

Tanulmány

Vacsi Anna

Cross-cultural and Situational Variation in Request Behaviour

Request Strategies in American English and Hungarian

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between social and cultural factors in the request behaviour of native speakers of American English and Hungarian. It also tests the extent to which speakers' directness is influenced by social factors, such as distance, power and imposition. It examines whether the request strategies of American English speakers and of Hungarian native speakers follow a similar trend across different social situations; and if so how and to what extent they are similar. Requests were chosen because they intrinsically involve the usage of politeness strategies; and they are frequently used in everyday situations.

Results have shown that there is a great degree of correspondance between the two cultural groups in terms of general trends of situational variation, at the same time, there are cross-cultural differences in the specific directness levels employed for particular situations. This study argues that distance, power and imposition alone do not always decide speaker's level of directness. A number of situational and cultural factors need to be taken into consideration when interpreting speakers' linguistic choices.

Keywords: politeness, politeness strategies, requests

1 Introduction

It is generally known that verbal communication should be interpreted in its sociocultural context. A vast number of sociopragmatic studies have demonstrated how speakers' speech acts and the degree of directness they employ in a specific situation are influenced by certain social variables.

The social variables of social distance (D), power (P) and rate of imposition (R) proposed by Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) influential theory of politeness are the most widely discussed and tested variables. Brown and Levinson argue that these social variables are the most important factors that influence speakers' linguistic choices. They claim that these variables are in direct proportion to the extent of the face threat and to the degree of indirectness. In other words, the greater the hearer's power, social distance and degree of imposition of the act, the greater the face threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness will be employed by the speaker.

Although in the 2nd edition Brown and Levinson (1987: 16) admit that "there may be a residue of other factors which are not captured within the P, D and R dimensions", a large

number of empirical studies have provided support for the relationship that exists between these social variables and the speakers' choice of requesting strategies.

What makes things more complicated is the fact that these social variables are not only situation but also culture dependent as members of different cultures might differ in their perceptions of social situations as well as in the relative importance attributed to any of the social parameters mentioned.

The present study focuses on the relationship between situational and cultural factors in determining variable patterns of request behaviour. It investigates the request behaviour and directness choices of American English speakers and of Hungarian native speakers across different social situations. Using data collected from a written discourse completion test (WDCT), it examines whether the request strategies of American English speakers and of Hungarian native speakers follow a similar trend across a number of socially different situations, and the extent to which cultural factors interact with social factors. In order to do this, the social variables of D, P and R are connected to the three types of request strategies: most direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect.

2 Method

2.1 Subjects

Thirty-seven participants took part in this study: 18 native speakers of American English and 19 native speakers of Hungarian. All the American participants were full-time university students in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota and all the Hungarian informants were full-time university students in Debrecen. Students were chosen as the target population in order to ensure as much homogeneity as possible in terms of educational background, age, social class and possible future occupation. In order to ensure greater inner validity, only students aged 20-25 were included in the study. 9 male and 10 female Hungarian and 8 male and 10 female American participants participated in this research.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data of this study was collected in September 2010 with the help of a written discourse completion task (WDCT). The DCT was designed to elicit requests in writing in the English and in the Hungarian language. Through the DCT, a total number of 259 requests were collected, coded and analysed. It was a discourse-completion, open-ended questionnaire which included 7 social situations. The informants were given a short description of the situation which specified the setting, the social distance and the social power between the participants. They were asked to complete the dialogue, responding as they thought they would respond in a real situation. The social situations represented by this questionnaire varied along the dimensions of social distance, power and imposition. These selected situations also intended to elicit both requests for action and requests for information. This was chosen in order to achieve greater linguistic variation. The given situations were as follows:

1. You are at a close friend's place. You haven't had dinner yet and you feel very hungry. How would you ask for food?
2. Your mother is about to go shopping. You would like her to buy a magazine for you.
3. You are going to a party and you borrow your sister's/brother's brand new shirt/blouse.
4. You need a book and you know that one of your superiors (e.g. teacher) has a copy, so you decide to go to his/her office and ask for it.
5. You are at your office. You would like a packet of cigarettes, but you can't go out. One of your subordinates (e.g. student, assistant) is just about to go out and get some for him/herself. How would you ask him/her to bring you a packet of cigarettes?
6. You are at the bus stop. You don't know the time. You ask a middle aged passer-by.
7. You and your friend are at the airport. Your flight number has been called but your friend is still looking around in a duty free shop. How would you tell him/her that you have to go?

