

# How Americans and Saudis Make Requests: A Politeness Theory Analysis

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**Abstract**—This study elucidates how speakers of different cultures, namely, Saudi Arabia and United States employ the speech act of requesting, drawing upon various politeness features. It conducted a qualitative analysis to offer explanations for different strategies of requests used by both groups and how they employ politeness features. The present study also conducted small statistics (frequencies and percentages) to explore the most and least common strategies that were used by participants in this study. The sample of this study included 20 Saudis and 20 Americans who were students at Southern Illinois University. The findings revealed that while Saudi participants used more direct strategies than their American counterparts, these direct strategies were characterized as positive politeness. That is, Saudi participants relied on directness feature to minimize the social distance with the addressee. However, American students were more formal than their Saudi counterparts, suggesting that they were less direct when they made requests. But this type of directness is negative as it doesn't aim at removing social borders between interlocutors. This study indicates that Saudis tend to be more informal (and hence less indirect) than Americans when they make requests. The present study demonstrates that culture is a key social factor to determine how this speech act is employed by speakers of different cultures. It can thus be argued that directness has social implications as it plays an important role in eliminating social borders and minimizing social distance between the interlocutors.

**Index Terms**—speech acts, requests, politeness, formality, directness

## I. INTRODUCTION

Politeness is universal, as it concerns all communities across the world. However, perception and realization of such a phenomenon 'politeness' can vary dramatically between cultures and within the same culture (Huang, 2008). In anglophone societies and the West in general, for instance, politeness is associated with behavioral characteristics of a particular social community, while it is seen as a way of respecting others and self-disparagement in Chinese culture (Huang, 2008; Zhu & Bao, 2010). This study explored numerous politeness strategies of Saudis and Americans when making verbal requests. It hypothesized that the strategies variation is attributed to differences in how Saudi and American cultures defined politeness. Accordingly, politeness is a linguistic, social and cultural phenomenon. There are many aspects that can be associated with politeness that needs to be investigated. While some of these aspects are linguistic, such as linguistic expressions that mark politeness, others are social. There are numerous social factors, e.g., social distance and cultural aspects, which affect politeness. That is, nationality, traditions and region can have effects on how speakers communicate with one another. Accordingly, the speaker's choice of strategy over the other can be socially and culturally motivated.

### A. Defining Politeness

Politeness is a complex topic. However, determining whether linguistic politeness is culture-specific or reflects universal norms is even more complex (Watts, 2003). Thus, it is difficult to find rules that can define polite regardless of culture. Despite difficulties defining politeness in a universal sense, some views are broadly accepted, such as the notion that people seem more polite when they talk to strangers than friends, that indirectness shows more politeness than directness, and that every community has its own views of politeness (Gupta et al., 2007).

In Arabic, the word for politeness, *adab*, has multiple layered meanings. In its early use, the word meant hospitality, generosity, and invitation (Grainger et al., 2015). For example, in *fulan adaba sadiqah* ("someone invited their friend"), *adab* means "invite." Later, *adab* evolved to be similar to the English word, referring to a person's behavior. Furthermore, it was used frequently by the Prophet Mohammed to mean morality, generosity, tolerance, and virtue (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012).

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Gender is a major factor influencing style of speech (Mckelvie, 1999; Mulac et al., 2001). Nevertheless, some researchers paid little attention to gender, assuming that such differences are due to accommodation to the fronted party (Tannen, 1994). This idea is illustrated when two parties of the same gender talk to each other, and one tries to accommodate the other whose speech appears more empathic and polite. This accommodation relies on the type of the person and their culture rather than gender (Shams & Afghari, 2011). Culture has thus been shown to affect speech and politeness within communities (Tannen, 1994).

