Differentiation of Request Phrases in American Native Speakers and Japanese Learners of English

—Would you…? Could you…? Can you…? Will you…?—

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Abstract This study employed a questionnaire to examine request differentiation in five Japanese advanced learners of English and five American native speakers. Differentiation in Japanese learners showed a clear relationship with social distance and request imposition suggesting social indexing in request formulation. However, in the Americans there was no clear relationship. Instead, there was evidence for compliance-gaining strategies that relied on speaker perception of request legitimacy, certainty of compliance and benefit to the hearer. These two modes of use are judged incompatible in the exchange of interpersonal intentions.

Key words: pragmatics, requests, EFL, politeness, cross-cultural, speech acts

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要旨　本調査はアンケートを通して日本人上級英語学習者 5 人とアメリカ人母語話者 5 人における英語リクエストの使い分けを検証した。日本人の使い分けでは社会的距離とリクエストの負荷度とに関連が見られ、社会的要素の指標化が裏付けられた。一方、アメリカ人の使い分けではその関係は見られなかった。代わりに、リクエストの正当性、承諾の見込み、聞き手への利益の 3 点に対し、話し手の想定に基づいたリクエスト承諾のストラテジーが裏付けられた。両者の使い分けはお互い対人的な意図を交わす上では合致しないと評価される。

キーワード：　語用論、依頼表現、EFL、ポライトネス、文化横断的、発話行為

1. Introduction

Requests can be one of the most daunting tasks in using a foreign language. Two of Searle (1969)'s constitutive rules of requests are that "it is not obvious that Hearer[hereon H] will do Act[hereon A]" and that "it counts as a real attempt by Speaker[hereon S] to get H to do A." In other words, making a request means convincing H to do something you want him/her to do that he/she wouldn't otherwise do. As Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out, this is an inherent violation of negative face and hence requires sensitive linguistic choices.

In summary, a successful request requires 1) that H understand you're making a request and 2) that H see some satisfactory reason to go out of their way to comply. This often requires a thorough understanding of one's social relationship with H in terms of both power and intimacy (distance) (Brown and Levinson 1987).

These conditions are often difficult to satisfy even for native speakers who, presumably, know the local societal rules and, moreover, which of them apply to the current situation and possess a comprehensive knowledge of the pragmatic functions of request phrases. In contrast, learners both lack knowledge of interpersonal functions and bring their own culture's sense of appropriateness into the picture.

For successful communication, it is essential that S be able to accurately portray his/her interpersonal intentions, be they in opposition to the culture or not. For learners, this would require an awareness of the interpersonal implications of the English phrases they employ.

In following, this study attempts to delineate the intentions of both Japanese learners and American native speakers of English. Focusing on both groups as distinct but valid speaker communities is expected to be a step toward an objective comparison of their differences and constructive steps toward global, not American, English education.

First, I will discuss potential universalities brought up in the literature. Then I will discuss specific studies contrasting native speakers and Japanese learners. Following this, I will offer definitions of the concepts necessary for targeting the area of research and point out some gaps in research on request behavior thus far. After this, I will attempt to explicate the current understanding of usage of the modal requests. Finally, I will describe this study and discuss the differences in usage of English modal requests between American native speakers and Japanese learners which it found.

2. Research Background

Traditionally, cross-cultural research on requests has compared gross rates of usage of request forms without paying attention to how each learner actually intended their request to be understood.

Blum-kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) presented one of the earliest attempts to compare requests cross-culturally. They created 16 situations systematically varied by power, social distance and imposition and examined what request phrases were used in response to each situation in seven different languages. This produced a vast amount of data on the types and forms of requests available in each language and gave backing to a universal indirectness scale, first proposed by Leech (1983). This study brought non-English languages into the picture and became a model for cross-cultural pragmatic and SLA research on requests for years to come. However, the claims were based on form and offered little insight into how speakers intended their phrases to be interpreted.