3 Data analysis and Results

A comparison between the strategies used in American English and in Hungarian was made. The method of analysis was based on the one hand on Fukushima's study on request strategies in British English and Japanese (1996), on the other hand on Sifianou's work on politeness phenomena in England and Greece (1992). There are five features, such as structures of head act (HA) and supportive moves (SM), strategy types of head act, forms and types of head act and types of supportive moves used to analyse data in this study.

3.1 Structures of Head Act and Supportive Moves

First, the results of the structures used by the American subjects were examined which were the following:

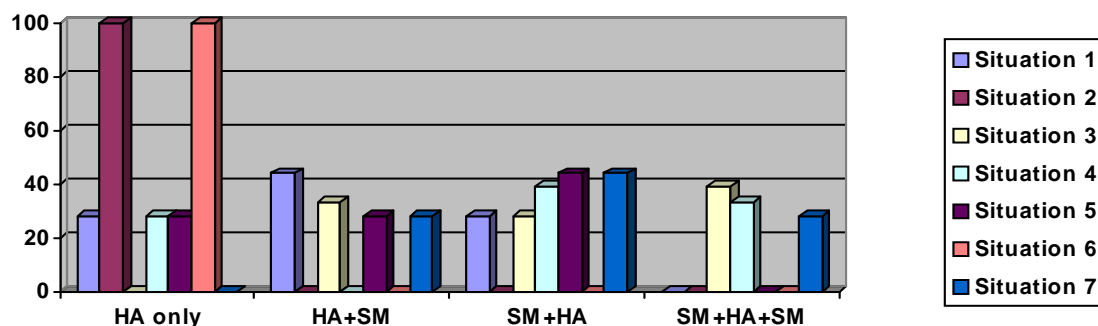


Fig. 1: Percentage distribution of structures by the American subjects

Second, the results of the structures used by the Hungarian subjects were analysed which were the following:

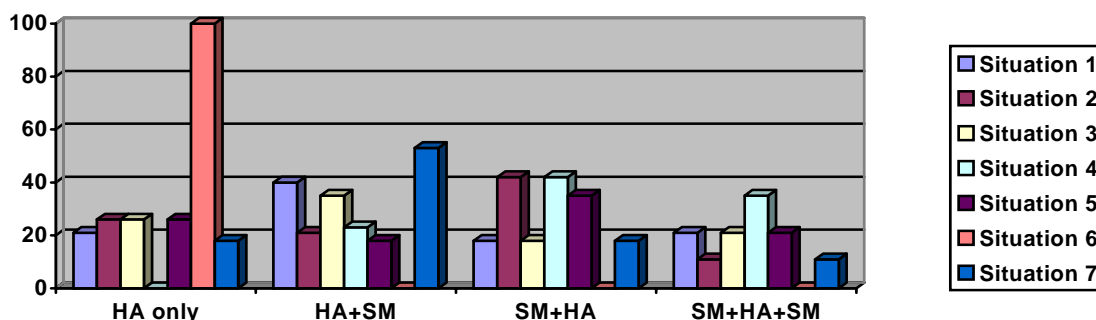


Fig. 2: Percentage distribution of structures by the Hungarian subjects

It can be seen that although there are some similarities between the request structures employed by the American and the Hungarian subjects, there are several differences. These differences are not only observable in the choice of the request structures but also in their various applications in the given situations. Another conclusion can be drawn from the number of HA only structures that were used. Unlike the Americans, the Hungarians used some HA only structures in all the given situations.

Examples of the HA only structures according to situations and cultures:

Situation 1: *Tudnál adni valamit enni?*

I'm getting kind of hungry.

Situation 2: *Vegyél már légyiszi egy Nemzeti Sport Magazint!*

Can you pick me up the magazine ...?

Situation 3: *Ideadod ezt az inget?*

In the American data no HA only structures were found.

Situation 4: *Kölcsön tudná nekem adni a ... könyvet?*

Is there anyway I could borrow this book for a few days?