### B. Previous Research

According to Shams and Afghari (2011), people from different societies vary in terms of how they make requests. Consequently, different communities can be distinguished based on how they request different things (Al-Khateeb, 2009; Jalilifar, 2009; Sheer & Chen, 2003). In response to requests, refusals are extremely sensitive speech acts. As a result, negotiating refusals cross-culturally is a complicated issue, involving a balance between directness and indirectness, as well as social status and age (Sarfo, 2011). A key factor in this regard is knowledge about the meanings of refusals and how they are perceived by the addressee. This linguistic knowledge enables speakers to use languages effectively to refuse an invitation, suggestion, offer, or request. Furthermore, speakers' contextual knowledge facilitates communication with the addressee. Any previous requests and refusals with the other party can affect the addressee's acceptance of a new refusal, meaning the more the parties know each other, the less offence is likely to be taken between them (Berlo, 1960).

Nugroho and Rekha (2020) investigated the frequency and use of request strategies by 40 EFL learners through a DCT questionnaire, roleplay, and focus group discussion. The participants employed conventionally indirect strategies more frequently due to cultural factors and social distance between speakers. There were differences in terms of politeness strategies that American and Saudi participants employed when expressing disgrace. These differences can be observed in the choice of positive and negative politeness techniques, as well as the use of on-record and off-record strategies. Al Shboul (2020) also examined how male and female writers used request strategies in digital religious platforms. His study offered explanations from a socio-pragmatic perspective. The study found that the participants employed seven techniques for making requests in their online communication. Applying Chi-square test, the analysis revealed that many strategies such as *explicit performatives* and *locution derivable* have statistically significant differences between male and female participants.

In addition, Gari (2017) investigated politeness. The findings of this study highlighted the importance of understanding cultural differences in communication that can inform cross-cultural training and language teaching practices. These findings pointed to the differences in the use of politeness strategies by Americans and Saudis when making requests, which can be further explored in the context of cross-cultural communication. The differences in the use of politeness strategies in expressing disgrace between American and Saudi Arabic speakers can be observed in various studies.

Moreover, a cross-cultural comparison of indirectness and politeness in American English and Saudi Arabic requests was conducted by Tawalbe and Al-Oqaily (2012). They found that the two social variables (power and distance) contributed to the participants' use of various request strategies. The results also showed that on-record and off-record strategies were used differently between the two cultures. A comparative study of politeness strategies in Arabic and American motivational speeches by Bajiri and others found that the most frequently used type of politeness in both languages was positive politeness. However, the study observed differences in the use of on-record and off-record strategies, with American speakers (Bajiri et al., 2022).

## II. METHOD

### A. Research Problem and Questions

The aim of this study was to explore the ways that Americans and Saudis make requests and to determine any differences or similarities between these groups. For this purpose, this study aimed to answer the following three research questions:

1. How do Americans and Saudis make requests?
2. Which group favors more polite requests?
3. Does culture affect how requests are formulated?

The first question is concerned with the way that both groups, Saudis and Americans, employ the speech act of requesting in their daily interaction. This question examines how they make requests in terms of (im)politeness. The second question is statistically investigated by showing the frequency of frequencies and percentages to indicate which one of the two groups tended to use more politeness strategies. With regards to question three, it tries to indicate whether culture can have an impact on participants' choices of such strategies.

### B. Participants

The participants of this study were 20 Americans (nine female, 11 male) and 20 Saudis (five female, 15 male) who were studying at Southern Illinois University. Most of those participants were 19-25 years old, with the youngest 19 and the oldest over 30. The length of stay in the U.S. for Saudi participants ranged from one to two years. The majority (12)

of these Saudis were pursuing an MA while eight were either pursuing an undergraduate degree or taking remedial English classes in the Center for English as a Second Language.

C. Instrument

The instrument of this study is a questionnaire with three questions about the ways that American and Saudi participants would make requests in different situations. The available choices were categorized into three groups: more polite, less polite, and impolite. A brief demographic survey was also taken as a part of the questionnaire. If major differences were found within one group, the demographic information could be used to relate their differing answers to gender, nationality, age, or length of stay in the U.S. Distractor questions were added to conceal the purpose of the study. The three questions in the questionnaire were as follows:

1. How would you typically ask for money when you are in need? Would your approach differ when making the request to a friend versus a stranger?
2. When you require clarification on information missed during a class, how would you ask someone for assistance in understanding? Do you employ the same method when interacting with friends as you would with strangers?
3. What is the most appropriate manner to request a pen when you need one? How would you ask a friend versus a stranger?

