

## DIMENSION OF REQUESTS

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Speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969 and 1975a and b) leaves unresolved why there are so many alternative ways of speaking. For example, requests may take any of the following forms.

Rake the leaves.  
Please rake the leaves.  
Can/Could you rake the leaves?  
You could rake the leaves.  
Have you raked the leaves?  
Have the leaves been raked?  
I would like you to rake the leaves.  
I think/suggest you rake the leaves.  
Will/Would you rake the leaves?  
I think the leaves need to be raked.  
The leaves need to be raked.  
Don't you think the leaves need to be raked?

Ervin-Tripp (1976a and b) and R. Lakoff (1977) have argued that the different surface forms of speech acts are determined by conversational conventions for speaking politely and directly. The selection of a directive form allows the speaker to make or neutralize differences in rank, age, or territoriality, and to indicate how serious the request is and whether compliance is assumed or expected.

The present research was undertaken to explore whether there is general agreement as to the politeness of different forms of requests and to determine whether requests that violate conversational conventions governing the form of requests are more memorable than requests that conform to the rules.

The relative politeness and directness of different forms of requests was examined using multidimensional scaling (MDS). MDS has been highly useful in identifying the underlying structural relations among, e.g., lexical items (Fillenbaum & Rapaport, 1971; Rips, Shopen, & Smith, 1973) and English consonants (Shepard, 1974). MDS assumes that stimuli may be represented by points lo-

cated in an underlying Euclidian space and that the spatial proximity of these points describes the perceived psychological similarity of the stimuli. In the first study, the stimuli were ten different forms of requests and the subjects were asked to judge the relative effectiveness of pairs of requests. Their judgments were assumed to reflect the similarity of the directive forms. This procedure did not require the subjects to articulate the basis for their judgments or restrict them to intuitively-defined dimensions of similarity.

### Method

Ten directive forms were chosen to represent declarative vs. imperative vs. interrogative and direct vs. indirect forms of requests. These ten forms and examples of each are listed in Table 1 on the next page. Two general themes and four examples of each theme were used to create eight sets of requests.

Eight sets of response booklets were constructed by randomly ordering the lists of 45 pairs of requests sharing a common topic. Each pair of requests was accompanied with a rating scale of relative effectiveness. This scale ranged from "-9" to "+9." The subjects were instructed to judge the relative effectiveness of the two sentences labeled as A and B. Negative values were to be assigned to those pairs where sentence B was judged to be more effective than sentence A in securing the intended result; positive values were to be assigned when sentence A was judged to be more effective than sentence B.

In addition, each subject was asked to rate a second set of ten requests on six bipolar adjective scales. They were to rate these requests on nine-point scales of politeness, assertiveness, intimacy, naturalness, clarity, and importance. These ratings were obtained in order to provide convergant evidence for the interpretation of the MDS. Eighty subjects participated.

The ratings of the relative effectiveness of each pair of requests were collapsed to a nine-point scale of dissimilarity. Low values represented pairs that were judged to be similar in effectiveness; high values represented pairs judged to be dissimilar in effectiveness. For each subject, a lower-half matrix of dissimilarities was obtained. These 80 half-matrices were averaged and the resulting matrix was submitted to non-metric MDS using the KYST-2 (Kruskal, Young, & Seery, 1973) program. Stress for the one, two, and three dimensional solutions was .13, .08,

Table 1

Requests Used in MDS Studies: (A) Original 10 Request Set,  
 (B) Five Additional Requests Used in the Second Study, (C)  
 18 Requests Used by Clark and Schunk.

- A. Tell me where Strong Hall is.  
 Please tell me where Strong Hall is.  
 I think you should tell me where Strong Hall is.  
 I think I need to know where Strong Hall is.  
 I need to know where Strong Hall is.  
 Why don't you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do you think you could tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Don't you think you could tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do you think I need to know where Strong Hall is?  
 Don't you think I need to know where Strong Hall is?
- B. You should tell me where Strong Hall is.  
 Should you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Did you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do I need to know where Strong Hall is?  
 Should I need to know where Strong Hall is?
- C. Permission  
 May I ask you where Strong Hall is?  
 Might I ask you where Strong Hall is?  
 Could I ask you where Strong Hall is?
- Imposition  
 Would you mind telling me where Strong Hall is?  
 Would it be too much trouble to tell me where Strong Hall is?
- Ability  
 Can you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Could you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Can't you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do you know where Strong Hall is?
- Memory  
 Have I already asked you where Strong Hall is?  
 Did I ask you where Strong Hall is?  
 Have you told me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do I know where Strong Hall is?
- Commitment  
 Will you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Would you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Won't you tell me where Strong Hall is?  
 Do you want to tell me where Strong Hall is?
- Obligation  
 Shouldn't you tell me where Strong Hall is?

and .05, respectively. The two dimensional solution was selected for further consideration; the reduction in stress from two to three dimensions was not appreciable and the solution with three dimensions was difficult to interpret. Figure 1 is a display of the two-dimensional solution.

