Non-native Accent and the Realization of Request Speech Act

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Abstract

This research aims to study politeness levels and the probability of compliance by non-native speakers as perceived and judged by American native speakers. The focus of this study is on how speakers' accent affects interlocutors' perception of the request politeness, their compliance with the request and the possible role of speaker's gender on such perception. Based on the role-plays performed by participants, a questionnaire of politeness and compliance was constructed containing three different situations (i.e., job leave, restaurant and borrow a car). Each participant was asked to rank each request on a range of 5 levels of politeness and determine the probability of compliance with the request speech act. The subjects' perceptions of politeness were compared based on their native language. Data collected from 15 non-native students and 15 native students showed that there were differences in perception of politeness and compliance between the two groups and that native speakers were perceived as more polite and received more compliance by American native interlocutors. Subjects' gender did not have any significant relationship with how the participants assessed the politeness degree and their compliance with the request speech act.

Keywords: compliance; request; non-native accent; politeness; speech act

INTRODUCTION

Accent is not only acoustics, rather it has a complex relationship with social activities. When we have a look on the studies and research which have showed the role of the accent on stereotypes of prejudice in accent perception, we can find out the importance of accent and pronunciation in our social lives (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Rakić, Steffens & Mummendey, 2011; Tsalikis, Ortiz-Buonafina & LaTour, 1992; Tsurutani, 2012) and more importantly they have referred to the negative attitude toward foreign-accented speakers (Bresnahan, et al. 2002; Munro, 2003; Munro, Derwing &. Sato, 2006). Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) claimed that non-native speakers are less believable because they are harder to understand, and it is related to their accent. People also attribute positive

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traits to certain types of accents based on the prestige of the class or group that possess it (Ladegaard, 1998).

In our everyday lives, we make and respond to many requests. Making requests is inseparable from politeness strategies, mainly because of the need to avoid threats to H's face, and to gain compliance from H. To ensure the highest possibility of being accepted, the highest effort should be made so as to make the most accurate form of speech. Most non-native speakers have an accent, and it can affect interlocutors' perception of speech in general and the request politeness and their compliance with the request in particular. This speech act has been the focus of many studies which mainly dealt with appropriate request strategies based on the positive/negative politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) (see Eslami-Rasekh's (1993) study on Iranian and American societies), the effect of expectation of compliance on the preferred request strategy (Abdolrezapour, 2012), the effect of using mitigation devices on request compliance (Abdolrezapour & Eslami-Rasekh, 2012), using hints and direct off-record requests (Ogiermann, 2015a), the function of pre-requests (Rossi, 2015) and the concept of in/directness (Ogiermann, 2015b). A review of the literature reveals that there is virtually no study attending to the possible influential role of requestor's accent on the requestee's perception of politeness and his/her decision on the acceptance or denial of request. This study is intended to contribute to this growing body of research by comparing the native speakers' perception of non-native requests and it mainly addresses three research questions:

1. Does the speaker's accent have any effect on the requestee's compliance?
2. Does the speaker's accent affect the interlocutor's perception of the requestive speech act politeness?
3. Is gender an influential factor in the interlocutor's perception of the non-native requestive speech act?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foreign Accent and Cognitive Judgments

As the communication between various societies and cultures expands, the need for mastering a number of skills and aspects of target language becomes more evident, in that individuals need to internalize phonology, morphology and syntax as well as the second language pragmatics. A foreign accent will happen when there is a "break-through of native language phonology" into a target language (Lippi-Green, 1997, p.43). According to Munro, Derwing and Sato (2006, p. 71), "individuals with a foreign accent may be perceived negatively because of the stereotypes or prejudices that accent can evoke in a listener."

Some varieties of accent can relate the speaker to a particular social group and social level by interlocutors. Research shows that in certain contexts, such as education, health and law, FA (foreign accent) may also be judged as less competent, less educated, less intelligent, and less trustworthy than L1 accents (Garrett, 2010; Gluszek & Dovidio,

2010; Lindemann, 2003; Lippi Green, 1997) and it has been found that native speakers of English may judge foreign accent speech as less prestigious than native patterns (Kalin & Rayko, 1978). Also, some studies point to the difference between non-native foreign-accented speakers and native speakers, as in a research by Fayer and Krasinski (1987) showed that non-native speakers of English exhibited a greater intolerance and annoyance towards foreign-accented speech than native English speakers.   Conversely, some studies have mentioned the positive evaluations received by foreign-accented speech. For example, Giles (1970) found that French-accented English was rated far more favorably than Italian or German accents, and also as superior to English regional accents.

Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) in their investigation asked non-native and native speakers of American English to present the same statements about Ants don't sleep, and asked native speakers of English listen to them and then determine the degree of credibility which was perceived by interlocutors of each statement. The authors found that when people listen to an accented speech, the difficulty of understanding accented speaker reduces processing fluency and it causes the listeners perceive non-native speech as less truthful. Their results were in contrast with Souza and Markman (2012) who claimed that there was not any correlation between difficulty with understanding a foreign accented speech and degree of interlocutors' credibility perception. In their opinion, non-native accented speech like a noise will make the statements harder to understand than native speech but it does not affect participants' judgments of truth (Souza & Markman, 2012). The authors also claim that the lack of effect of accent on cognitive judgment can be explained in terms of the kinds of masking (energetic versus informational) that accent and background noise causes to the speech signal. Energetic masking (also known as perceptual masking) occurs when there is a degradation of the acoustic signal in shared spectro-temporal regions (Souza & Markman, 2012).

McCullough (2013) in her investigative attempt on finding aspects of the speech signal which cause listeners to perceive a foreign accent showed that several acoustic properties contribute substantially to the perception of foreign accent, at least for stop-vowel sequences, and that some varieties of non-native English sound more accented than others (McCullough, 2013). Tsurutani (2012) investigated the attitudes of Japanese people towards foreign-accented Japanese and their difference depending on the area of their residency, i.e. whether living in a metropolitan or rural area. The subjects were asked to listen to a short Japanese passage spoken by Japanese native speakers and native English speakers, and to evaluate what they thought of each speaker's likely personality, job and social status. The author found that the participants rated native speakers higher than non-native speakers in competence and integrity, and rated both types of speakers equally only in social attractiveness.

There is another research which has considered the impact of foreign accent by Fuertes et al (2011); the researchers found out that 'non-standard' accents (defined by them as those spoken by minorities and considered foreign) had a very strong negative impact upon evaluations of status, solidarity and dynamism relative to 'standard' accents

(defined as the accepted accent of the majority population), and according to Lindemann (2003), such evaluations are not even necessarily dependent upon the listener correctly identifying the specific ethnicity of the accented speaker, but may simply result from a bias against foreign accent in general.

Request speech act and foreign accent

A request may be seen as a speech act through which the speaker attempts to get the addressee to do something (or commit themselves to doing something) that is generally in the interest of the speaker and demands a certain effort or exertion on the part of the addressee (Haverkate, 1979; Searle, 1969; 1976). Therefore, the addressee is imposed upon, to a lesser or greater extent. Requests have been chosen as the focus of this study, because they are important in everyday life as well as in politeness theories.

At a socio-pragmatic level, the type of request strategy chosen has been found to be affected by a number of social and contextual variables. Social distance, social power and the degree of imposition of the requested act are influential factors in various conventional norms. Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) main argument was that there is a direct and linear relationship among these social variables, such that the greater the hearer's power, the social distance between interlocutors and the degree of imposition of the act, the greater the face-threat will be and the greater the degree of indirectness and modification to be employed by the speaker.

Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh (2012) documented differences in the type of mitigation devices used in the requestive speech act by Persian and American native speakers and their results pointed to different perceptions of politeness in situations involving the social power and social distance variables by these groups, as will be explained later in this study. A number of studies have also shown that learners' ability to modify speech act in non-native learners are less and they tend to use fewer varied modifiers than native speakers (Faereh and Kasper, 1989; Hendriks, 2010). And it has also been pointed that the comprehensibility of EFL language grammatical errors and non-native pronunciation can obstruct comprehension (Lindemann, 2003) and that non-native speakers may be evaluated negatively with regard to their personality (Bresnahan et al., 2002).