These items of the questionnaire aimed to trigger responses to these hypothetical scenarios. These responses to a large extent can reflect people’s everyday language. To put it differently, they can reveal how people make requests in their public interactions.

III. RESULTS

A. Requests for Money

As illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, participants tended to select a “more polite” or “less polite” way to request money from friends, with a small minority selecting an impolite method. Participants were twice as likely to select a “more polite” request with strangers. Americans in this case only selected the “more polite” option, while Saudis also selected a “less polite” option. As both tables show, 5% of Saudi participants left the question unanswered.

TABLE 1  
ASKING A FRIEND FOR MONEY

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	45%	45%	10%
Saudis	40%	45%	10%

TABLE 2  
ASKING A STRANGER FOR MONEY

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	100%	0%	0%
Saudis	85%	10%	0%

B. Requests for Information

Regarding requests for missing information in class, the “less polite” option was the most common among both groups with friends (see Table 3). Americans selected the “more polite” method over twice as often as Saudis, who were more likely to use the impolite method with friends. Regarding strangers (see Table 4), the two groups agreed for the most part, with Saudis selecting the “more polite” method slightly more often than Americans and the “less polite” method slightly less often.

TABLE 3  
ASKING A FRIEND FOR INFORMATION

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	40%	55%	5%
Saudis	15%	55%	30%

TABLE 4  
ASKING A *STRANGER* FOR INFORMATION

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	75%	25%	0%
Saudis	80%	20%	0%

### C. Requests for a Pen

When asking a friend for a pen (see Table 5), Americans tended to choose the “less polite” option most of the time but also selected the “more polite” option. In contrast, Saudis selected the “impolite” method half the time, none of the Americans chose this option, and selected the “less polite” option in most other cases instead. When asking strangers (see Table 6), both groups tended to select the “more polite” option, with Saudis twice as likely as Americans to choose the “less polite” option and American leaving this question unanswered 5% of the time.

TABLE 5  
ASKING A FRIEND FOR A PEN

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	25%	75%	0%
Saudis	10%	40%	50%

TABLE 6  
ASKING A *STRANGER* FOR A PEN

Participants	Strategy		
	More Polite	Less Polite	Impolite
Americans	80%	15%	0%
Saudis	70%	30%	0%

## IV. DISCUSSION

### A. Analysis of Saudi Answers

#### (a). Asking for Money

The following example was the most indirect request used by participants in this study:

أحتاج لمبلغ مالي بشكل ضروري ممكن لو تكرمت أستعير منك مبلغ وأرده لك قريب جدا

This example involves the verb “need,” which emphasizes the speaker’s need for money. It is followed by the adverb /bʃakil dʕaruri/ “incredibly need”, which adds emphasis to the request. In this utterance, a politeness marker was employed by the speaker /law takarramt/ “if you may”. In this request, the speaker indicates when they will pay the addressee back.

The politeness maker /teg dar taʃtʕini/ is used in this expression:

أحتاج مبلغ مالي تقدر تعطيني وأرده لك قريب؟

However, it is less polite than the previous example. Here the utterance starts with /aħtadz/, a verb widely used when people ask for money. As a result, it was frequently used by Saudi participants in this study. This example also indicates when a speaker will pay back the addressee.

This example does not show any politeness marker:

عطني فلوس!

The speaker performed this request using the imperative form of the verb /ʃatʕni/. This example shows less politeness than the verb /aħtadz/ since the verb /ʃatʕni/ does not explain the speakers’ need for money. That is, this utterance does not indicate any reason for the request, while providing reasons can mitigate the face-threatening severity of the request.