The ten directive forms were also ordered in terms of their mean ratings on each of the six bipolar adjective scales. These orderings were used to interpret the MDS solutions. Dimension 1 was interpreted as a dimension of politeness. The Pearson  $r$  correlation coefficients between rated politeness of the ten forms and their value on this dimension was +.76 for the KYST-2 ( $p < .01$ ). Dimension 2 did not appear to be related to any of the other five bipolar scales; rather it was interpreted as a dimension of directness. Need-assertions and questions are located at one end of this dimension while the imperative forms are located at the other. Thus, it was concluded that the subjects' judgments of the relative effectiveness of directives are based, in part, on the relative politeness of the forms and, in part, on the relative directness of the forms. These two dimensions of directives would appear to be independent.

A second MDS study was undertaken to explore how the choice of requests affects the solution. Twenty additional subjects were asked to rate 15 directive forms using the same procedure. These 15 forms included the original set of ten forms plus (1) the declarative formed by adding a subject to the imperative, (2) the interrogatives formed from the imperative by fronting a modality marker and by fronting an auxiliary verb, and (3) the interrogatives formed from the need-assertion by the same two fronting operations. (See Table 1). Two topics (raking leaves and buying new choir robes) were used. The two dimensional KYST-2 solution is presented in Figure 2.

Stress for this solution was .18. Note that this new solution preserves the configuration of the original ten directives: Along the politeness and directness dimensions the two solutions correlate  $r = .96$  and  $.90$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively.

Clark and Schunk (1980) argue that the politeness of indirect requests can be computed from the direct meaning of the utterance. This computation involves determining the costs and benefits to the addressee (A) of the speaker's (S) request. Clark and Schunk consider the 18 requests listed in the lower third of Table 1. These requests are classified into six categories based on impli-

Figure 1: Two dimensional MDS for ten request set.

