Direct off-record requests? - 'Hinting' in family interactions

Abstract

This paper engages with the concept of off-record requests (Brown and Levinson, 1987), often referred to as hints and viewed as a form of implicature in politeness research. It analyses three fragments of data featuring the transfer of objects in video-recorded interactions taking place in Polish families. In all these sequences the object transfer is initiated through hint-like utterances asking about the availability or location of the required object.

The paper argues that off-record requests are exceedingly difficult to identify in ongoing interaction: the present data show that even though the analysed 'hints' are highly transparent in the contexts in which they are produced, there is no conclusive evidence that they are intended as requests or even interpreted as such by the person providing the object. The analysed examples also show, on the one hand, that 'hints' can function as a form of communicative abbreviation (Ervin-Tripp, 1976) and, on the other, that they can represent an idea evolving over several turns as the interlocutors jointly accomplish a task.

While most research to date has focused on the different forms requests take and the amount of politeness they express, viewing them in their sequential environments illustrates that politeness is not so much about how we formulate our needs and involve others in satisfying them, but how we attend to others' needs.

1. Background

This paper engages with the concept of off-record requests (Brown & Levinson 1978/1987), also referred to as non-conventionally indirect (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). The data discussed here are taken from video-recorded family interactions – a setting strongly under-represented in politeness research. What makes it interesting to analyse off-record strategies in everyday family interactions is that they are generally "associated with large requests, or distant or elevated addressees" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 12). This paper, on the other hand, looks at requests for "free goods" (Goffman 1967) directed at intimate status-equals – and produced in Polish, a language with a relatively strong preference for direct forms (Ogiermann 2009).

Unlike other request types, off-record requests are not linked to any specific linguistic or grammatical forms, which makes it difficult to identify them in interaction. According to Brown and Levinson (1987:211), the formulation of an off-record utterance involves saying something more

general or different from what is meant, i.e. generating an implicature to be inferred by the hearer (Grice 1975). The idea that requests can be implemented through "all kinds of hints" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:69) has been developed further in cross-cultural pragmatics, where non-conventionally indirect requests have been equated with two types of hints: strong hints, which refer partially to the requested object or action, and mild hints, which rely fully on context (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984:201-202). But while these definitions may be sufficient when categorizing elicited request data, they are much less helpful when it comes to identifying off-record requests in ongoing interaction.

Not only are we presented with a category that will vary across contexts and situations, we are also told that we cannot rely on next turn validation as the hearer "can ignore the request with impunity" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:213). And it is exactly this property of off-record requests that makes them the most face-saving and polite option. In fact, off-record requests provide an 'out' for both hearer and speaker, as the latter can always pretend that no request was intended. At the same time, off-record requests are said to involve a long inferential path which can increase the interpretative demands and the imposition on the hearer (Blum-Kulka, 1987:141). They may also be seen as "putting the hearer in a position where she or he has to take the initiative for the speaker's wishes to be fulfilled" (Ogiermann, 2009:192) and thus as potentially manipulative and impolite.

Another problem related to the interpretation of off-record requests is that while they are defined as ambiguous, allowing for more than one interpretation, they can also be used "in circumstances where no defensible alternative interpretation is available" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:12), in which case they are on-record. And Brown and Levinson do admit that "it is not so easy to verify empirically some notion like 'having in context only one defensible interpretation'" (ibid.).

The idea that off-record requests can be, in fact, unambiguous and direct has been left largely unexplored in politeness research. Studies conducted in the area of child language development, however, have identified similar forms in the speech of children, who produce hint-like utterances at a very young age, i.e. before they are able to infer and implicate meaning. These utterances often take the form of 'problem statements' and "children use them because they have not yet worked out what action will remedy their problem" (Ervin-Tripp et al, 1990:316). And while the children's utterances may not necessarily be intended as requests and they may not even be aware of making a request, their parents respond by providing them with what they need (Ogiermann, 2015).

Blum-Kulka (1990) also identifies highly contextualized and transparent hints within parental control acts while Ervin-Tripp (1976:44) views hints as a form of abbreviation, which is particularly common in close relationships, such as those between family members, whose shared experiences, background knowledge and daily routines lead to the conventionalisation of indirect but recurrent forms.

2. Analysis

The present paper discusses three extracts from video-recorded conversations taking place in Polish families; two of them living in Lublin and one in Warsaw.[1] All three sequences discussed here are initiated by a hint which could be classified as an off-record request and all of them aim at obtaining an object. The formulations all refer to the availability of the object, but the sequences unfold in different ways, illustrating the different uses and understandings of hint-like utterances.

Extract 1, Kasia and Piotr

The first fragment features a dialogue between a wife (Kasia) and a husband (Piotr), who, together with their two daughters, are gathered around a large kitchen table doing handicrafts. The mother is the only person standing up. She interrupts her handiwork to put one of her daughters' hair in a bun and as she finishes, she produces the following utterance:

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1 KAS:  ((to PIO)) masz tam wolne jedno krzesełko?
                   Do you have a free chair over there?