Situation 5: *Tudnál hozni egy narancssárga Pall Mallt?*

Could you buy me a packet of cigarettes?

Situation 6: *Meg tudná mondani, mennyi az idő?*

Do you know the time?

Situation 7: *Gyere már!!!*

In the American data no HA only structures were found.

3.2 Strategy Types of Head Act

To analyse the strategy types of head act used by the Hungarian and by the American subjects, it is necessary to match the Hungarian data with the American. The results of the strategy types of head act used by the American (ANS) and by the Hungarian (HNS) subjects were examined. They are presented in Table 1:

Situation	Strategy type	ANSs %	HNSs %
Situation 1	1. Direct	28	47
	2. Conventionally indirect	28	21
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	44	32
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 2	1. Direct	0	53
	2. Conventionally indirect	100	42
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	0	5
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 3	1. Direct	44	42
	2. Conventionally indirect	56	58
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	0	0
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 4	1. Direct	0	11
	2. Conventionally indirect	100	74
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	0	15
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 5	1. Direct	0	26
	2. Conventionally indirect	100	74
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	0	0
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 6	1. Direct	0	11
	2. Conventionally indirect	100	89
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	0	0
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0
Situation 7	1. Direct	83	89
	2. Conventionally indirect	0	11
	3. Non-conventionally indirect	17	0
	4. Do not do FTA	0	0

*Table 1: Percentage distribution of main request strategy types in the social situations
(nHungarian=19, nAmerican=18)*

Summarizing the above findings, it can be seen that both nationalities employed all the three main strategies, but there are differences in their preference and distribution in the specific social situations. Similar to the American data, the most frequently used strategy type employed by the Hungarian subjects was the conventional indirect request strategy; although the percentage of their usage by the Hungarian subjects was lower than in the case of the American subjects. The major difference between the results of the Hungarian and the American subjects was that more direct requests were used by the Hungarians than by the Americans. In situations 2 and 7, in which the degree of imposition was low, more than half of the Hungarian informants used direct requests (e.g. *Kérlek, vedd meg a kedvenc magá-*

zinom!; Gyere már!), and even in situation 1, in which the degree of imposition increased, 47% used this strategy type (e.g. *Nincs valami kajád itthon?*).

It can be seen from the above findings that there may be differences in the exercise of positive and negative politeness in the American and in the Hungarian society. The differences between them may lie in the boundary of in-group and out-group members in each society. Americans and Hungarians may consider people in the same situation as different group members. For instance, American subjects in this study seem to have considered their mothers as an out-group member (e.g. *Hey Mom, while you are out would you mind buying me a magazine?*), but the Hungarian informants seem to have considered theirs as an in-group member (e.g. *Anya! Légyszí vegyél már nekem egy Magyar Horgászt!*). Consequently, Americans used negative politeness frequently to minimise impositions, while Hungarians used bald-on-record politeness to strengthen solidarity between in-group members. Although it still needs to be investigated further, the differences in the use of strategy types between the American and Hungarian respondents may lie in this kind of difference.

3.3 Forms of Head Act

In dealing with the form of requests, I shall focus on request constructions such as imperatives, interrogatives, negatives, declaratives and elliptical constructions.

Regarding the forms of head act, I follow Sifianou's (1992) categories in order to examine the forms of head act used by the American and by the Hungarian informants focusing on the similarities and differences between them.

The head acts used by the American subjects were as follows:

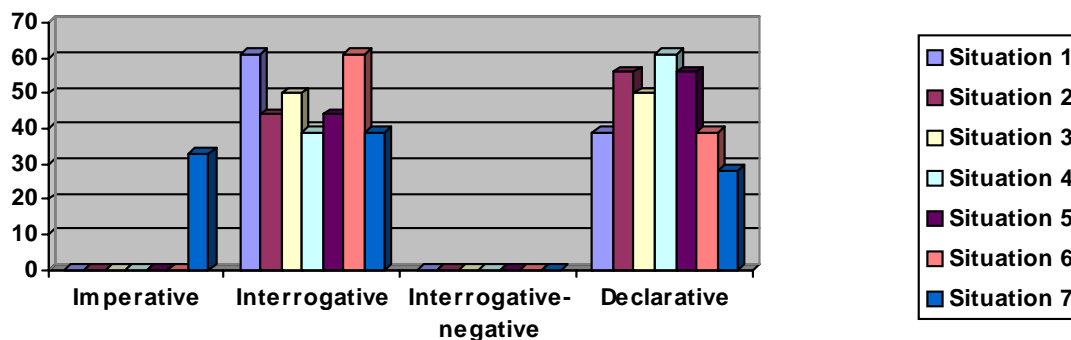


Fig. 3: Percentage distribution of forms of HA by the American subjects

The head acts used by the Hungarian subjects were as follows:

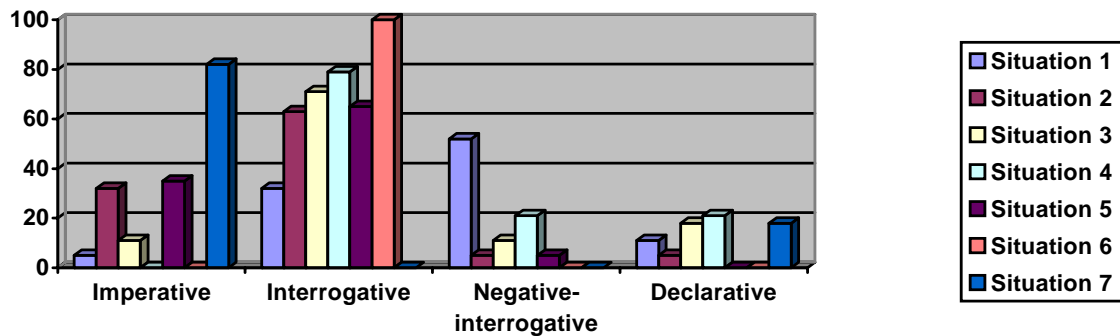


Fig. 4: Percentage distribution of forms of HA by the Hungarian subjects

It should be pointed out that more imperatives were found in the Hungarian data than in the American. In cases in which the participants were close friends or relatives, especially in household environment, there was a frequent usage of imperative constructions in the Hungarian data (e.g. Sit. 1: *Dobj meg egy szecsóval, légy szíves!* Sit. 2: *Anya! Vegyél nekem egy újságot légy szíves!* Sit. 3: *Tesó! Kérlek, add kölcsön a felsőd!* Sit. 5: *Hozz nekem is egy doboz cigit!* Sit. 7: *Tipli!*)

As for the interrogatives, many similarities could be found between the American and the Hungarian data. One main difference was that the Hungarian students in contrast to the American students did not use interrogatives at all in the last situation. The other important difference could be seen in the percentage distribution of the interrogatives. Whenever Hungarian informants used interrogatives, they used them in higher percentages.

In requests, negatives are not very common, but this is less so in Hungarian than in English. They are usually employed in situations in which the positive requests would sound more abrupt. What was found more frequent in Hungarian than in American English were interrogative-negative constructions (Sit. 1: *Nincs valami kajád itthon?* Sit. 3: *Nem tudnád kölcsön adni az új felsőd?* Sit. 4: *Nem kérhetném kölcsön egy rövid időre?*).

Comparing the American and the Hungarian results, it can be clearly seen that the declarative (e.g. Sit. 3: *I borrowed your shirt.*), whether a hint (Sit. 1: *I'm starving.*) or an indirect question (Sit. 4: *Would you mind if I borrowed yours?*), was employed in more situations and in higher percentages by the American undergraduates than by the Hungarian ones. It is also worth stating that neither the American nor the Hungarian informants used the so called 'need statement' (e.g. *I need your help.*; *Szükségem lenne a tanár úr könyvére.*). Instead, there were 'hints' and indirect questions employed. 'Hints' were chosen in situations in which social distance was small, such as in situations 1 (e.g. *Nekem még nem volt időm vacsizni.*), 2 (e.g. *Uhhh... tegnap elfelejtettem megvenni a magazinom.*), 3 (e.g. *Thanks for letting me borrow your shirt.*) and 7 (e.g. *Elkezdődött a beszállás.*). On the other hand, indirect questions were used in situations in which social distance was great, such as in situations 4 (e.g. *Azt szeretném megkérdezni, hogy kölcsönkérhetem-e a könyvet a munkámhoz?*), 5 (e.g. *Azt szeretném megkérdezni, hogy hoznál nekem is egy dobozzal?*) and 6 (e.g. *Megkérdezhetném, hogy mennyi az idő?*).

