REQUESTING STRATEGIES
IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL BUSINESS MEETING

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Introduction

It is common for corporate values and the values of the people who work in corporations to be at odds. Hofstede’s (1983) finding that value systems vary across cultures in terms of four variables (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity) illustrates that while a corporation (in his case, IBM) might have a particular corporate culture, this culture’s values may not necessarily be shared by the people who work in the many varied local offices of the corporation worldwide.

Individualism, as it applies in the West, for example, is almost certainly not a universal phenomenon. Hofstede’s research revealed that different cultures view the value of individualism differently. Research in the area of Chinese psychology (Ho 1976; Hu 1944; Hwang 1982; Hwang 1985) suggests that individualism is, to some extent, frowned upon in Chinese culture. The Chinese orientation towards social networks with their reciprocity of obligations, dependence and esteem protection contrasts with Western preoccupation with the individual (Ho 1976). Studies by Tang & Kirkbride (1986) suggest this is true in Hong Kong, too. The Chinese, not wishing to be perceived as unduly individualistic, often couch ambition in collective terms.

Consequently, it would appear that the Chinese are more disposed to working in collective environments than Westerners. Naturally, this disposition is mediated by certain external factors in the environment in which they work. If their company has a strong group culture, for example, emphasising the value of team work, easy access to authority, two-way communication between junior and senior staff (and a suitable physical environment allowing such communication), clearly-defined collective goals and so on, this will generally encourage group cohesion and team work, whatever culture workers come from. Conversely, high power distance through a strict corporate hierarchy, restricted access to authority, poor communication between junior and senior staff, and ill-defined goals will generally discourage group cohesion, irrespective of workers’ cultural backgrounds.

The term ‘team work’ also implies working towards a collective goal, and feeling that one has the right to call upon the cooperation of others. The purpose of this paper is to investigate some of the request strategies that people in business meetings in Hong Kong use to gain compliance and cooperation from each other, and to identify similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers of English in this area.
The literature

Research in the area of compliance-gaining has been considerable (see Marwell & Schmitt 1967; Cody & McLaughlin 1980; Cody, Woelfel & Jordan 1983), although much of it has lacked a theoretical framework. One framework that has become widely accepted was proposed in Brown & Levinson’s (1978) *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness phenomena*, in which they investigated different degrees of politeness (in terms of their directness), and discerned some of the factors that affect politeness.

Brown & Levinson linked politeness strategies with positive and negative face. In broad terms, positive face is the desire to feel valued by other people, while negative face is the desire for autonomy, and freedom from constraints imposed by others. Brown & Levinson then discerned several types of speech act that they felt inherently threatened positive or negative face. For example, requests naturally threaten negative face since they imply that the hearer’s freedom will be restricted in some way. Insults, on the other hand, invariably threaten positive face since they imply that a person is not respected or valued by the speaker.

In order to gain cooperation from their audience, speakers tended to use redressive action to counter threat to positive and negative face, Brown & Levinson stated. This redressive action they called *politeness*.

Brown & Levinson identified five suprastrategies of behaviour on the scale of politeness. These were: *Face-threatening actions*, e.g. threats and orders; *bald-on-record directness*, e.g. direct statements of the desired goal; *positive face redress actions*, e.g. ingratiating; *negative face redress actions*, e.g. indirect requests; and *off-the-record indirectness*, e.g. hints.

Use of these tactics was dependent, Brown & Levinson posited, upon certain situational factors: *Relationship distance, relationship power and magnitude of face threat*, along with individual characteristics, most notably *gender*. They suggested, for example, that the closer the relationship between speaker and hearer, the less need there would be to be indirect. Similarly, the greater the power of the speaker over the hearer, the less need there would be for indirectness on the part of the speaker. Lastly, it was suggested that if the face threat associated with a request were small, indirectness would again be unnecessary. They also felt that personal characteristics might play a part in determining politeness. For example, they discovered a correlation between gender and politeness, finding that women generally tended to use more redress action than men.

Several researchers have discovered correspondences between politeness strategies and other phenomena related to request-making, notably the speaker’s *right to make the request*, *anticipated resistance* and the *long-term versus short-term consequences of the request* (Cody, Woelfel & Jordan 1983). The last two might, in aggregate, be similar to Brown & Levinson’s ‘magnitude of face threat’. Roloff & Barnicott (1978) also considered the impact of *Machiavellianism* on politeness strategies, and Katz & Danet (1966) the issue of *potential benefit from the request*.

The conclusion from these studies is that speakers’ indirectness, and,
Requesting strategies

According to Brown & Levinson’s terminology, this is synonymous with politeness\(^1\), varies according to their relationship with the hearer, and according to the nature of what is being requested, along with the potential benefits of complying with the request.