2 PIO:  mam
        I do.

3 KAS:  ((walks around the table and gets the chair))
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Kasia's question literarily enquires about the availability of a chair, without specifying any action related to this chair to be performed by the addressee. It could be interpreted as a request to bring her the chair, and the context clearly supports such an interpretation: Somebody who has been standing during an activity which involves three other participants sitting may want to sit down herself. Her husband, however, chooses not to treat her utterance as a request. Instead, he merely confirms availability; and he does so without looking up from his handicrafts. One could, therefore, argue that Kasia has produced an off-record request, which Piotr, being otherwise engaged, has ignored 'with impunity.' And since Kasia is likely to know or even see that there is a chair next to her husband, her utterance could be interpreted as strategic – though it is also possible that it merely aims at establishing whether the chair next to Piotr is *free*.

If her aim is to get Piotr to bring her the chair, her utterance could also be interpreted as a pre-request; and Piotr's turn as a go-ahead response completing the pre-sequence and inviting a request proper. In contrast to pre-invitations and other pre-sequences, however, a go-ahead response to pre-requests is not the *preferred* response. According to Schegloff, "the preferred response to the pre-request is to pre-empt the need for a request altogether by offering that which is to be requested" (2007: 90). Rossi (2015) has further demonstrated that in the case of pre-requests referring to the availability of an object, it is its immediate provision that is the unmarked and preferred form. In either case, a mere confirmation of availability, such as the one produced by Piotr,

breaks "contiguity between a first pair part (the pre-request) and the accomplishment of the course of action initiated by it (the fulfilment of the projected request), thus obliging the requester to produce another first pair part (the request proper)" (Rossi, 2015:7).

Having received a go-ahead response from Piotr, rather than producing a request proper, Kasia walks to the other side of the table and gets the chair herself. Following Brown and Levinson's line of argumentation, one could conclude that the ambiguity of her request has not only provided Piotr with an 'out', but also allows her to pretend that no request was intended. At the same time, her reaction illustrates that a mere go-ahead response in a transparent context like this one comes across as uncooperative and thus functions more like a blocking response, discouraging the requester from pursuing the request further.

On the other hand, there is no evidence that Kasia's turn was *intended* as a request. Her response (getting the chair) follows Piotr's turn without delay. Hence, there is a possibility that at the time of formulating her question, she merely wanted to establish that her husband does not need the chair, leaving it open how it gets transferred to her end of the table.

Extract 2, Jacek and Bolek

While in extract 1, the response to a question about the availability of an object does not go beyond confirming it, and the requester does not treat it as an encouragement to articulate a request proper, in extract 2, a similar question results in the immediate provision of the object. In this fragment, the family – parents and two children – sit around the dinner table when the older son (Bolek) asks the following question:

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01 BOL: gdzie jest nóż?
        Where is the knife?

02 JAC: ja mam  nóż,  już ci daję. proszę
        I have the knife, giving it to you right away. Here you go.
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Bolek's utterance literarily enquires after the location of a knife. It not only does not request a specific action, but it does not specify an addressee either. As no possessive pronoun is used, the knife seems to be shared by all family members at the table. Although Bolek's utterance does not carry any linguistic features of a request, it is very transparent in the context in which it is used – a person expressing an interest in the whereabouts of a knife at the dinner table is likely to want to use it.

The father (Jacek) begins his response by identifying himself as the current user of the knife, thus providing a literal answer to Bolek's question. Once he has confirmed the location of the knife, however, he produces another TCU, which treats Bolek's question as a request, and then provides the knife. In sequential terms, one could argue that the first TCU of the father's turn treats Bolek's turn as a pre-request, making a request proper the next relevant action. At the same time, Jacek's response does not provide a slot for such a request, as he immediately hands over the required object. His response, therefore, provides a shortcut – it not only makes a request proper dispensable, but also renders the implicit (off-record) request explicit. As we have seen in extract 1, waiting for

Bolek to articulate a request proper, or even issuing an offer, would unnecessarily extend the sequence and thus come across as uncooperative.

The final fragment involves a wife (Bogusia), husband (Henio), and their two daughters. All family members are assembled in the kitchen, establishing who would like to eat what for dinner, removing various items from the fridge and preparing them. In line 1, the mother asks the older daughter (Magda) to confirm that she would like to eat dumplings as well. The use of the word *też* (also) is ambiguous here. It could refer to other things that Madga will eat as well as to the fact that other family members are also having dumplings. It is in this context that Henio brings up another item that is usually eaten together with Polish dumplings, namely lardons (line 4).

Extract 3, Bogusia, Magda, Henio

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01 BOG: ((to MAG)) dobrze. ale to znaczy że będziesz jadła te:ż [pierogi?
                   Okay. But this means that you are also eating dumplings?

