utilizando los siguientes porcentajes indica el grado de certeza del hablante. (Puedes repetir los porcentajes.)

- 90–100%
- 80–89%
- 70–79%
- 60–69%
- 50–59%
- 40–49%
- 30–39%
- 20–29%
- 10–19%
- 0–9%

**Situación 1**

Un/a estudiante universitario/a necesita un libro de la biblioteca para terminar un trabajo a tiempo. La biblioteca está cerrada y sólo sabe de una persona que tiene el libro que necesita: uno/a de sus profesores/as. Caminando por los corredores de la universidad se encuentra con el/la profesor/a que tiene el libro.

(a) ¿Le importaría ir al despacho y me lo presta? 

(b) Me hace falta un libro urgentemente y me han dicho que usted es la única persona que lo puede tener

(c) Vengo de la biblioteca de buscar un libro que necesito, estaba pensando que a lo mejor lo tenías tú

(d) ¿Me podría dejar el libro sobre Ingeniería? 

(e) Si pudiera dejarme el libro sería una buena ayuda

(f) ¿Me puede prestar un libro para el trabajo que nos pidió la clase anterior?
APPENDIX D

Questionnaire II

II. Answer the following questions

1. In your opinion, what factors influence your degree of certainty that a request will be granted?

2. What kind of cultural knowledge/awareness do you need to be sure that your request will be granted?

3. How do you acquire this cultural knowledge/awareness?

4. A. When you make a request, like the ones in the situations above, do you believe that you adopt—subconsciously—a strategy to ensure that your request will be granted?

Circle your answer  Yes  No

If your answer is ‘Yes’, try to describe the strategy you adopt.

5. How would you describe your personality? If you want to, you can use some adjectives from the following list.

reserved  tense  self-confident
humble  self-sufficient  suspicious (untrusting)
shy  practical  group-dependent
shrewd  assertive  straightforward
outgoing  conscientious  open to new experiences
relaxed  trusting  tough-minded

Any other comments

III. Circle your answers or fill in the blanks

Name: __________

Age (in years): __________

Gender:  Female  Male

Place of birth: __________

City/region of permanent abode: __________

Number of years you have lived at your permanent abode: __________

What do you study? __________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION

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the Psychology Department at Surrey for kindly letting us use their Laboratory for this experiment and Mr Don O’Brien for his assistance in recording the role plays and interviews. We are grateful to Dr Victoria Escandell Vidal, Professor Leo Hickey, Dr. María E. Placencia and Dr Helen Spencer-Oatey for their comments on an earlier version of this paper. We would also like to thank three anonymous reviewers for their comments.

2 Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992: 49–54) argue that one of the possible reasons why lexical frames such as ‘Modal + subject pronoun + VP?’ have been conventionalized over others such as ‘Are you able to + VP?’ as standard requests rather than questions for information, can be found in the relative syntagmatic simplicity and paradigmatic flexibility allowed within the lexical frame. It is this flexibility which allows for the inclusion of slots and fillers or internal modification devices, hence creating a variety of utterances.

3 By ‘relative directness’ the author alludes to the speed with which the addressee interprets the utterance as a request.

4 Owing to the fact that the data for this study were mainly collected through a questionnaire, prosodic features were not part of the analysis. It should also be pointed out that Clark and Schunk (1980: 117) have shown that requests expressing equal modality are perceived differently according to the actual choice of words made by the speaker, thus ‘Would you mind…’ is seen as less polite than ‘Would it be too much trouble…’ because of the strength of the imposition.

5 Open role plays have been used by Edmondson et al. (1984) and García (1989a, 1989b). For a recent review of role plays as an elicitation method, the reader is referred to Kasper (2000).

6 The choice of independent social variables follows Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) original politeness model. Although Table 1 shows two values under ranking of imposition, these values are based on the assessment of the role play situations by native speakers of both languages. It should be noted that no values were given to the role play participants, their interactions reflect their own interpretation of the social variables in question.

7 Ideally, a different group of informants with similar characteristics should have been used. However, we did not have access to large numbers of Peninsular Spanish speakers.

8 Although the term compañeroismo could be translated as camaraderie, the latter implies a relationship of friendship and mutual trust which may not be present in the case of compañeroismo, where the participants only link could be work-related. In this case, the link between the participants is the neighbourhood they live in.

9 For a study of simpatía as a Hispanic cultural script, the reader is referred to Triandis et al. (1984).

10 An educada person in Spanish is generally characterized by having good manners and showing politeness as opposed to having (many) qualifications.

11 p values were less than .00, but are reported in Table 4 to two decimal places. Although intensifying or aggravating internal modifications are also possible, they are less common and did not occur in the corpus.
REFERENCES