Kasper (1990) points out, however, that Brown & Levinson’s view of politeness as being essentially a matter of avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs) is a somewhat over-simplified and linguocentric one. Kasper claims that Brown & Levinson’s preoccupation with the individual’s need for autonomy (their negative face) fails to take account of the fact that different cultures place more or less importance on individualism or collectivism (Kasper, 1990). Chinese and Western cultures are instances of cultures where individualism is viewed in a different light, as we have seen.

Kasper further points out that strategic politeness, of the type described by Brown & Levinson, may differ from discernment politeness, or politeness as social indexing. The former operates in specific situations where speakers have particular goals that they want to achieve, while the latter is a marker of deference entitlement (Shils, 1968). In some cultures, for example in Chinese culture, utterances may carry within them markers of social index, while in other cultures, for example Anglocultures, social markers are conspicuous by their absence.

Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) suggest that discourse type and the nature of the speech event may also strongly affect the means of politeness enactment that are used. Transactional and interactional discourse, for example, may differ in terms of the politeness they contain. The former may be typified by more directness (and less attendance to the hearer’s face-wants); the latter may commonly contain more indirectness and sensitivity to the relationship between the speaker and hearer. However, it is important not to attribute a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the nature of the discourse and directness. Flowerdew (1991) found, for example, that even in definitions made in university science lectures (a typically transactional type of discourse), there was a surprising amount of indirectness present in terms of internal and external modification. Similarly, while interaction in business meetings may be considered typically transactional in nature (since it normally focuses on "the optimally efficient transmission of information" (Brown & Yule 1983), that interaction is often marked by a high degree of intimacy which may mitigate directness, e.g. by means of subtle hints and references which are obscure to the observer.

Another point worth considering is that talk of politeness strategies and their correlation with relationship distance and power suggests that the latter are fixed commodities. This ignores the fact that interaction is at least partly responsible for determining the nature of the relationship between interactants. According to this dynamic view (Thomas 1984), use of politeness in routine business meetings, as well as being representative of the relationship that exists between speaker and hearer at a given time, is responsible for establishing the type of relationship they have both inside and outside the meeting room. Research on compliments by Herbert &

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\(^1\) Indirectness and politeness may not, however, be in one-to-one correspondence. Intimacy allows one to be direct without being impolite; rudeness is also often based on hints and other forms of indirectness. To equate indirectness with deference would, therefore, be unwise.
Straight (1989), for example, has shown that complimenting strategies are not only a reflection of solidarity but also a means of constructing it.

**Hypotheses**

It is clear from the above that the principles governing politeness are only partially defined in terms of their applicability to different discourse types and to different intercultural contexts. Two issues raised by this discussion are:

a. Are request strategies that one uses with one’s work colleagues in business meetings similar to those used when requesting cooperation from other people outside the meeting room? Or are they a limited subset of request strategies with greater directness due to the fact that relationship closeness, relationship power and magnitude of request are all circumscribed by the situation, and to the time constraints that operate in most business meetings?

b. In business meetings where there are Chinese and Westerners present, do both groups’ judgments of what constitutes appropriate politeness match?

The following two hypotheses may, therefore, be put forward:

**Hypothesis I**

*That, due to the nature of the situation (in terms of relationships, roles, responsibilities and time), requests for cooperation from colleagues in business meetings tend to be marked by high levels of directness.*

**Hypothesis II**

*That there are identifiable differences between Chinese and Western judgments of what constitute appropriate levels of directness in business meetings.*

**Methodology**

Ten routine weekly departmental meetings (each lasting approximately one hour) were video-recorded in two departments of the company, a large multinational in Hong Kong. Over a period of twelve months, a number of visits were carried out to the company prior to recording the meetings that were subsequently to be the principal focus of the research. The purpose of the visits was to help the writer to understand better the infrastructure of the company, and to become familiar with some of the more technical aspects of the company's work. A number of interviews were conducted during this period with the General Managers responsible for the two departments in question. These two people, both native English-speaking Westerners, would be responsible for chairing the meetings subsequently recorded. In the process of these visits, a lot was learnt about some of the specific topics that
would be discussed in the meetings, and about the relationships, both professional and personal, between the staff observed in the meetings. Follow-up visits were then conducted to interview both of the chairmen.

**The situation**

Business meetings of the type that are the subject of this study can be described as "goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions." (Levinson 1979) Ervin-Tripp et al. (1987) would term this type of structured activity type, a "conventional situation", where the conventions relate to:

i. *the setting*, which was always the same
ii. *the personnel*, who were virtually always the same
iii. *the activities*, which were always the same
iv. *the subject matter*, which was familiar to all present

For this study, in order to rule out possible differences between the chairing style of the two chairmen, only one department's meetings are considered.

**The setting**

The meetings all took place in the same room on the same day of the week and at the same time.