02 MAG:                                                  [>i dwa pierogi<
                                                          And two dumplings

03 BOG: no do:brze.
        Okay then.

04 HEN: szkoda że skwarek °nie ma (0.6) do pierogów°=
        It's a pity there are no lardons to go with the dumplings.

05 BOG: =>no ale< JEST boczek to można zrobić
        Well but there is bacon, so we can make lardons.

06      (0.3)

07 HEN: tak?=
        Really?

08 BOG: =no oczywiście.
        Well, of course.

09      (0.2)

10 BOG: Pokroić?
        Shall I cut them?
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Magda's request for dumplings (line 2) merely consists of a noun phrase; resembling requests found in service encounters. By saying "*i dwa pierogi*" (and two dumplings), she not only answers her mother's question but also adds another item to the list of things she has already requested for her dinner. Although Henio is just as entitled to request further food items as is his daughter, his

utterance (line 4) is ambiguous, hesitant and quiet. Since it eventually results in the lardons being provided, one could argue that it has been interpreted as a request – though it is difficult to say whether it was intended as one. Henio could be merely stating that the dumplings the family are about to have would taste better with lardons, and we do not know how familiar Henio is with the contents of the fridge.

Bogusia's quick response (line 5) offers a solution to the problem raised, but it gives no indication as to whether she has understood Henio's utterance as a request. Her suggestion to cut up a piece of bacon takes an impersonal form, with the verb form *można* (one can) being in the third person singular, thus suggesting a possibility without naming an agent. This ambiguity makes it possible to interpret Bogusia's utterance as a request, an offer, or a mere suggestion.

The information she gives Henio does enable him to take the initiative and prepare the lardons that he expressed interest in having with the dumplings, but rather than starting to prepare them, or explicitly asking Bogusia to do it, in line 7, he utters an astonished sounding *tak?* (yes?). Bogusia's answer again comes quickly, seemingly confirming that it is indeed possible to make lardons out of bacon, followed by a short moment of hesitation and, finally, an offer (line 10).

Henio's response in line 7, especially if one considers that a grown man is likely to know that lardons are made from bacon, creates the impression that there is something strategic about his approach. On the one hand, one could argue that, rather than doing the job himself, he manipulates his wife into doing it for him. On the other, with Bogusia's suggestion being open to an interpretation as an offer, his response may be taken as expressing enthusiasm and appreciation.

There is clearly no need to go off-record in the analysed setting (as evidenced by Magda's request) and while viewing Henio's utterances as off-record requests renders him strategic, it is difficult to interpret them as polite. An alternative interpretation one could suggest though is that he merely brings up an idea, which is taken up by Bogusia: first in the form of a suggestion and, once Henio has welcomed it, in the form of an offer. In fact, in the end, the lardons are jointly made by Bogusia, who cuts the bacon, and Henio, who fries the lardons.

3. Discussion

The fragments discussed here illustrate how the transfer or provision of an object can be initiated through hint-like utterances asking about the availability or location of an object, or simply noting its absence. Viewing these 'hints' in their sequential environments has revealed their similarity to pre-requests, which can be followed by a go-ahead response (extract 1), a pre-emptive offer (extract 3) or the provision of the object (extract 2). The above analysis has also shown that their interpretation as (off-record) requests is far from straightforward – and that they do not necessarily qualify as implicatures.

On the one hand, the current findings support recent research on implicatures, which has moved away from viewing them as mere inferences about speakers' intentions, while suggesting that they "arise as much through the hearer's response to the speaker's prior turn, as through whatever the speaker him or herself is taken to be doing in interaction" (Haugh 2015:116). On the other hand, implicatures continue to be viewed as a strategic means of dealing with delicate situations. In the

everyday family context analysed here, in contrast, certain things are left unsaid, not because spelling them out might be potentially sensitive, but because they do not need spelling out.

The hint-like utterances referring to objects analysed above are embedded in recurrent routines and thus transparent, which would support the view that they are 'direct' off-record requests (Ervin-Tripp, 1976). They do not come across as strategic or face-saving, nor do they involve a long inferential path, given the rich context in which they occur and the familiarity of the speakers. As Terkourafi argues, the "lack of explicitness on the part of the speaker does not always spring from a strategic desire to avoid going on record for the sake of (immediate or future) deniability" (2011: 2970) – though being implicit can leave both the speaker and the hearer an 'out', as we have observed in extract 1.

What the present study has also shown is that hints not only function as a form of communicative abbreviation, as illustrated by extract 2, but they can also represent an idea evolving over several turns as two (or more) interlocutors jointly accomplish a task (as in extract 3). Ultimately, even when a speaker who requires an object verbalises this, it does not necessarily mean that she or he is intentionally involving the hearer in obtaining it. And while a request may be built up incrementally, leaving the speaker and the hearer an 'out' at every turn, without having access to speakers' intentions, it is difficult to say whether this is strategic.

What this study has illustrated, however, is that while hint-like utterances initiating object provision or transfer do not necessarily express politeness, the responses to these off-record requests (whether they are intended as requests or not) can be analysed as instances of politeness. Accommodating somebody's wishes by 'reading their mind' and providing them with what they need without being explicitly asked for it is certainly cooperative and considerate; providing a literal response to an utterance that can be read as a request (i.e. ignoring it 'with impunity') is unlikely to be evaluated as supportive or polite. On the whole, the present data seem to suggest that politeness is not so much about how we express our needs and involve others in satisfying them, but how we attend to others' needs.

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