The aim of this research is to help us better understand the relationship between non-native's accent and the perception of native speakers of the second language. This study aims to find a link between the more negative attitudes of interlocutors and someone's accent, and whether trivial statements sound less true when said with a foreign accent than without. Obviously, non-native speech is harder to understand than native speech, but we want to focus on how speakers' accent affects interlocutors' perception of the request politeness, their compliance with the request and the possible role of speaker's gender on such perception.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The subjects of this study include two groups of participants:

Speaker participants: Thirty participants took part in this study, 15 native speakers of American English and 5 native speakers of Chinese and 5 native speakers of Persian and 5 native speakers of Spanish, who were second language speakers of English. All the participants were full-time university students at Texas University. Students in the age range of 20-30 were included in the study, therefor the mean age for non-native and native speaker participants was 25. For the American participants, there were 8 females and 7 males. For Chinese and Iranian and Spanish participants there were 3 females and 2 males for each group.

The foreign students had been living in the United States for an average of 3 years at time of the study because we wanted to be sure that the foreign students were qualified and had proficiency in spoken and written English. The foreign students were enrolled for a Bachelor or a master degree; therefore, their English language proficiency level was advanced.

Listener participants: The second group of participants who took part in this study were 20 American English native speakers who listened to the statements of native and non-native participants and investigated the written discourse completion of each speaker participants and evaluated and rated them according to politeness and compliancy. Listeners aged 20-40 were included in the study (there were 10 females and 10 males). The listener participants were all university graduated and they reported that they had had limited exposure to communicating with non-native speakers.

Instrumentation

Role-plays

The required data were collected via role-play. The role-play tasks comprised three situations. The speaker participants required to act for each situation. The situations that were represented by this role-play are as follows (see also Appendix A):

   Job leave: the speaker is a new employee and has a terrible toothache so the speaker has to ask his/her boss for leave to see a dentist.

   Restaurant: The speaker is in a restaurant and asks the waiter to bring something.

   Borrow a car: The speaker asks his/her neighbor for borrowing his/her car because an emergency has come up.

Tape Recorder

An audio-recorder was used to audio-record the participants' role-play.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was constructed based on the role plays and the request head acts used. The main purpose of this questionnaire was to assess the politeness level given by each listener to each request head act. This questionnaire also intended to check the participant's compliance with the requestive strategy applied by requestor participants (those who play the requestor's role in role play situations).

Data Collection and Coding Procedures

The data were collected via role-play. The role-play tasks comprised three situations. The speaker participants were required to act for each situation. The situations that were presented by this role-play are as follows:

1. Job leave: the speaker is a new employee and has a terrible toothache so the speaker has to ask his/her boss for leave to see a dentist.

1. Restaurant: The speaker is in a restaurant and asks the waiter to bring something.

2. Borrow a car: The speaker asks his/her neighbor for borrowing his/her car because an emergency has come up.

The purpose of the role-play tasks was to determine how native and non-native speakers that associated with certain production patterns effect on listener's perception about the degree of politeness and compliancy. All of the native and non-native participants were required to do role-play for each 3 social situation, their statements were recorded by an audio-recorder. An audio recorder was used in this study because we did not want to make any affects in relationship to race and nationality on listener participants' judgment. Each participant was recorded individually in a room away from the other participants in order to minimize any other effects.

Then we asked listener participants to listen to their speech acts and complete a questionnaire (Appendix B) to evaluate and rate each statement according to its degree of politeness in a scale from 1 to 5 (1= the least polite to 5= the most polite). Then we asked them to inform whether they comply with the request speech act or not and they filled the questionnaire about compliancy or not compliancy of each speaker participants' requests (Appendix B). Approximately, the time given to each speaker participant to do role-play and fill the questionnaire was 25 minutes.

RESULTS

In order to answer the first research question, which dealt with the relationships between the speaker's accent and its effect on requestee's compliance, the audio-recordings of role-plays obtained from 15 American native speakers and 5 native speakers of Chinese and 5 native speakers of Persian and 5 native speakers of Spanish, who were foreign language speakers of English were played for native listener participants. Table 1 yields the results of descriptive statistics including the mean

scores of the certainty of request compliance; it shows that the mean score for native speakers is 2.7333 and for non-native speakers is 0.8667.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the mean scores for request compliance

Group	N	Mean	SD
Native	15	2.7333	.59362
Non-native	15	.8667	.99043

A Mann-Whitney U test was run on the mean scores to determine if there were differences between native and non-native speakers in terms of request compliance. Table 2 shows the Mean Rank related to request compliance. As the results show, the mean rank for native speakers is 21.87 and for non-native speakers, it is 9.13.