In addition to the full grammatical constructions discussed so far, a speaker can use elliptical constructions, in which a part of the request is not or only partially stated, because the intent of the speaker "can be understood either from the linguistic or the extra-linguistic context of the ongoing encounter, or from the knowledge participants share" (Sifianou 1992:

152). One could analyse elliptical constructions in more detail, but as in this study there are no elliptical constructions found, I would not do that this time.

3.4 Types of Head Act

In the following, the types of head act will be examined, because the same form can express different types of head act. For instance, the declarative can give hints (e.g. *I'm hungry.*), or it can question H's doing A (e.g. *I was wondering if it would be possible for me to borrow it.*), and both of them belong to different categories of requests, i.e., conventional and non-conventional requests.

In investigating the types of request strategies used in this study, I set up the following categories based on speaker's intention:

- a, Stating S's desire (e.g. *Kérlek siess!*)
- b-1, Asking H's will, desire, or willingness to do A (e.g. *Megvennéd nekem az xy magazint?*)
- b-2, Asking H's permission for S's requesting H to do A (e.g. *Azt szeretném megkérdezni, hogy kölcsön kérhetem-e az xy könyvet?*)
- b-3, Asking H's permission for S's doing A (e.g. *Kölcsönkérhetném a blúzodat?*)
- b-4, Asking H's state (e.g. *Van valami harapnivalód?*)
- b-5, Asking with implicit reference to A (e.g. *Kölcsönkérném a blúzodat.*)
- c-1, Questioning H's doing A (e.g. *Azon tűnődöm, kölcsön adná-e tanár úr a könyvét.*)
- c-2, Questioning S's doing A (e.g. *Azon tűnődöm, valyon elkérhetném-e a tanár úr könyvét.*)
- c-3, Stating S's expectation of H's doing A (e.g. *Értékelném, ha igyekeznél.*)
- c-4, Stating that H can do A (e.g. *Nem tudok most kimenni az irodából, de te hozhatnál nekem egy doboz cigit.*)
- c-5, Hints (e.g. *Még nem vacsiztam.*)

The above categories a, b, and c, correspond to the classification of the forms of head act discussed in the previous section.

The results of the types of head act used by the American and by the Hungarian respondents are examined. They are presented in Table 3:

Situation	Types of HA	ANS's %	HNS's %
Situation 1	a	0	5
	b-1	0	11
	b-2	0	11
	b-3	28	0
	b-4	39	53
	b-5	0	5
	c-5	33	15
Situation 2	a	0	32
	b-1	56	58
	b-5	0	5

	c-1	44	0
	c-3	0	5
Situation 3	a	0	28
	b-1	0	15
	b-3	33,33	53
	c-2	33,33	0
	c-5	33,33	5
Situation 4	b-1	0	30
	b-2	0	15
	b-3	33	45
	b-4	0	5
	c-1	28	0
	c-2	39	0
	c-3	0	5
Situation 5	b-1	44	68
	b-2	28	0
	c-1	28	0
	c-3	0	32
Situation 6	b-1	44	90
	b-2	0	5
	b-5	56	0
	b-6	0	5
Situation 7	a	100	95
	b-4	0	0
	c-3	0	5

Table 3: Percentage distribution of the types of HA in the social situations (nHungarian=19, nAmerican=18)

To sum up the American and the Hungarian results, we can claim that generally the preferred types of head acts are the same. But if we have a closer look at the findings, two differences can be pointed out: One difference is that the percentage of the Hungarian data is always higher than the American data. The other difference is that the percentage difference between the first and second most frequently used type of head act is generally much higher in the Hungarian than in the American data.

