DIRECTNESS IN POLITENESS OF INDONESIAN CHILDREN’S REQUESTS

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ABSTRACT

The role of politeness in social interaction and conversation has been an important topic in sociology and conversational studies. Politeness has become a highly prolific research field in linguistics (Hickey & Stewart 2005). However, a comprehensive study has rarely been done on the politeness in children, particularly in Indonesian children. This article is a research-based study that combines pragmatics and speech act issues in language acquisition frame. The study deals with politeness in Indonesian children’s requests in written language. Basing the study on actual written requests produced by children at the age of 9 up to 12 years old, it was found that: (1) the children promote largely direct strategies in their requests to the Bobo magazine, (2) the directness level varies with increasing imposition of children’s requests. The findings indicate the fact that Indonesian children are able to perform politeness in their interaction to others. This finding also call for further study on politeness dealing with subject at different age periods e.g. adolescence, as age factor bears some influence on investigation on these matters.

Key word: Directness, politeness, children, requests

INTRODUCTION

One of the important issues in pragmatics is politeness. Politeness seems to be an important device used in order to carry out successful communication. It is an important issue in pragmatics because it is regarded as a universal phenomenon in language use (Brown & Levinson 1987). As a universal principle of human interaction, politeness phenomena by their nature are reflected in language and it deals with social and cultural complexity. Holmes (1995:267) emphasizes that politeness involves an understanding of, not only, the language but also social and cultural values of such community.

Being polite is a complicated business in language use, particularly for children. Writing on children's understanding of politeness, Clark (2003:340) suggests that to make appropriate use of politeness, children must master several different dimensions of use. Firstly, they need to know what linguistic forms are for making polite requests. Secondly, they must identify the pragmatic conditions on making requests in any social settings and hence take into account the status, age, and sex of their interlocutors. Thirdly, they need some general understanding of the cost versus benefits of gaining (or losing) face in relation to others, and the desirability of keeping things equal or balanced within an exchange (Brown & Levinson 1987).
Byron (1990:6) outlines the importance of politeness in the development of children’s language by stating that politeness forms a vital part of the socialization process during which the skills of adulthood are acquired. Thus, politeness can be understood as basic to the production of social order and a precondition of children interaction. Very simply, politeness is behavior or language designed to make people feel at ease.

Exploring politeness in western-language, (Brown & Levinson 1987) state that politeness is attributed to indirect strategies. There are two different views regarding politeness and issues of indirectness. Brown & Levinson (1978) believe that politeness relates to the aspects of indirectness in speech. They agree that politeness is attributed to indirect strategies. It means that the more indirectly the request is realized, the more polite it is. Higher levels of indirectness may result in higher levels of politeness. Oppositely, Blum-Kulka (1989) claims that indirectness is not the only way to influence the degree of politeness, other modifiers such as politeness markers also play a role.

A directive or request is a particularly important speech act in children interaction. Request is the clearest example of face threatening speech act (Brown & Levinson 1978:71). The importance of request in children interaction is emphasized by Clark & Clark (1977:315) stating that requests are universally used by normally-developing children and used mainly in the children’s speech beside assertions. It means that in their interaction with other, children use requests and assertions dominantly in order to obtain their intention. Moreover, requests for children, particularly request for information are functioned also as the means to learn about new phenomena.

**THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study is to examine the linguistic realization of politeness in Indonesian children’s requests. This is done by examining children’s requests in their letters addressed to the *Bobo* Magazine. Thus, it was children’s written language that has been examined. The request examined is one specific illocutionary act-request i.e. attempts on the part of speaker to get the hearer to perform some kind of action or cessation of action. This definition is intended to exclude request for information and permission.

The study examined whether children’s requests in their letters to magazine promote more direct or indirect request strategies, whether request strategies in children vary with increasing imposition of the request, and if such requests are mitigated-and thus rendered more polite- what lexical politeness modifiers are used, and lastly; what request perspective used to mitigate children’s requests. Overall, the analysis is merely focused on request strategies to examine the level of directness. The analysis conducted depends on the ranking of imposition of children’s requests on the recipient that refers to the relative rights that the speaker has to perform an act and the relative obligation of the hearer to comply. Three types of requests were analyzed from least to most imposing; requests for pen pal (ReqPP), requests for variety of rubrics content (Req VRC), and request for bonus (ReqB). This is to show that the imposition of children’s requests varies across requests types.
RESEARCH METHOD

Requests strategies used in each request types are identified by using Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) modified Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework to find the proportion of direct, indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies.

The subjects of the study are Indonesian children living in Indonesia. They are actually the readers of the Bobo magazine who send letters to Bobo. The children whose requests were examined in the study are all the students of middle childhood from the age of 9 up to 12 years old. The decision of using this range of age was based on the fact that, firstly, most of the study on politeness shows that children produce and understand polite sentences then fully mastered polite register at age 9 (Axia & Baroni 1985). Secondly, that in Indonesia, letter writing lessons is began to be taught formally in school at grade IV – VI of primary school (i.e. around age 9 up to 12). The gender differences of the subjects were excluded in the study since there is no association between children’s politeness skills and gender (Pedlow 1997).

