



King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.1016/j.pragma.2015.04.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2015.04.001)

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ogiermann, E. (2015). Object requests: Rights and obligations surrounding object possession and object transfer. *JOURNAL OF PRAGMATICS*, 82, 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2015.04.001>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Object requests: Rights and obligations surrounding object possession and object transfer

Eva Ogiermann

Requests are omnipresent in our lives. We use them to obtain goods, services, favours and information, to transfer objects and jointly accomplish tasks. Requests are also the most extensively researched form of social action. They have been studied across a wide range of research areas, such as pragmatics, politeness theory, conversation analysis, language acquisition and language socialisation. And while the different methodologies and theoretical frameworks used in these areas have provided very different perspectives on requesting, there is one feature of requests that has attracted the attention of scholars, irrespective of their research background, namely that they can take a wide range of forms; and that these forms are not used interchangeably.

The diverse nature of requests was already reflected in Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts, in which requests belong to the category of directives, defined as "attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (1976:11). Searle further specified that "they may be very modest 'attempts' as when I invite you to do it or suggest that you do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (Searle, 1976). But while he did recognise that directives differ in the degree of strength of their illocutionary point, he did not engage with the different linguistic forms they can take.

The first systematic treatment of request forms and factors governing their choice was offered within Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978/87) which, although not explicitly devoted to requests, assigns a very central role to this speech act. It considers requests to be face-threatening acts and provides a comprehensive inventory of linguistic forms associated with requesting, represented by five super-strategies through which requests can be implemented and a wide range of politeness strategies through which they can be mitigated. According to Brown and Levinson, the formulation of a request depends on the amount of face-threat it entails, which can be calculated on the basis of three broad variables, namely social power, social distance and imposition. Despite its very limited understanding of context, this framework has inspired a wealth of research on requests, in particular in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics (e.g. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The studies conducted in these areas have taken a quantitative approach, generating a vast amount of data which have enriched the description of requests, while placing them on a scale of in/directness. But while the experimental design of these studies has helped establish preferences for different request forms across numerous languages, the use of decontextualised scenarios to elicit the data meant that they neglected the sequential environments in which requests occur.

Qualitative research in the area of conversational analysis (CA), on the other hand, focuses on sequential properties of social actions, but as CA analyses are guided by next turn validation, there was initially little interest in sequence initiating actions, such as requests. Instead, early CA research on requests focused on the responses they receive and the turn design features distinguishing preferred responses (complying with the request) from dispreferred ones (rejecting the request). It further established that requests themselves are characterised by turn design features typical of dispreferred responses, in that they tend to be delayed, mitigated and accounted for (Heritage, 1984). This observation, along with the finding that pre-requests often elicit offers, making a request proper dispensable, has led to the suggestion that requests are dispreferred actions, with offers being their preferred counterparts (Levinson, 1983; Lerner, 1996; Schegloff, 2007 - but see Kendrick and Drew, 2014). With the focus being on features of dispreference, analyses of the request turns did not involve examining the different grammatical structures used to implement them.

With the notable exception of Wootton's (1981, 1997) work on children's requests, an interest in the diversity of request formats and factors underlying their selection only developed in the 2000s, which saw the publication of several CA studies comparing different pairs of request formats in different languages, including Swedish (Lindström, 2005), Danish (Heinemann, 2006), British English (Curl and Drew, 2008; Craven and Potter, 2010; Zinken and Ogiermann, 2013), Italian (Rossi, 2012) and Polish (Zinken and Ogiermann, 2013). Unlike studies conducted in cross-cultural pragmatics, which correlated strategy choice with broad and static

sociological variables, these CA studies began to draw attention to local factors impacting on the choice of request formats. While the compared formats differed across studies, with some contrasting interrogative vs. imperative forms (Lindström, 2005; Craven and Potter, 2010; Rossi, 2012), others focusing on positive and negative interrogatives (Heinemann, 2006), and yet others on Can you vs. I was wondering if constructions (Curl and Drew, 2008), all these studies have arrived at a similar finding, namely that the two forms express different assumptions about entitlement to have the request granted.