3.5 Types of Supportive Move

In this section, the types of supportive moves will be investigated. Similarly to the categories of head act, I employ Blum-Kulka, et. al.'s (1989: 287-288) categories:

- a, Preparator (e.g. *I'd like to ask you something...*)
- b, Getting a precommitment (e.g. *Could you do me a favour*)
- c, Grounder: reasons, explanations or justifications (e.g. *Judith, I missed class yesterday. Could I borrow your notes?*)
- d, Disarmer (e.g. *I know you don't like lending out your books, but could you make an exception this time.*)

- e, Promise of reward (e.g. *Could you give me your blouse? I'll wash it.*)
 f, Imposition minimiser e.g. (*Would you buy a pack of cigarette for me, but only if it's not a problem.*)

The results of the types of supportive moves used by the American and by the Hungarian respondents are examined. They are presented in Table 4:

Situation	Types of the Supportive moves	ANS's %	HNS's %
Situation 1	Getting a precommitment	0	4
	Grounder	50	56
	Promise of reward	0	4
	Imposition minimiser	0	20
	No SM used	50	16
Situation 2	Preparator	0	5
	Getting a precommitment	0	10
	Grounder	0	38
	Promise	0	5
	Imposition minimiser	0	14
	No SM used	100	28
Situation 3	Getting a precommitment	12,5	8
	Grounder	12,5	40
	Disarmer	0	8
	Promise of reward	37,5	16
	Imposition minimiser	25	4
	No SM used	12,5	24
Situation 4	Preparator	0	16
	Getting a precommitment	0	13
	Grounder	58	55
	Promise of reward	0	3
	Imposition minimiser	21	13
	No SM used	21	0
Situation 5	Getting a precommitment	0	25
	Grounder	39	33
	Imposition minimiser	28	21
	No SM used	33	21
Situation 6	No SM used	100	100
Situation 7	Grounder	75	79
	Promise of reward	25	0
	No SM used	0	21

Table 4 Percentage distribution of the types of SM in the social situations (nHungarian=19, nAmerican=18)

Comparing the American and the Hungarian data, we can claim that both nationalities used the grounder as the most frequent supportive move. Another similarity can be found in situation 6 in which neither of the nationalities used a supportive move. The reason for this may lie in the fact that here a request for information was articulated, which might not need any supportive move.

Besides the similarities, there were two major differences: First of all, the Hungarian students generally employed grounders in higher percentages than the American undergraduates. Another difference is that the percentage difference between the first and second most frequently used type of supportive move is generally much higher in the Hungarian than in the American data.

4 Summary and Conclusions

The analysis of the distribution of the main request strategy types in the seven, socially different situations examined revealed that there is a high level of cross-cultural correspondance between the American English speakers and the Hungarian native speakers. This cross-cultural correspondance can be explained by the nature of the situations where they used higher directness (situation 1 and 7), and the requestive nature of situations 4, 5 and 6 which warranted for conventional indirectness.

The study, however, also revealed some cross-cultural variation in the choices of the level of directness, as the two groups were found to disagree on the specific directness levels employed for given situations. A number of significant differences in the speakers' assessment of distance, power and imposition were revealed. The significant differences in the speakers' degree of requestive directness in the first two situations could be explained by the speakers' differences of social reality. Overall, the Hungarian subjects' production tended to be more direct than the American subjects'. According to these findings, Hungarian culture was found to be positive politeness oriented. As opposed to this, the American culture was found to favour negative politeness.

Following the results of the correlation analysis that were carried out, it could be argued that none of the social variables was particularly influential on the speakers' requestive production. This finding challenges Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) claim that the variables of power, distance and imposition are the most important factors influencing speakers' linguistic choices. Following the results of this study, a number of other situational "context internal" and "context external" (Blum-Kulka & House 1989) factors are suggested to influence the strategy selection of the speakers. Besides the social variables of distance, power and rate of imposition, other "context internal" (Blum-Kulka & House 1989) factors, such as the 'the request goal' or the 'urgency of the request', along with the cultural factors such as 'politeness considerations' were found to successfully explain speakers' linguistic choices.

The results of the present study clearly point towards the complex picture of the culture-dependent sociolinguistic variables. The picture which emerged from this study is a complex one and reveals that a number of intervening social, contextual and cultural factors interact with one another in order to explain speakers' linguistic choices. The complex way with which the social variables interact demands further research. What the exact role of other

factors such as ‘the request goal’, the ‘urgency of the request’ and ‘politeness considerations’ is needs to be investigated in greater depth.

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Anna Vacsi
University of Debrecen
Institute of German Studies
Pf. 47
H-4010 Debrecen
vacsia@freestart.hu