

Politeness in Requests: The Role of Linguistic Structure and Social Relation

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Background: (Im)politeness is commonly analysed as arising from the interaction between linguistic form and contextual expectations. Within Terkourafi's (2001, 2005) frame-based account, recurrent associations between expressions and contexts give rise to expectations of appropriate use. Requests provide a suitable domain to investigate these issues, as their perceived politeness depends on multiple factors, including linguistic structure and relational context (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Vergis & Pell, 2020). Whether politeness judgments are primarily driven by linguistic encoding or by context-based expectations remains an open question. While previous work has investigated several factors influencing politeness judgments, no study has directly examined the joint contribution of linguistic structure and relational context. The present study addresses this question using both offline politeness ratings and online reading-time measures.

Methods: The experiment employed a 2×2 design crossing relational context (superior vs. subordinate) and linguistic structure (direct vs. mitigated requests). 60 Italian native speakers ($M=20.1$, $SD=2.2$; 30F/30M) first read contextualised scenarios. After pressing a key, they read the target utterance. Reading times for the target utterance were recorded, after which participants rated its politeness on a 7-point Likert scale. 12 items were distributed across a Latin Square design (see Table 1 for an example). Dependent variables were politeness ratings and log-transformed reading times.

Results: *Politeness ratings.* Mixed-effects models revealed a main effect of linguistic structure, with mitigated requests rated as more polite than direct ones ($Estimate = 2.41$, $p < .001$), and a main effect of relational context, with requests to subordinates rated as slightly more polite than requests to superiors ($Estimate = 0.27$, $p < .001$). No interaction between structure and relation emerged ($p = .535$) Fig.1. *Reading times.* No significant effects of linguistic structure, relational context, or their interaction were observed.

Discussion: Results indicate that politeness judgments were primarily driven by the linguistic properties of the utterance, as mitigated requests were consistently rated as more polite than direct requests, underscoring the robustness of mitigation as a cue to politeness. Although relational context also influenced politeness ratings, it did not interact with request type, suggesting independent, though differently weighted, contributions of contextual and linguistic information to politeness evaluation. These findings support accounts that assign a central role to linguistic encoding in politeness, while remaining compatible with frame-based approaches that emphasize context-dependent expectations (Terkourafi, 2005). No reliable effects emerged in reading times, leaving open whether online processing differences were absent or simply not captured by the sensitivity of the present paradigm.

References

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Figures and Tables

Table 1: Example of an item illustrating the experimental conditions.

Context sentence	Condition	Target utterance	Politeness Rating
Marco works in a hospital laboratory. While carrying out an analysis, he realizes that he needs some materials.	Direct – subordinate	He asks Nico, the intern: “Bring me the test tube.”	How polite is this sentence? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
	Direct – superior	He asks Nico, the director: “Bring me the test tube.”	
	Mitigated subordinate –	He asks Nico, the intern: “Could you bring me the test tube?”	
	Mitigated – superior	He asks Nico, the director: “Could you bring me the test tube?”	

Figure 1: Ratings of perceived politeness by structure and relation