Hill (1997), following in this tradition, attempted an appraisal of English request strategy usage in Japanese university students by comparing their choices with those of Irish native speakers (NSs). He found that while the level of Japanese learners reflected positively on their usage rate of the three directness levels indicated by Blum-kulka, et al (1989), (direct, indirect, unconventionally indirect), distribution of specific request types was very different from native speakers (hereon NS). For instance, while they displayed differentiation between the modal verb requests on some level, it parted from that of native speakers, using "would" much more and "could" much less.

However, this type of study can only tell us that gross trends are different, which would likely be the case even in two different cultures of the same native language like England and USA. In reality, the appropriateness of a request strategy varies depending on the subjective assessment of the situation and the goals of the individual speaker, making it nearly impossible to deem any given form "incorrect."

On the other hand, there is a type of error about which learners need to be educated. For example, research has shown that "please," can make requests seem insistent depending on the context. House (1989) showed

"standardness" was a prerequisite of its acceptable use. If S thinks it's only natural that H clean the table, he/she might politely request, "Can you please wipe the table?" but if, on the other hand, H thinks this is a big imposition "please" will sound pushy and perhaps offensive. This is an example of "sociopragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1983) and, due to the idiosyncrasy of individual expectations, is abundant even in NS speech.

Conversely, if S were to use "please" not as a result of perceived "standardness" but as a simple display of deference, it would be "pragmalinguistic failure," which is the result of a mismapping of form and pragmatic force and can be classified as an error. Pragmalinguistic failure is "caused by the difference of the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force" (Thomas, 1983: 99). This is the type of failure of which learners must be made aware. However, this type of discrepancy would be extremely difficult to determine based on a comparison of gross usage rates.

While this point has been acknowledged at least since the above-quoted Thomas (1983)'s seminal paper on pragmatic failure, there has been little research into the systematic (mis)mapping of pragmatic force in learners, perhaps due to the difficulty in determining the intentions of individuals. Instead research has focused on Japanese learners as a group (or perhaps several demographically divided groups such as ESL vs. EFL) under the false pretense that each situation has a single most-suitable phrase. In reality, there cannot be a single "correct" phrase for a situation, only a phrase which is most compatible with the situational assessment of the speaker.

In this sense, the understanding of the pragmalinguistic properties underlying even native speaker use is inadequate. For instance, in regards to the request aspect of modal verbs, English dictionaries and English-Japanese dictionaries alike list "would" and "could" as mere "polite" or "indirect" alternatives of "will" and "can." Some sources even suggest that "would" and "will" are not requests but polite commands and that their usage is restricted to S's of higher power (Kashino, 2002: 98). Modality research treats them as frozen pragmatic particles of politeness, apart from normal modal usage in declarative sentences (Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J., 1985). Meanwhile, pragmatics literature treats them indistinctly as "conventionally indirect requests" (Blum-kulka, 1989). Even recent research in discourse analysis (Curl and Drew, 2008) has grouped all four modals together as serving one function.

However, as this study will attempt to show, these explanations cannot satisfactorily account for their usage in native speech. Hence, in order to attain a base of comparison for the learners' usage, this study also attempts to delimit the pragmalinguistic force intended by American native English speakers and to offer questions that would be useful in arriving at these choices.

Specifically, the research questions are as follows:
1. Do social distance and request imposition influence differentiation of "can/could/will/would" in requests in Japanese non-native speakers of English?
2. Do social distance and request imposition influence differentiation of the modal verbs in requests in American native speakers of English?
3. What other variables influence differentiation?
4. Are the influencing factors different between Japanese and English speakers?
5. Is the differentiation in both groups communicatively compatible?

3. Research Method
3.1. Participants

The participants included 5 American native speakers of English and 5 Japanese learners. This survey was intended as a case study so numbers were small and each participant's data were examined individually. English proficiency was not a major concern of the study but it was ensured that they knew the target request phrases.