Table 2. Mean ranks for request compliance

	IDIM means Native or Non-Native	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Native	15	21.87	328.00
compliancy	non-Native	15	9.13	137.00
	Total	30		

Table 3 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test which point to a statistically significant difference (P<0.05) between the two groups of native and non-native speakers.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U test for request compliance

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Compliancy	17.000	137.000	-4.181	.00

The pattern of correlations was generally consistent with our expectations. There exists a significant difference (P<0.05) between the two groups. In other words, as the results suggested, high probability of compliance was related to non-foreign-accented English.

To find the answer to the second research question, which considers the effect of speaker's accent on the interlocutors' perception of the request speech act politeness, native speakers were asked to rate the politeness degree of each request by assigning a number from 1 indicating the least polite request to 5 indicating the most polite request. Table 4 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test, which point to a statistically significant difference (P<0.05) between the two groups of native and non-native speakers.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test for request politeness

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Politeness	11.000	131.000	-4.320	.00

In order to find the answer of the third research question, which considers whether gender is an influential factor in the interlocutor's perception of the non-native

requestive speech act, the answers provided were analyzed according to the informants' gender.

Table 5 shows the results of Mann-Whitney U test, which point to the fact that there is not any statistically significant difference between male and female.

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U test for request politeness

	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	100.500	253.500	-.429	.668

The results show that these two groups had approximately similar perceptions and differences were not significant. It revealed that gender was not a determining factor in the rating of politeness.

DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to explore the relationship between non-native accent and perception of native speakers. Also, the study aimed to find and examine the effects of foreign-accented requests on interlocutors' perception of request compliance and requestive speech act politeness, and also to consider whether gender is an influential factor in interlocutor's perception of the non-native requestive speech act.

The data collected via role-plays pointed to a significant difference in terms of request compliance and requestive speech act politeness between native and non-native speakers on interlocutors' perception. The results of the first research question, which dealt with the relationships between the speaker's accent and its effect on requestee's compliance that were obtained from role plays interactions, pointed to the relationship between non-native accent and interlocutor's perception. The results showed that there were negative attitudes toward foreign interlocutors and their accent. As the results pointed, there are significant differences between non-native accent and native accent with regard to request compliance at the significant level of p< 0.05. That is to say, the research reported more certainty of compliance when realizing native accent than non-native accent. It showed that in the native listener participants' perceptions, non-native speakers were less credible than native speakers, and interlocutors enforced compliance with native speakers more than non-natives. This finding, which was consistent with our prediction, is also in accordance with Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010), who assert that the accent makes it harder for people to understand what the non-native speaker is saying and it might reduce the credibility of non-native speakers. It was also in accordance with Giles et al. (1995), who showed that native speakers judged non-native accent more negatively than standard speech in terms of social status, intelligence, and education and it was in contradiction to Souza and Markman's (2012) finding which posited that there was not any correlation between difficulty with understanding a foreign accented speech and degree of interlocutors' credibility perception. Therefore, accent which includes pitch, duration, loudness and other

auditory features of a person's speech influences requestee's compliance and his/her perception of the personality of the speaker.

The findings in relation to the second research question according to role-play speech acts, which considers the effect of speaker's accent on the interlocutors' perception of the request speech act politeness also pointed to the relationship between speaker's accent and interlocutors' perception of request politeness. The results showed a significant difference between native and non-native speakers and showed that the mean scores of these two groups were significantly different. In general, the replies to the second question of the questionnaire in relation to role-plays revealed that the most polite request in interlocutors' perception belonged to the native speakers. This finding, which was consistent with our prediction, is also in accordance with Lambert et al.'s (1960) finding which asserts that as listeners, we make many judgments about speakers depending on how they pronounce words and phrases.