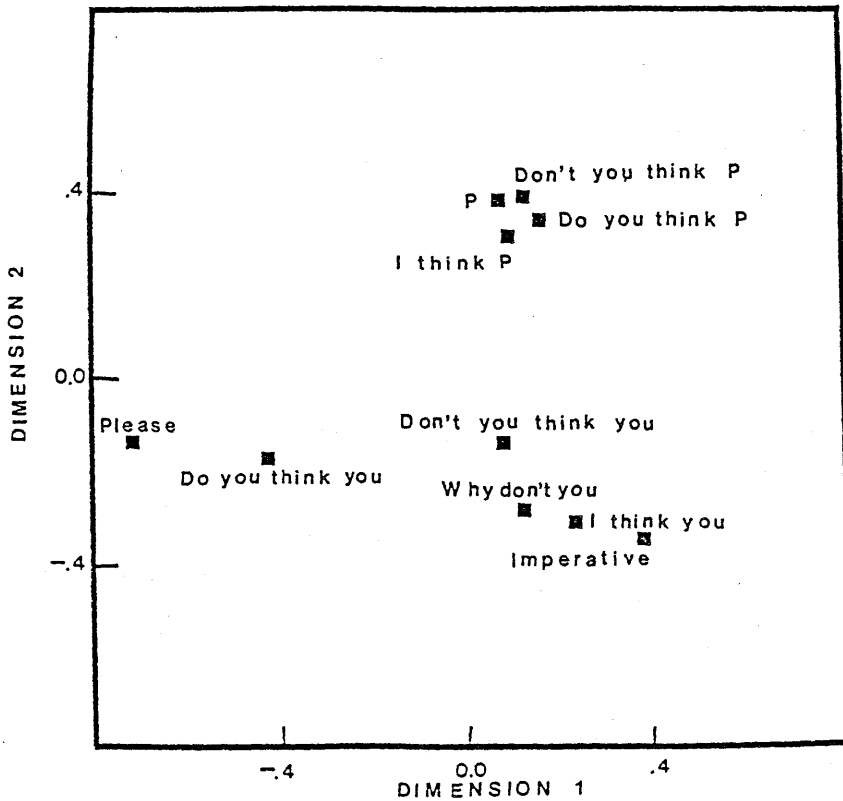
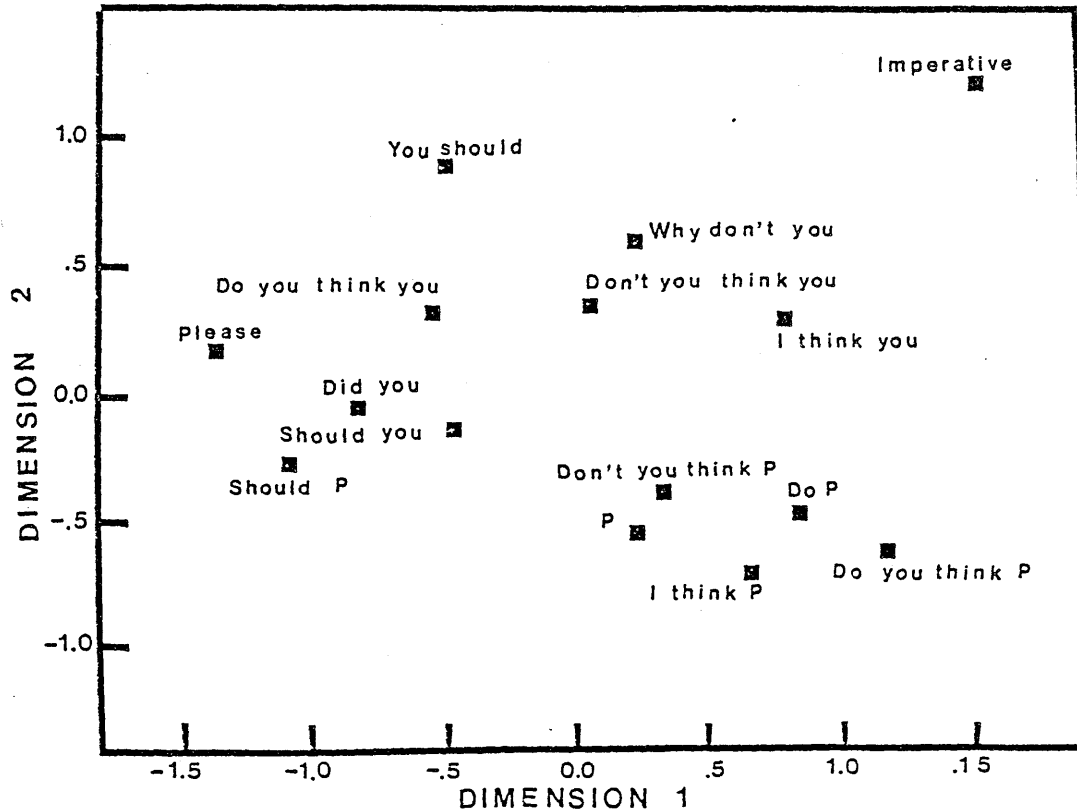


Figure 2: Two dimensional MDS for 15 request set



cations conveyed by their literal meaning: Interrogatives questioning (1) whether S has permission to make a request, (2) whether S is imposing on A by making a request, (3) whether A has the ability to conform to S's request, (4) whether A remembers a prior request, (5) whether A will commit himself to complying with S's request, and (6) whether A is obligated to comply with S's request (r). Clark and Schunk order these categories as listed above from most to least polite. They further allow that requests with (a) conditional modal auxiliary verbs are more polite than those with nonconditional modals, (b) that negative forms are less polite than positive forms, and (c) that requests strongly implying desire are less polite than those weakly implying desire.

Clark and Schunk base these orderings on a consideration of the costs and benefits to A of the implications of each form. All predictions from this analysis are confirmed by actual ratings, on a seven-point scale, of the politeness of each request.

A third MDS was undertaken to determine whether Clark and Schunk's set of requests and politeness orderings were compatible with our own. Their 18 stems were supplemented with three (the imperative, Please and the imperative, and Why Don't You and the imperative) from our original set. Twenty subjects participated; a single topic was used. Table 2 presents the one-dimensional solution; stress = .25.