Figure 1. Participant information

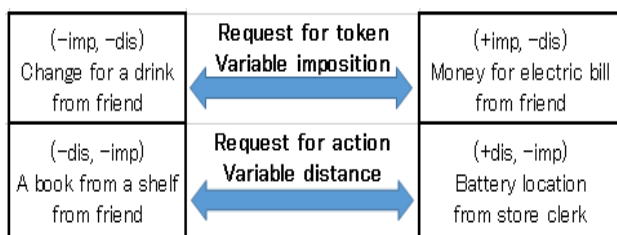|		Born	Sex	Age	Exp. Abroad	Profession
Japanese	JS	Japan	M	23	1 month/UK	4th year univ. English major
	JT	Japan	F	21	None	3rd year univ. English major
	JN	Japan	M	21	None	3rd year univ. English major
	JO	Japan	M	38	3 years, 6 months/ univ. student in Canada	1st year grad. student/Applied Linguistics
	JY	Japan	F	37	None	Housewife (former cram school English teacher)
American	AI	NY, USA	M	31	None	Software Developer
	AJ	NY, USA	F	55	None	School Counselor
	AA	NY, USA	F	41	None	School Counselor
	AC	NY, USA	F	28	None	Master Control Operator
	AD	NY, USA	F	27	None	Hotel Cleaning Staff

3.2. Materials

All the participants were sent a URL to fill out a questionnaire via computer or smart phone using SurveyMonkey®. This is an online survey service which is capable of creating questionnaires using multiple-choice, scalar, free response questions, etc. and collecting responses via the internet.

Each survey was completed in one session of between 10 and 30 minutes. The American data were collected over two months and the Japanese data were collected a month later over a week, both in 2013.

The questionnaire was designed to test the effects of social distance, defined as the level of intimacy between the speakers, and request imposition, two of the three universal factors in predicting politeness specified by Brown and Levinson (1987). The third, social power, was deemed too dissimilar between USA and Japan to account for in this study given its aim to determine pragmalinguistic understandings and not societal differences. For example, even in casual conversation between teacher and student, in Japan a unilateral question-answer style is preferred while in the US as a two-way discussion is preferred (Ueno, 2014). Therefore, the requestees were designed to be unmarked in both cultures in terms of interpersonal power.

A total of four situations were divided into two groups. One group controlled for request imposition (hereon +/-imp) while varying the social distance (hereon +/-dis). The other group controlled for dis while varying the imp. The type request goal was also varied between the groups (see figure 2 below or appx. for the full situations).

Figure 2. Situational distribution of variables

| (−imp, −dis) Change for a drink from friend | Request for token Variable imposition | (+imp, −dis) Money for electric bill from friend |
| (−dis, −imp) A book from a shelf from friend | Request for action Variable distance | (+dis, −imp) Battery location from store clerk |

Each situation provided a description of the situation followed by a request phrase, such as "_____ you get that book for me?" and the participants were asked to rate each of "can," "could," "will," and "would" on a 4 point Likert scale, represented by "definitely wouldn't use," "probably wouldn't use," "probably would use," and "definitely would use" (see appendix). Consequently, it would be possible for them to indicate that they would use all of the phrases equally or, in contrast, none of the phrases at all (see appx. for sample).

By addressing their preferences regarding all four of these syntactically interchangeable request phrases rather than forcing a singular choice in each situation we can observe not only what they think is appropriate but what they think is inappropriate. In this way the research method differs from standard DCTs which ask for a single best answer and ignore the alternatives.

It should be made clear that this study does not address the speaker's actual usage but their knowledge of usage. It is the assumption that if they have the necessary knowledge, applying it to usage is a matter of practice.

Additionally, the perceived constituencies (Curl and Drew, 2008) or obstacles to compliance (Gibbs, 1985) have been shown to be cognitively active in request phrase choice. Therefore, participants were asked to describe what they would suppose the reason to be if they were refused.

They were also asked to assess the situation on a four-point scale for (1) their legitimacy in making the request, (2) the difficulty of the request for the hearer, (3) the hearer's obligation to comply and (4) the likeliness of compliance. These characteristics were extracted from cross-cultural pragmatics and human communication literature (House, 1989; Cody et al, 1994; Wilson et al, 1998; Meyer, 2002). As a possible intervening variable, these data were intended as a supplementary aid for explanation and not a main variable.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. Drink money from a friend (-imp, -dis)

All of the native speakers marked they would definitely use "could" for the drink money situation while four of them gave "can" a lower mark and three of them (AI, AJ, AC) even gave negative marks to "can." This is in great contrast to the Japanese who all gave a higher score to "can" compared with the other situations, presumably due to its low overall difficulty. The Japanese may be trying to encode "friendship" by using a less formal form, but this method is clearly not favored by the native speakers. To the contrary, by willingly lowering themselves to a deferential position with the past forms, they could be thought to be employing a strategy of "consideration" or, in plain terms, "being nice."