The naturally-occurring requests acts performed by subjects in Bahasa Indonesia that were analyzed. Those analyzed were requests occurred in the column of reader’s letters Apa kabar Bo in Bobo magazine over seven months of publication i.e. from January up to July 2007. Overall, 99 letters containing 118 requests has been analyzed.

The 118 requests head acts were then classified into three types of requests according to the Ranking of imposition (R) (see Brown & Levinson’s sociological variables). The targeted requests types are (1) 53 items of requests for Pen Pal (ReqPP) e.g. Bo, carikan aku sahabat pena yang sebaya denganku, ya!, (2) 40 items of requests for Variety of Rubrics Content (ReqVRC) e.g. Bo, tolong profilkan acara televisi tentang “Casper si Hantu yang ramah”, and (3) 25 items of requests for Bonus (ReqB) e.g. Bo, sekali-sekali bonusnya poster gambar Bona dan Rong-rong, dong!.

FINDINGS

Overall, the findings show the fact that directness plays an important role in children’s requests. This support Blum-Kulka’s statement (1989) claiming that children use direct rather than indirect request forms and indirectness is not the only way to influence the degree of politeness. The analysis of data can be traced on next part of this article.
TABLE 1. THE PROPORTION OF REQUEST STRATEGIES FOR ReqPP, ReqVRC & ReqB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGY TYPE</th>
<th>SUB-STRATEGY</th>
<th>ReqPP</th>
<th>ReqVRC</th>
<th>ReqB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Imperative</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explicit Performative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hedged Performative</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Goal Statement</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Want Statement</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Suggestory Formulae</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Query Prepatory (ability, willingness, availability)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NON CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (HINTS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Question Hints</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Statement Hints</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL NUMBER OF REQUESTS</strong></td>
<td>53</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that for ReqPP, children used far more direct strategies (90.6%) than indirect strategies that in this case are represented by non-conventionally indirect or hints strategies (9.4%). Here, conventionally indirect strategies seem to have no token. For ReqVRC, children used 70% direct strategies and 30% indirect strategies (2.75%) conventionally indirect strategies and 2.5% non-conventionally indirect strategies or hints) from overall of their requests. Lastly, for ReqB, children used 80% direct strategies and 20% indirect strategies that in this case are represented by conventionally indirect strategies. No children used non-conventionally indirect strategies or hints in this type of requests.

From the data above, it is found that for the three types of requests, children resorted largely to direct strategies. The average percentage of the uses of direct strategies are relatively high (80.2%) means that the majority of requests produced by children in the study are direct. Children used slightly similar amount of direct strategies in each types of requests.

**CHILDREN’S REQUEST STRATEGIES**

For the three types of requests, children resorted largely to direct strategies. It means that direct strategies are the strategies which children performed mostly in their requests. The preference to promote them in children’s requests presumably at the first place is due to the clarity of request since direct types of request would give a more transparent meaning to the request (Blum-Kulka 1989). Children selected more direct strategies to ease Bobo to understand their requests. By this way it is hoped and Bobo then fulfill their requests accordingly. Secondly, it seems that directness in children’s requests was due to the degree of closeness between the children and Bobo. Children may feel that Bobo is their close friend since most of the children who sent letters have subscribed the magazine for more than three years in average. Consequently, when writing their requests to Bobo, they feel comfort to use direct strategies even indirectness; as one of the formality indicator, is generally used in written language. Thus, written language does not emerge children, at any circumstances, to
opt more indirect strategies in their requests since the relations among children and Bobo are considered equals and close. In this case solidarity and camaraderie is considered to be a central issue. This is the evidence that indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness in children’s communication. It depends on the closeness between the speaker and the hearer.

Directness Level Related to the Level of Imposition in Children’s Requests

The directness level varies with increasing imposition of children’s requests. It seems that the level of imposition goes gradually with the directness. The highest uses of direct strategies found in the low-level imposition request (ReqPP) emphasize this fact. It seems normal that in ReqPP children use mostly direct strategies since the imposition of the request is relatively low. This is an accordance with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) formula of the seriousness of face threatening act that the more serious the act (with high imposition), the higher number of strategy chosen by the speaker. This formula can be interpreted then as the more indirect strategy chosen. In this study, children may feel that requesting Bobo to find them pen pals do not rend any burden to Bobo since the tasks are relatively not difficult to carry out. Consequently, the use of indirect strategies in this requests type seems to be unnecessary for the fulfillment of their requests.

Surprisingly, beside direct strategies, children use non-conventionally or hints as well for this request type. These children apparently assume that the context speaks for itself; when they write statement in their letters to Bobo, they are actually requesting the readers to be their pen pals. By the same token, for readers, their familiarity with such situation will not make such hints difficult to interpret. This shows that politeness as the pragmatic competence is already developed on children’s requests.