Table 2

## Scaled Politeness of the 21 Request Set

	MDS Dimension		MDS Dimension
Do I Know	-1.614	Might I	+0.195
Have I	-1.400	May I	+0.406
Did I	-1.269	Could I	+0.520
Shouldn't You	-1.072	Would It	+0.680
Have You	-1.035	Do You Know	+0.796
Tell Me	-0.926	Would You Mind	+0.985
Can't You	-0.827	Would You	+1.035
Do You Want	-0.536	Can You	+1.259
Why Don't You	-0.340	Will You	+1.400
Won't You	-0.224	Please	+1.857
Could You	+0.224		

This configuration preserves the relative locations of the imperative, Please + imperative, and Why Don't You + imperative forms as found by Kemper and Thissen. When only the 18 requests common to this solution and Clark and Schunk are considered, the two sets of politeness rankings correlate  $r(18) = .42$ ,  $p < .05$ . Further in this solution, requests with conditional modal auxiliaries are less polite than those with nonconditional modals.

Thus it appears that the politeness of different forms of requests must be determined relative to the standard politeness values of the imperative and Please + imperative forms. A cost-benefit analysis cannot, in general, account for the politeness of a wide range of requests and the relative politeness of different forms is effected by the presence vs. absence of the imperative. Politeness is conventionally determined with respect to the imperative rather than computed on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis of the implications of the forms' literal meaning.

The MDS solution demonstrates that the effectiveness of pairs of requests may be represented by the Euclidean distance between the two forms in an underlying two dimensional space. Within this space, requests that directly specify the service requested are ordered at one end of one dimension while indirect requests that assert or query necessary preconditions fall at the other end. Along the second dimension, the forms are ordered with respect to rated politeness. Hedges and question embeddings modulate both the directness and the politeness of imperatives and need-assertions. These modulations, however, have opposing effects when applied to these two forms: Hedges and embeddings render imperatives more polite but less direct while making need-assertions less polite and more direct. The politeness and directness of requests are independent of the propositional content of the requests.

The results of the MDS of these directive forms were used to predict recall of the different forms of requests. It was hypothesized that requests that violate conversational conventions would be more salient and more memorable than requests that conform to the rules. The appropriateness of requests was assumed to be governed by conversational conventions and to reflect (1) the relative social status of speaker and addressee, (2) the scaled politeness of the directive form, and (3) the scaled directness of the form.

The ten directive forms from the first MDS were again used.



These forms were combined with twenty different topics to create 200 different requests. These topics involved either simple actions or the exchange of modest amounts of money. These requests were then used as the captions of cartoons.

For each set of 10 requests about a particular topic, two cartoons were selected. These cartoons portrayed two (or more) individuals in a social context that clearly delimited the relative status of speaker and addressee. The two cartoons differed in whether the speaker was of higher or lower social status relative to the addressee.

Each subject received a booklet of 30 cartoons and captions. They were asked to rate, on a seven-point scale, how funny they judged each caption to be. After a 20 minute interval during which the subjects carried out an unrelated task, they were asked to recall the captions for the ten target cartoons. The original cartoons were provided as recall prompts. Verbatim recall of the original captions was stressed.

The proportion ( $\times 100$ ) of subjects who correctly recalled each request form verbatim is presented in Figures 3 and 4 for high- and low-status speakers, respectively. Isomemorability contours along regions of the two-dimensional space recalled with equal likelihood are also plotted. On dimension 1 (politeness) recall of requests by high-status speakers increases monotonically with politeness. Recall of requests by low-status speakers decreases sharply with politeness but shows a slight improvement for the most polite form. On dimension 2 (directness), memorability of high-status speakers' requests was best for those of intermediate directness. Directness per se does not seem to influence the memorability of low-status speakers' requests.

The benefits and risks of being polite must be balanced with those of being direct. Different forms of requests enable speakers to offset directness with politeness. A speaker who violates the conversational conventions governing the form of requests, who does not appropriately balance politeness and directness, will pay two penalties: Not only may the request fail but the inappropriate request will be accurately remembered.

Figure 3: Memory for requests by high-status speakers.