4.2. Electric bill money from friend (+imp, -dis)

In the situational assessment, both Japanese and Americans clearly marked this situation as the most difficult according to legitimacy, difficulty, likelihood and obligation. Accordingly, all of the Japanese participants chose "would" as most acceptable, and four of them as the single most acceptable. JO, who showed identical acceptability for would and could for the other three situations gave "could" a lower acceptability rating for this one only. Even JT, who gave negative acceptability to would/will in the other three situations, chose "would" as single most acceptable for this situation. This is evidence that "would" represents the most "polite" option for Japanese learners.

In contrast, the native speakers showed great variety: a combination of "can" and "could," a combination of "would" and "could," two "would"-s and even a "can" (AI). There was no evidence for any singular most appropriate (polite) option.

The use of "can" in the +imp situation calls to mind that "can" is semantically more ambiguous than "could" in interrogatives. "Could" can only be interpreted as a request unless combined with an "if" statement, but "can" can be interpreted as a question of ability (Leech 1983:121). Thus, AI may have intended "can" as a request "grounder," making it higher than "could" on Leech's indirectness scale. This type of strategy might be chosen if the speaker asked him/herself, "Is my request reasonable?"

4.3. Book from shelf from friend (-dis, -imp)

Being as the dis. and imp. are both negative just as in the "drink money" situation, similar choices might be expected, and indeed each Japanese participant made the similar top choices for both situations, either "can" or "could." However, there were differences in the secondary choices of three of the participants, in general showing the present modals as less appropriate than in the "drink money" request. This suggests some difference in perception of this request, perhaps due to the goal type being H's action rather than a token. Prior research has shown the cognitive presence of goal type in request formulation (Cody, Canary and Smith 1994; Meyer, 2002; Wilson and Leatham, 1998).

Meanwhile, the Americans, excepting for AI, showed a general rise in preference for "would" and "will." Three of the five chose "would" as their top choice and one chose "will." This is in stark contrast to their preference

for "could" in the "drink money" request.

According to Leech (1983), "will you…?" questions the hearer's wishes and as such effectively offers no choice of refusal as he/she would have to explicitly put his own wishes above the hearer's. This is true in some situations, but similar to the ambiguity of "can," the same property of a word can be utilized in different ways.

For example, AJ indicated that the hearer would be "being an idiot" not to get the book for her in her response to reason for refusal, which suggests that she views it as a given that the hearer will comply. In this case, rather than question ability, which is evident (the reason for asking is that the friend can reach and the speaker cannot), she can question his willingness and thus allow the hearer a chance to manifest "good will." A question used to reach this choice might be "Would the speaker want to comply?"

Following this suggestion, the fact that AI didn't rate "will" or "would" as acceptable here might be explained by his perceived reasons for refusal, which, in contrast with the other native speakers who all focused on the hearer's situation, showed concern for being personally "disliked" by the hearer.

4.4. Location of batteries from store clerk (+dis, -imp)

With little difference in imposition between this situation and the book shelf situation, both being -imp requests for action, clear differences in request formulation would be indicative of the cognitive presence of social distance in modal verb choice. The Americans all chose "can" as most acceptable for the store situation despite the social distance. Meanwhile, three of the Japanese differentiated with the shelf request, choosing chose "would" or "could" or both or giving lower ratings to "will" or "can." It seems safe to say that the Japanese are giving consideration to their social distance with the clerk, but it is hard to believe that the Americans are choosing "can" for its "less polite" function due to a greater social distance.

Instead, since this was the only situation where Americans judged there to be obligation on the listener's part, it can be surmised that making an unambiguous request with "could" or "would" (and hence stepping down to a reverential status) seemed unnecessary so they opted for the more pragmalinguistically ambiguous option, "can." Thus, the ambiguity of "can" lends itself to more than one strategy. This also evinces that the nature of the request takes precedence over social distance in native request formulation. These decisions might be reached via: "Is

compliance self-evident?"