In some of the studies entitlement stemmed from asymmetrical role relationships, such as doctor-patient (Curl and Drew, 2008), caregiver-recipient (Lindström, 2005; Heinemann, 2006; Antaki and Kent, 2012) or parent-child (Craven and Potter, 2010), which are characterised by specific sets of rights and obligations. At the same time, entitlement has been shown to be a locally constructed property, with speakers using formats expressing low entitlement orienting to contingencies involved in complying with the request (Curl and Drew, 2008). Studies of everyday interactions between family and friends, on the other hand, have shown that an expectation of compliance can also derive from the contribution a request makes to ongoing activities, i.e. whether it furthers their accomplishment or disrupts them (Wootton, 1997), and whether the request supports an activity involving the request maker as well as the request recipient or takes place solely for the speaker's benefit (Rossi, 2012).

The contributions to this Special Issue bring new insights into the concept of entitlement -- and the ways in which it manifests itself in different types of informal interaction. They do so by focusing on object requests and object transfer in everyday interactions between family and friends: interactions which commonly involve objects changing hands. The expectation of compliance conveyed by the requests analysed here mainly stems from the nature of the requested objects, i.e. that they are free or shared goods. An important factor emerging from these studies is, therefore, that of possession or (temporary) ownership.

The five papers comprising the Special Issue study object requests produced in different languages and different informal settings depicting close relationships and involving adults as well as children. Rossi's study looks at object requests produced by Italian speaking adults; family and friends engaging in informal activities, such as card games. Zinken analyses family interactions among adult speakers of British English and taking place during the preparation and consumption of food. Ogiermann's paper examines Polish children's requests for food items during mealtimes, which are primarily directed at their parents, while Dixon's study of children's requests for toys looks at peer interaction taking place in Alyawarr English, a language spoken in a small Aboriginal community in Central Australia. Finally, Takada and Endo's study analyses request sequences initiated by Japanese caregivers while focusing on the children's reactions to them.

Rossi's study provides a sequential analysis of the request format Hai X? (Do you have X?), which literally asks if the request recipient is in possession of the required object. In sequential terms it is, therefore, a pre-request, ensuring that a precondition necessary for the provision of the object obtains. Rossi's analysis reveals, however, that the properties of Hai X? sequences differ from those previously described in the literature, in that Hai X? formats are normally responded to with the immediate fulfilment of the projected request and therefore accomplished in two turns. Rossi argues that the immediate provision of the object is the preferred and unmarked response to Hai X?. A go-ahead response (e.g. 'yes'), in contrast, delays granting the request and, thus, foreshadows a problem or may come across as deliberately uncooperative. At the same time, blocking responses to Hai X? do not normally carry any features of dispreference, since they do not function as rejections of the request but merely as statements of unavailability.

While the Hai X? format treats the recipient as the (potential) owner of an object that is not visible to the request maker, the Can I have X? format discussed by Zinken is typically used to request objects which belong to requester and requestee alike and are being handled by the latter at the time of the request. Previous research tends to view the format Can I X? as a request for permission, which indexes low entitlement. Zinken's analysis, however, shows that requests for objects taking this form convey a high level of entitlement to the object, which is often reinforced through bodily conduct (e.g. stretching out the arm). The high expectation of compliance characterising this request format stems from the fact that the requested objects are shared goods. Another crucial factor underlying the choice of this request format is its timing, with the request occurring when the current user's engagement with the object comes to an end. Hence, Can I

have X? formats occur in environments where a current user has the responsibility to hand over a shared object, and the request maker the responsibility to ensure that the request recipient is in a position to pass it at the time of making the request.

Dixon's study focuses on two strategies used by girls, aged approximately 7, to obtain toys during play: imperative constructions and grabbing gestures. Both convey a strong expectation of compliance, which the author links to two factors: ownership and entitlement. Although ownership and entitlement can be viewed as related factors, with the latter stemming from the former, in Dixon's data they emerge as separate categories. Ownership is established at the beginning of the game, when the girls form two teams and divide the toys between them based on colour. As the toys change hands in the course of the play session, colour is often referred to as proof of ownership. At the same time, assertions of ownership are based on constellations emerging throughout the game. The girls use possessive pronouns portraying them as the owner of a particular toy and justifications strengthening their claims, such as who has used the toy last. When claims of ownership cannot be supported, they express entitlement by referring to rules of the game, such as fair play.

Rather than focusing on a specific request form, Takada and Endo's paper examines the entire process of transferring objects and their wider role in children's socialisation. The study, therefore, analyses longer sequences initiated by caregivers' requests for objects and eventually resulting in provision of the object by the children, while considering factors such as timing, bodily orientation and manner of transfer. Since young children (here aged 0--5) get attached to the objects they play with and thus may display a strong sense of ownership when it comes to returning the objects to their parents or sharing them with their siblings, the caregivers engage them in socialisation practices which encourage object transfer and emphasise their roles and obligations, such as those of an 'older sister'. These recurrent, everyday activities, in which children are taught to be generous and cooperative help transmit the values of Japanese culture. Within these activities, objects can be viewed as semiotic resources, strategically used by parents to help their children develop both communicative and cultural competence.