#### (b). Asking for Information

In this example, the speaker gives a reason /ma ħadʕart eddars elmadʕi/ for the request made in the subsequent expression:

ما حضرتت الدرس الماضي. ممكن لو تكرمت تعطيني النقاط/المعلومات اللي أخذتها وأكون لك شاكر

This serves as a justification to reduce the severity of the request. It also serves as a politeness marker. This example thus shows a high level of politeness. Another expression which marks politeness /wa akun lik fakır/ indicates the speaker's gratitude in case the addressee agrees to the request.

This example starts with a question /momken tařt'ini enniGat'elli ayađtuha eddars elmad'i/:

ممکن تعطیني النقاط/المعلومات الي أخذتوها الدرس الماضي لأنني ما حضرت؟

This formula serves as a politeness marker and provides a reason for the request.

In this example, the request is in the imperative form, making it a direct request:

عطني المعلومات/النقاط الي درستوا الدرس الماضي لأنني ما حضرت

The speaker provides a reason for the request. This example is among the most direct strategies used in this study. This could be justified by the informal relationship between the speaker and addressee as classmates.

### (c). Asking for a Pen

Here the speaker initiates the request by providing a reason for the request /niseit g lmi eljum/ using a question formula /momken law takarramt t'irni g alam/:

نسبت قلمي اليوم. ممكن لو تكرمت تعيرني قلم؟

In this example, the speaker asks a question /momken t'it'ini g alam/:

ممکن تعطیني قلم؟ نسبت قلمي

He then provides a justification for his request via a statement /niseit g lmi/, which serves as a politeness marker.

This request is made in an imperative form /řat'ni/:

عطني قلم

It shows a high degree of indirectness and little politeness, possibly due to an informal relationship with the addressee. People generally avoid using this formula in formal settings.

## B. Analysis of American Answers

### (a). Asking for Money

"My financial situation is getting worse. I had many commitments this month and I am short of money, so could you please lend me some money".

Here the speaker makes a request. However, this request was not directly made. That is, this example begins with stating a reason for this request. It serves as a justification, and thus reduces the severity of face threatening of the request. The request is then formulated using a yes/no question formula. This expression indexes formality between the interlocutors. People usually resort to this strategy when they prefer to keep social distance with the addressee.

Nevertheless, the second example is a direct request, where the speaker asks for money "please I need some money". He used a politeness marker "please" as one way to show respect and consideration. The participant used a statement formula to perform the speech act of requesting. However, although it is formulated using this statement, the illocutionary force of this expression is a request.

### (b). Asking for Information

"I didn't attend the class yesterday, could you please tell me what the main points you discussed were?".

Here the speaker initiates his request with a justification for this request, which comes in the second utterance in the form of question. The illocutionary force of this question is to make that request. He made an indirect request. In this example, indirectness points to social borders between the interlocutors. The speaker here shows respect and consideration for the recipient.

The other example extracted from the data is the following:

"Please tell me what you had last class".

Here the speaker performs the speech act of requesting directly. However, he uses a hedge "please" for the purpose of reducing the severity of face-threatening of request. This hedging word "please" was used widely in the American data. The other expression which is used by American participants is:

"What are topics you discussed?".

This request was formulated indirectly. It is considered an implicit speech act of requesting. The participant used wh-question to ask the addressee to provide him with all information needed regarding his missing class. The illocutionary force of this question then is requesting. This strategy was commonly used by American as one effective way to make requests.

### (c). Asking for a Pen

"Give me your pen."

In this expression, the speaker uses a direct strategy to perform the request. Despite its directness, it indicates politeness since it minimizes social distance between speakers. In another expression ("Oh, I forgot my pen. Could you please give me your pen?"), the speaker uses a question formula. The illocutionary force of this expression is to make a request. However, the speaker uses a less direct strategy than in the previous example. The example starts with an excuse for the request followed by the actual request. Such strategies were widely used by American speakers in this

study. Participants tend to justify their request by stating a reason, as a sort of justification, behind a request for the sake of gaining compliance on the part of the addressee.