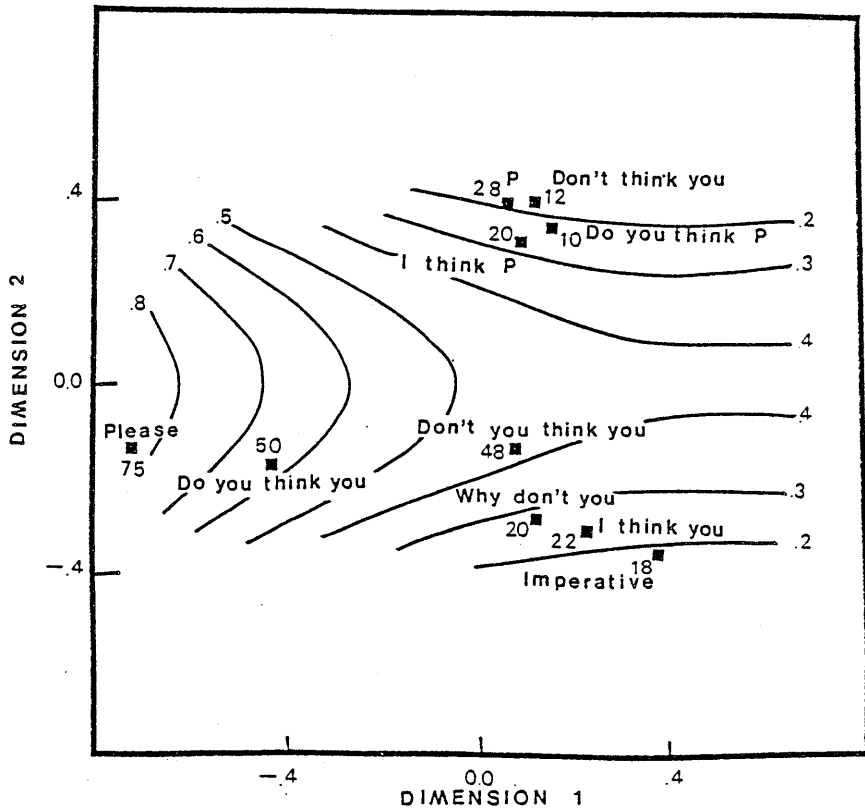
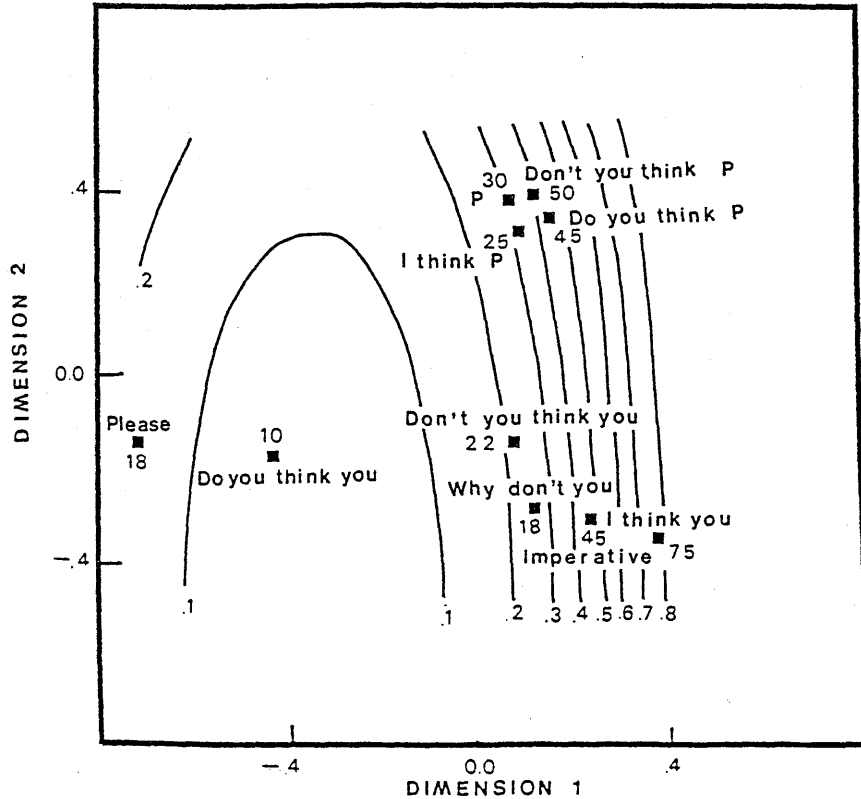


Figure 4: Memory for requests by low-status speakers.



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