**The personnel**

The chair was constant, and in virtually all meetings, the staff present were the same. The only exceptions were when members of staff had to travel abroad on business, whereupon they sent deputies.

**The activities**

The structure of the meetings in each department was extremely consistent:

a (≈ 10 mins) Chair's report on the Senior Management Meeting conducted at the end of the previous week
b (≈ 20 mins) Each participant's report on:
   i. their activities over the previous week
   ii. their planned activities for the week to come
c (≈ 10 mins) Question-and-answer/discussion session directed mostly by the Chair
d (≈ 10 mins) Musing by the Chair on topics of importance to the Company as a whole

The percentage of Chair-talk in the five meetings was very high (35.6%; 30.1; 44.8; 30.6; 30.6% [ave. 34.3% of total meeting time]) while NS- and NNS-talk was comparatively small given their numerical superiority (ave. 24.4% and 41.0% respectively). The higher percentage of NNS-talk than NS-talk was a reflection of the fact that NNS participants were more numerous than NS participants (21 person-meetings as compared to 12 person-meetings considering those staff at
Manager-level and above).

The subject matter
These were not highly technical meetings. As they consisted of Managers from various sections of the department, each having their own specialism, e.g. engineering, training, computer systems, personnel and so on, the subject matter covered in the meetings was reasonably intelligible to the layman. Participants had their own particular contribution to make relating to a small number of subjects which recurred again and again in the meetings. These subjects included:

- performance;
- large-scale reconfiguration of the company’s product;
- fine-tuning of the company’s existing product;
- the company’s new computer system;
- the corporate mission statement

Findings

Hypothesis I
That, due to the nature of the situation (in terms of relationships, roles, and responsibilities and time), requests for cooperation from colleagues in business meetings tend to be marked by high levels of directness.

Ervin-Tripp et al. (1987) found that when people were in the midst of a well-coordinated joint activity, this could sometimes affect the amount of politeness used. It would not be surprising, therefore, to discover that in the "heat" of business meetings, politeness lapses and more directness is used than might commonly be the case.

Table 1 shows the request strategies used by participants in the meetings, ranging from the most direct (imperatives) to least (hints). It illustrates that, in this set of meetings, the Chair used an extremely broad range of requesting strategies, far broader than either NSs or NNSs, in spite of the fact that the latter group spoke, in aggregate, for longer. This suggests that Hypothesis I is untrue. The range and types of requesting strategies (from imperatives to hints with various forms of modification, both internal and external) in the business meetings we recorded matched those exhibited in more general situations (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

The fact that the Chair made far more requests than NSs or NNSs (44: 9: 1 requests respectively) may also reveal, perhaps not surprisingly, that requests are normally associated with the Chair rather than participants. However, it is noticeable that there are differences between the requesting strategies used by NSs and NNSs. The only request made by a NNS was at the upper end of the directness scale, while NS requests tended to be more conventional and accompanied by syntactic, lexical and phrasal downgraders which served to reduce their directness. This may have a bearing on our second hypothesis, namely:

Hypothesis II
That there are identifiable differences between Chinese and Western judgments of what constitutes appropriate politeness in business meetings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REQUEST STRATEGIES EMPLOYED</th>
<th>CHAIR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit directness</td>
<td>Firm that up...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Think about...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Have a thought about that.</td>
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<td>Better ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I want to .....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We don't want to ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I have decided ... will</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It's something we've got to ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We've gotta ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We'll talk about that ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You should...</td>
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<td>You can ....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You could ....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I think we should ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maybe we can ...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conventional indirectness</td>
<td>Why don't we.....?</td>
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<td>Let's ... Can we ....?</td>
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<td>Could you.....?</td>
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<td>Should you .....?</td>
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<td>Will you have anything ...?</td>
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<td>We'll be ...ing?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I'd be much happier if...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I think I'm going to be asking you to ....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Obviously, you'll be .....?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>You might...., would you?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It's very germane on you people to ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I think it is important that we do ...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it's very very important that you ...</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>it's very much up to you people to ....</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-conventional indirectness</td>
<td>What if I should say to you .....?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have you got any travel lined up in the near future?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NS PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>NNS PARTICIPANTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have to ask you for ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We need to...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Let's ... Can you just ...?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>If I could just..., If ..., we should ....</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It might be prudent for us to...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>I think you might well ...</td>
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<td>You probably might want to ...</td>
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Table 1
Bilbow (1993) suggests possible reasons for the differences between politeness strategies demonstrated by Chinese and Western participants in business meetings:

a  Use of politeness strategies by Chinese speakers may be affected by the rank or status of the hearer (providing their pragmalinguistic competence allows them to create situationally appropriate utterances) to a greater extent than in the case of Western speakers.

b  Western participants' use of indirectness may depend to a greater extent on whether they feel that hinting and other forms of indirectness will be understood by their audience. If the person being addressed is a non-native speaker of English, directness may be opted for in order to avoid any possibility of misunderstanding (Bilbow, 1993).