### C. General Discussion

As the case with any speech acts, the speech act of requesting is usually investigated along with politeness. To put it another way, speakers usually employ various linguistic strategies that has social meanings. These strategies are used to show politeness and consideration for the addressee. However, different cultures may evaluate politeness differently. That is, many scholars (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987) argue that what can be polite in one culture may not be so in another culture. For example, when asking a stranger, Americans and Saudis tended to use the “more polite” option, even when they wanted to ask for a pen, a low imposition request. The “impolite” option was never chosen by any participants when asking a stranger for a pen. However, with a friend, the situation differed. In general, Americans leaned towards the “more polite” or at least the “less polite” methods, while Saudis also used the “impolite” method. Only four Americans chose an impolite method when asking for information and two when asking for money. On the other hand, 17 Saudis used it in different situations when asking a friend: two when asking for money, six for information, and nine for a pen.

When Saudis used “impolite” methods of making requests, they likely had several goals. One was establishing solidarity between interlocutors, eliminating barriers, and being closer. This intimacy and solidarity could be considered a feature marking Saudi speakers. Consequently, it can be argued that these expressions used by Saudi participants were to convey positive aspects of politeness as they aimed to minimize social distance.

Furthermore, according to our experience living within Saudi culture, when Saudi speakers seek solidarity, they normally do not use impolite methods alone, normally adding additional expressions whose aim is to reduce the severity of face-threatening force of requests, as one way to show respect and consideration for the addressee. This can help the requester to make the addressee comply with the request. For instance, they might pray for the hearer or thank them before or after uttering the requests, such as by saying, “May Allah bless you” or “May Allah keep you in good health.” If one of these remarks is not mentioned with the request, the request could be then considered less impolite. This can reveal that while directness is associated with lower level of politeness, it does not necessarily convey impoliteness, but it carries social meaning such as minimizing social distance or revealing willingness to make friendship. Thus, directness is a social practice used by speakers to convey particular meaning and social motives. It is an integral part of people’s social communication in various social domains such as friendship, work and the like.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigated politeness aspects of requesting made by speakers of both Saudi Arabia and the United States. In this regard, it can be argued that politeness and impoliteness indexed social meaning in both cultures. That is, based on the data collected for this study, politeness features aimed at keeping social borders. However, directness features aimed to make relationship between interlocutors less formal, and thus minimized social distance between interlocutors. This study was limited by its small sample size (N=40), but it gave some indications about the differences and similarities between Americans and Saudis when formulating requests in different situations. In addition, the location was also limited, meaning that the results may not be generalized. That is, other differences may exist if other cultures are investigated. Future research, however, could build on this study with a larger and more diverse sample. It could also employ a larger variety of questionnaire items, collect data using other methods, or focus on questionnaire items not brought up in this study. For example, does the place where a request is made affect politeness strategies and reactions to them? If the speech act occurs in the presence of a third party, does that have an impact on how it is delivered or perceived?

This study could be helpful for those interested in testing whether different cultural communities vary in their perspectives on requests and politeness in general. The results suggested that people could benefit from considering cultural differences when requesting something of someone from another culture.

This study can also help students of other languages learning the Arabic language better understand that directness can carry many positive purposes, and can be an important factor for minimizing the social distance between the interlocutors. In the Arabic culture, people frequently use various directness strategies in their everyday interactions for social purposes (e.g., to minimize the social distance). As a consequence, this can minimize miscommunication attributed to cultural differences.

## APPENDIX. SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How would you typically ask for money when you are in need? Would your approach differ when making the request to a friend versus a stranger?
2. When you require clarification on information missed during a class, how would you ask someone for assistance in understanding? Do you employ the same method when interacting with friends as you would with strangers?
3. What is the most appropriate manner to request a pen when you need one? How would you ask a friend versus a stranger?

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