The second ranks of the uses of direct strategies are found in high-level imposition request (ReqB). Interestingly, though having high imposition, request for Bonus does not prevent children to use more direct strategies. It seems that children intend to make their requests as clear as possible and easy to be fulfilled. Here, children presumably realize that only by using direct strategies they can obtain their wants. Thus, the uses of direct strategies are intended to avoid ambiguity in their requests. This is supported by the fact that children never use hints in this type of requests.

The lowest uses of direct strategies are found in the mid-level imposition request (ReqVRC). Here children also performed most of their requests by the use of direct strategies. But different from the two requests type, in ReqVRC, children employ all types of request strategies. It can be explained by the nature of this requests type itself since the requests were varied. Children express not only one similar type of requests but also opinions, suggestions, inputs, and even critics for improvement of the magazine. Actually, their requests contain lots of information of children’s needs.
The directness levels of each request types are presented as shown on the chart:

![Chart 1. Directness Level by Request Type](image)

The chart shows that the directness level varies with increasing imposition of children’s requests. It seems that the level of imposition goes gradually with the directness. The highest uses of direct strategies are found in ReqPP (90.6%) where the imposition is relatively low.

Example:
(1) Carikan aku sapen, Bo!
*Find me pen pal, Bo!*

It seems normal that in ReqPP children used mostly direct strategies since the imposition of the requests is low.

Surprisingly, beside direct strategies, children use also non-conventionally strategies or hints in this type of requests (9.4%).

Example:
(2) Bagi teman-teman yang ingin bersapen, silahkan!
*For you (friends) who want to make pen pal, please!*

The second ranks of the uses of direct strategies are found in ReqB (80%) where the imposition is high.

Example:
(3) Tolong bonuskan poster keluarga Bobo!
*Please give us the poster of Bobo’s as the bonus.*

Interestingly, though having high imposition, request for Bonus did not prevent children to use more direct strategies.

The lowest uses of direct strategies are found in ReqVRC (70%) where the imposition is medium. Here children also performed most of their requests by use of direct strategies.

Example:
(4) Bo, tolong profilkan acara televise tentang “Casper si Hantu yang ramah.”
*Bo, please carry the television program “Casper the friendly ghost.”*

But different from the two requests types, in ReqVRC, children used all the requests strategies.
CONCLUSIONS

Based on data analysis and the findings of the study, it can be concluded that children promote largely direct strategies in their requests. The possible reason for that is, firstly, due to the clarity of the request since direct types of request would give a more transparent meaning to the request. Children selected more direct strategies to ease hearer to understand their requests and then fulfill their requests accordingly. Secondly, the directness in children’s requests is due to the degree of closeness between children and hearer. This is evidence that indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness in children’s communication. It depends on the closeness between speaker and speaker.

The directness level varies with increasing imposition of children’s requests. The lower the imposition is, the more direct the requests will be. The highest uses of direct strategies are found in Request for Pen pal where the imposition is relatively low. Interestingly, the second rank of direct strategies use was found in Request for Bonus where the imposition is high. Supported by the fact that children never use hints in this high-level imposition requests, the uses of direct strategies is presumably intended to avoid ambiguity in the requests. Being in the third rank for the uses of direct strategies, Request for Varieties of rubrics content included the uses of all requests strategies. The nature of this requests type itself is assumed as a cause of this finding. Because different from Request for Pen pal and Request for Bonus, where children only have one exact goal to be fulfilled by the request, this request was expressed in the form of opinions, suggestions, and even critics for the improvement of the magazine.

Beside findings found as the answers of research problems, it was found also that most of the requests performed by children were mitigated with phatic form ya and the great amount of the use of slang particle dong especially in direct requests. The use of phatic ya presumably intended to soften the force of such request acts. This can be interpreted as a means to show politeness. The phatic ya may be used to seek agreement of the hearer or as persuasion technique to get the goal. But in other circumstances, it can be also emphasize a requestive force. Further study on this matter needs to be conducted.
SUGGESTIONS

This article is made as contribution and inputs to widen our horizon about politeness issues. The writer realizes that this study is also subject to certain constraints especially when dealt with subjectivity that sometimes seems to be unavoidable. Some suggestions may be useful for reader who is interested in doing related investigation.

As the writer has only dealt with participant in a similar age range i.e. middle childhood (9-12 years old), dealing with subject at different age periods (adolescent) could have varied the result, as age factor bears some influence on such investigation. Further research on politeness also need to be conducted on the basis of new technology communication devices use such as internet relay chatting, short message services (SMS), internal message (IM), etc.

Furthermore since present study found the use of phatic form *ya* and slang particle *dong* in most of Indonesian children’s requests, it is suggested to conduct further research to find out the function of their presences in children’s particular speech acts in Bahasa Indonesia.

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