If this were the case, one would expect that NNS requests directed towards the Chair (a high-status General Manager) would contain considerable politeness, rather than the extreme directness of the explicit performative, *I have to ask you for...* we saw in Table 1. However, there are two factors that may explain this apparent inappropriateness.

Firstly, the extremely small number of requests made by NNSs during the meetings may be traced to the fact that NNSs' pro-active participation in the meetings is generally rather restricted. In spite of the fact that NNS-talk accounts for 41% of all talk in the meetings recorded, their participation in the third part of the meeting, ie free discussion, is markedly lower than that of NSs, as can be seen in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Total Speaking Time/Meeting in secs.</th>
<th>Time spent on Part (b) Main Report</th>
<th>Time spent on Part (c) Supplementary Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in secs.</td>
<td>% of total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS Participants</td>
<td>612.8</td>
<td>497.4</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted (&gt; Man.)</td>
<td>748.5</td>
<td>607.3</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNS Participants</td>
<td>556.9</td>
<td>514.6</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighted (&gt; Man.)</td>
<td>1177.5</td>
<td>1082.5</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Table 2 shows the average length of contributions made by NSs and NNSs in the meetings in Part (b) (participants' main reports) and Part (c) (discussion/question-
and-answer) of the meetings. It can be clearly seen that NSs offer more supplementary talk than NNSs in Part (c) of the meetings, eg making requests, offering opinions, and asking and answering questions (18.7%: 7.6% or 18.9%: 8.1% weighted for Manager-level and above2). NNSs, on the other hand, by and large limit their contribution to their main report (Part (b)), or answers to direct questions (Part (c))(97.8% or 97.7% weighted for Manager-level and above).

It is also interesting to note that, in terms of supplementary talk, NSs offer four times as much pro-active talk as reactive talk whereas NNSs offer twice as much reactive talk as pro-active talk. Requests of the type that we have been looking at naturally appear during supplementary talk rather than in a person’s main report, and are almost always pro-active in nature.

The second reason for the apparent flouting of meeting conventions by an NNS participant’s use of an explicit performative to the Chair may be traced to this particular person’s pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence in English, which did not appear to be as developed as that of many other NNS members of the meeting. It is possible, therefore that this was a case of pragmalinguistic error. In fact, in subsequent discussions with the Chair, it emerged that this person was often felt to be prone to such pragmatic breaches.

Thus, due to the sparseness of evidence in the corpus, Hypothesis II, ie that there are identifiable differences between Chinese and Western judgments of what constitutes appropriate politeness in business meetings, remains to be proved. However, the fact that NSs consider it part of their role in meetings to participate pro-actively in discussions, while NNSs tend to view their role as more a reporting one may indicate that the latter group apply a type of social politeness, which transcends the speech events in the meeting by avoiding requests altogether. Saying nothing may be the most extreme form of indirectness.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to test two hypotheses, namely that requests for cooperation in business meetings are typified by a high level of directness due to the nature of the situation (limited time, close relationships, high perceived levels of legitimacy of requests and so on); and that there are identifiable differences between Chinese and Western judgments of what kinds of politeness are appropriate in business meetings.

The first hypothesis proved to be untrue. Requests made in the context of the meetings attended used the full spectrum of directness, suggesting that despite the conventional nature of the setting, indirectness still plays an important part in interaction. This raises the important issue of whether we should equate indirectness with politeness.

The second hypothesis remains unproven due to the fact that there were very few instances of request strategies used by NNSs in the meetings attended. This, in itself, is interesting, and suggests that alternative strategies may be used by NNSs

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2 The weighted averages show the figures for participants at or above manager-level. It is necessary to weight the figures in this way as there are a number of junior Chinese members of staff present who speak only very rarely in meetings and thereby skew the figures.
that fall outside the meeting setting. I have also suggested in the discussion above that NNSs may be exhibiting social politeness rather than linguistic politeness when they avoid making either direct or indirect requests in business meetings.

It was posited earlier that Chinese people are more predisposed to working in groups than Westerners. If this is true, then it is interesting to ask why they do not appear to use the setting of the business meeting as an appropriate one in which to request the cooperation of their peers.

A number of tentative reasons for this can be proposed. It is possible, for example, that in Chinese business contexts requests for cooperation are not made inside the meeting room or that they are made in different settings. Alternatively, Chinese participants may feel uncomfortable requesting cooperation from foreigners in a foreign language. Or perhaps, in spite of their group orientation, they do not see this type of meeting as an appropriate situation for teamwork. Such intuitive observations are extremely open to question, however, and require rigorous testing involving larger samples than the present study.

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