4.5. Dynamic Use

In all four situations, native speakers appear to construct different roles for these modals depending on their perceived situation. As other researchers have pointed out, the idea that a form is intrinsically "more polite" than another relies on extracting it from its context (Curl & Drew, 2008:132). As was seen, the same semantic ambiguity of "can you…?" can be used to mask the request both because the speaker is afraid to make it or because they don't deem it worthy to step down to a deferential role as they would in a plain request. "Will you…?" can be used as Leech suggests to make a polite command or, as in AJ, to allow the speaker to show their good will and "look good."

As such, defining these dynamically-charged phrases in any linear order, although not entirely incorrect, has not been and will not be instrumental in understanding their usage in native speech. Their roles change depending on the situation and the goals of S, so they are dynamic.

4.6. Modal pairing

Compared to a mere 4/20 in the native speakers, 14/20 of the situations in the Japanese participants showed pairing, with two of the modals as "acceptable" and two as "unacceptable." There were basically two types of paring: stem word (can/could, will/would) and tense (could/would, will/can).

Two of the five Japanese, JO and JY, showed blatant tense pairing with a general preference for the past modals in all situations. JO was the only participant in this study with significant experience abroad and his reasons for refusal all centered on metalinguistic concern for rudeness, which could explain his strong bias for past modals, which are taught as "polite." Thus, rather than change understanding of the pragmalinguistic properties of the modals, experience abroad may have changed the strategies employed, encouraging greater caution in general.

Three of the five, JT, JN and JS, showed stem word pairing, within which two patterns were observed: 1) an overall preference for can/could with would/will as inappropriate and 2) would/will for +imp.,+dist. and can/could for -imp, -dist.

Considering the age differences of the stem word pairing group (21-23) with the tense pairing group (37-38), this difference may owe to changes in English education materials in Japan. Shifts in attitudes toward each modal verb in Japanese English education were indicated as early

as 1988 (Takatsuka, 1988). However, there were too few participants in this study to make any strong claims.

However, while the values assigned to each lexical item vary between these two groups, the basic standards of differentiation, social distance and request imposition, appear to be equally active.

This trend may not be entirely a result of incorrect/insufficient definitions and education. For example, Hill, B., Ide, S., Ikuta, S., Kawasaki, A., & Ogino, T. (1986) introduced the Japanese cultural concept of "*wakimae*," wherein the speaker firstly considers their social standing relative to the hearer. The social indexing seen in the Japanese in this study is suggestive of its involvement.

5. Conclusion

◆ *Do dis and imp influence differentiation of these phrases in non-native speakers and native speakers?*

Looking at the straightforward relationships of differentiation with the variables in Japanese users, and the lack of any such relationships in the native speakers, it is at least safe to say that native speakers do not rely on distance or imposition variables singularly to choose between these phrases and that, to the contrary, Japanese learners do.

◆ *What other variables influence differentiation and are they different between the two groups?*

Native speakers constructed different roles for these modals depending on their perceived situation. This perception may be represented by the following questions:

➢ Are you entitled to make the request? (legitimacy)

➢ Is compliance self-evident? (certainty of compliance)

➢ Will the speaker want to comply? (hearer benefit)

◆ *Is the differentiation in both groups communicatively compatible?*

The differentiation in either group stems from different factors so the answer is no. For example, if a native speaker hears a "Can you…?" which was intended to demarcate friendship by a Japanese learner, he/she is more apt to take it as a choice to not bother with a "nice" form. While in practical terms this may not cause any serious consequences, it is a clear gap in intended meaning.

Learners should at minimum be made aware that the considerations dealt with in forming requests vary from

their own. As connectionist theory posits (Ellis, 2012), input can only be absorbed after the relevant stimuli are made apparent.