Ogiermann's study, on the other hand, looks at how children aged 2-10 request and obtain objects such as food items at the dinner table. Children's requests for food during mealtimes directed at their parents are generally characterised by a high degree of entitlement, with the expectation of compliance not only stemming from the requested items being free goods but also the parents' obligation to feed their children. Despite the contextual conditions being very similar across the request situations, the children use a wide range of forms, including those that do not express high entitlement and which have been described as indirect in pragmatic research. The study, therefore, shows that the factors leading to the preference of indirect forms suggested in previous research do not hold for the analysed interactions. It also illustrates that in the analysed setting, indirect, off-record requests function in a similar way to direct forms, such as want statements, imperatives and performatives, but differently from conventionally indirect requests, such as interrogative constructions with modal verbs. While the former are used in situations where the parents serve food to their children, who thus adopt the roles of dependent receivers whose requests signal absences and needs, the latter occur in interactions taking place during dinners in which both parents and children participate on equal terms. The use of conventionally indirect forms, therefore, reflects the greater autonomy enjoyed by the children, who seem to be positioning themselves as adults and adjust their use of request forms accordingly.

Unlike most previous research on requests in informal contexts, which views them as an imposition on the request recipient, this Special Issue has brought together studies of object requests that are embedded in recurrent, everyday activities among family and friends. Analysing the transfer of objects regarded as free or shared goods has shown it to be smooth and unproblematic – though the concept of sharing is not necessarily something that comes to us naturally, as illustrated by the children's responses to requests in Takada and Endo's and Dixon's studies. The five studies focus on different request formats and reveal a number of situation-specific and interactional factors related to their choice – and the different understandings of ownership and entitlement that they reflect. They provide insights into how rights to 'have' an object and the obligation to 'share' it are managed in interaction through the use of particular linguistic structures and multimodal resources

References

- Antaki, Charles, Kent, Alexandra, 2012. Telling people what to do (and, sometimes, why): contingency, entitlement and explanation in staff requests to adults with intellectual impairments. *J. Pragmat.* 44, 876-889.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, House, Juliane, Kasper, Gabriele (Eds.), 1989. *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Ablex, Norwood, NJ.
- Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen, 1987. *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Craven, Alexandra, Potter, Jonathan, 2010. Directives: entitlement and contingency in action. *Discourse Stud.* 12, 419-442.
- Curl, Traci, Drew, Paul, 2008. Contingency and action: a comparison of two forms of requesting. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 41, 129-153.
- Heinemann, Trine, 2006. "Will you or can't you?" Displaying entitlement in interrogative requests. *J. Pragmat.* 38, 1081-1104.
- Heritage, John, 1984. *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Kendrick, Robin H., Drew, Paul, 2014. The putative preference for offers over requests. In: Drew, P., Couper-Kuhlen, E. (Eds.), *Requesting in Social Interaction*. Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 87-113.
- Lerner, Gene H., 1996. Finding 'face' in the preference structures of talk-in-interaction. *Soc. Psychol. Q.* 59, 303-321.
- Levinson, Stephen C., 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lindström, Anna, 2005. Language as social action: a study of how senior citizens request assistance with practical tasks in the Swedish home help service. In: Hakulinen, A., Selting, M. (Eds.), *Syntax and Lexis in Conversation: Studies on the Use of Linguistic Resources in Talk-in-interaction*. Amsterdam, Benjamins, pp. 209-230.
- Rossi, Giovanni, 2012. Bilateral and unilateral requests: the use of imperatives and mix? Interrogatives in Italian. *Discourse Process.* 49, 426-458.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A., 2007. *Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Searle, John R., 1976. A classification of illocutionary acts. *Lang. Soc.* 5, 1-23.
- Wootton, Anthony, 1981. Two request forms of four year olds. *J. Pragmat.* 5, 511-523.
- Wootton, Anthony, 1997. *Interaction and the Development of Mind*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Zinken, Jörg, Ogiermann, Eva, 2013. Responsibility and action: invariants and diversity in requests for objects in British English and Polish interaction. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 46 (3), 256-276.