The third research question dealt with the effect of gender on the interlocutor's perception of the non-native requestive speech act. The findings obtained from role-plays showed that these two groups had approximately similar perceptions and the differences were not significant. Results pointed to the fact that gender is not an influential factor in the interlocutor's perception of the non-native requestive speech act. This finding is also in accordance with Dewaele and McCloskey's (2014) findings which realized that sex have no effect on the view of foreign accent of others.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the speakers' perceptions of compliance and request politeness when realizing different forms of foreign accent, the findings have shown that there is a significant difference between non-native and native speaker groups. Analyzing the perceptive data provided based on role-plays, it was found that the difference observed was mainly related to the accent. Non-native speakers' requests were found less polite and less possible compliance was ensured with the request speech act produced by non-native speakers than native speakers' requests.

The results of this study are important because of the significance of the speech act of request and its communicatively central role in everyday communication. It is often difficult to request and it involves not only linguistic knowledge, but also pragmatic knowledge. One can have a wide range of vocabulary and a sound knowledge of grammar, but misunderstandings can still arise if the speaker does not have appropriate accent and pragmatic competence. This study aimed to find the effect of requestee's accent on the perception of request politeness and the addressee's possible compliance with the request speech act. The results of this study can further our understanding of differences between native speakers and foreign accented speakers and the perception of such accent by native speakers, and will afford better options for teaching and learning in EFL/ESL contexts. It should be noted, however, that these results certainly do not warrant major generalization to all Persians and all Americans; such a generalization would have required a higher number of participants; the participant

profile of this study was limited to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Suggestions are made to investigate the linguistic realization and social strategies of participants of different ages, sexes, educational levels and socio-economic backgrounds.

Despite the abovementioned positive findings, some limitations need to be acknowledged. The scope of this study was rather limited with 20 American native speakers being utilized as listener subjects. It is recommended that further studies increase the numbers of American native speaker subjects and situations in the instrument. Also, the participation sampling which was limited to university students and graduated people and the results might not be generalizable to other social groups. Much empirical research is needed world-wide to further our understanding of the effects of the foreign accent on the interlocutors' perception of the request politeness and their compliance with the requests.

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APPENDIX A

Role Plays

Instructions

You will be asked to read some brief situations in which there are two participants. You will role play one of the participants and another person will role play the other. You both know who you are and where you are; however, one of you does not know what the other one wants. The interaction will be recorded. You will have to act as you would in an actual situation: you will have to act the situation and interact with the other person, thus expect there could be some social chat. Do not think too much and try to be as spontaneous as possible.

Situation 1 (Job Leave):

Informant A:

You are a new employee and you've got a terrible toothache. You have to ask your boss for leave to see a dentist. What do you say?

Informant B:

You are a boss. One of your employees comes to you and ask you for a favor. Respond to him/her.

Situation 2 (Restaurant)

Informant A:

You are in a restaurant and you need something. You decide to ask the waiter to bring something. What do you say?

Informant B:

You are working as a waiter in a restaurant. One of the customers ask you for something. Respond to him/her.

Situation 3 (Borrowing a car)

Informant A:

You go to your neighbor for borrowing his/her car because an emergency has come up. What do you say?

Informant B: One of your neighbors comes to you and ask for something. Respond to him/her.

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire

Age: ……….. Sex: ………… Place of birth: . . . . Field of study: . . . .

You will hear an audio-recorded file in which a speaker has made requests in three different situations. The situations given to participants are as follows:

Job leave: The speaker is a new employee and has a terrible toothache so the speaker has to ask his/her boss for leave to see a dentist.

Restaurant: The speaker is in a restaurant and asks the waiter to bring something.

Borrow a car: the speaker asks his/her neighbor for borrowing his/her car because an emergency has come up.

Please rate the degree of politeness of each request by putting a (X) under the number from 1(strongly polite) to 5 (strongly impolite)

Then, suppose that you are the requestee. Determine whether you comply (Yes) with the request or reject (No) it.

Speaker No	Role-play study	Degree of politeness					Compliancy	
No	Items	5	4	3	2	1	Yes	No
1	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
2	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
3	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
4	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
5	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
6	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
7	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							
8	Situation 1(Job leave)							
	Situation 2(Restaurant)							
	Situation 3(Borrow a car)							