6. Limits and future research

This study looked at only five individuals in each group and so no claims for data replicability can be made. Even within the Japanese, there was evidence of two distinct groups divided in use by age. There was also incongruence in gender distribution between the Japanese and American groups which may have influenced the results. In future studies, along with more participants, uniform gender treatment will also be necessary. In addition, this study only measures the participants' knowledge and cannot make any claims about performance.

In addition, data to judge the intensions of use was largely insufficient. In future studies, reflective information from the participants would be instrumental. It is also possible that the absolute level of imposition and social distance varied cross-culturally so future studies will benefit from additional survey into this possibility.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Situations

Drink money from friend (-imp, -dis)	((add imposition))	Electric bill money from friend (+imp, -dis)
You and your best friend have just finished a workout at the gym and have gone to the vending machine to get a drink. You're both sweating a lot and feeling great, but it seems you've forgotten your wallet. You decide to ask your friend for money to get a drink.	Request for token	You have to pay your electric bill by tomorrow or they're going to shut off your electricity. You don't have the money to pay for it. You know your good friend has enough to lend you the money but you're always borrowing money from him/her and, although you always pay him/her back, he/she is getting increasingly annoyed about it. However, you're desperate so you decide to ask him anyway.
Book from shelf from friend (-dis, -imp)	((add distance))	Battery location from store clerk (+dis, -imp)
You want a book from the top shelf at the library but there's no step or librarian to be found. Your friend from class/work, who is clearly tall enough to reach the book, happens to be looking through the shelves nearby so you decide to ask him/her to get it for you.	Request for action	You're in the department store looking for batteries but you can't find them anywhere. You see a store clerk stocking shelves nearby and decide to ask where they are.

7.2. Questionnaire Sample

2. Borrowing from a friend

You and your best friend have just finished a workout at the gym and have gone to the vending machine to get a drink. You're both sweating a lot and feeling great, but it seems you've forgotten your wallet. You decide to ask your friend for money to get a drink.

*1. _____ you lend me some money for a drink?

	Definitely wouldn't use	Probably wouldn't use	Probably would use	Definitely would use
Would	O	O	O	O
Could	O	O	O	O
Will	O	O	O	O
Can	O	O	O	O

2. Add to or rephrase it to how you think you would actually say it (if different from above)

*3. If he/she were to refuse, what do you think would be the biggest reason?

*4. Do you agree? Rate the following in terms of how much you agree.

	Don't agree at all	Don't really agree	Mostly agree	Definitely agree
He/she doesn't have to do this.	O	O	O	O
He/she will probably say yes.	O	O	O	O
This is hard for him/her to do.	O	O	O	O
I don't have the right to make this request.	O	O	O	O

Comments or problems (if any)

7.3. Survey Answers

2 (Definitely would use) 1 (Probably would use)

-2 (Definitely wouldn't use) -1 (Probably wouldn't use)

JS

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	−2	2	−1	1
Could	−2	2	−1	1
Will	−2	2	1	−2
Can	2	−2	1	−2

JT

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	−2	2	−1	−1
Could	1	1	2	2
Will	−1	−2	−2	−2
Can	1	−1	1	1

JN

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	−1	2	1	2
Could	2	−1	2	−1
Will	−1	1	−1	1
Can	1	−1	−1	−1

JO

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	1	2	1	1
Could	1	−1	1	1
Will	−1	−2	−1	−2
Can	−1	−2	−1	−2

JY

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	1	1	1	1
Could	1	1	1	1
Will	1	−1	1	1
Can	1	−1	1	1

AI

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	−1	−2	−2	1
Could	2	−1	2	2
Will	−2	−2	−2	−2
Can	−2	2	−2	2

AJ

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	−1	2	−1	−2
Could	2	−2	−2	−1
Will	−1	−1	2	−2
Can	−2	−2	−2	2

AA

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	2	2	2	−1
Could	2	2	1	1
Will	−1	−1	−1	−1
Can	1	−1	1	2

AC

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	2	2	2	−1
Could	1	1	2	−1
Will	1	−1	1	1
Can	−1	−1	1	2

AD

	Change	Bill	Shelf	Batteries
Would	1	1	2	−1
Could	2	2	2	2
Will	2	−1	2	1
Can	2	2	2	2