

# Cross-linguistic analysis of request strategies: examples from Norwegian and Hungarian

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## Abstract

Previous studies aimed to reveal the pragmatic norms for different request strategies and discourse organisation, considering politeness markers and individual language varieties. This paper proposes further theoretical and empirical exploration of the impact of culture and language-specific grammatical constructions on some informal requesting practices. Investigating asymmetric constructions used by speakers of Hungarian and Norwegian this study examines specific request strategies in the above-mentioned languages that have become widespread in casual conversation in recent years. Whether these structures will persist in these contextual settings remains to be seen. I am mostly concerned with the intercultural perspective, how these phenomena can be interpreted from a non-native speaker's view.

## Keywords

request, culture, politeness, please, intercultural communication

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## 1 Introduction

We live in a digital age. Everyday communication and job related interactions often take place on online platforms. Request strategies have also changed accordingly typically simplified and became more direct in the investigated languages. Cases examined in this paper will present examples on some tendencies that occur in real, face-to-face conversations and are also characterised by informal, straightforward expressions.

On a summer day in 2025 I went into a post office in Germany to buy some stamps for good, old-fashioned postcards. I addressed the man at the counter as follows: "*Can I get some stamps, please, for these postcards?*" "*No, you can't*", came the immediate answer. It took me a couple of seconds to realise that the middle-aged man was joking. These types of indirect question-formed polite requests are normally not meant to be understood as yes or no questions; consequently, a negative answer in the given situation would be quite unexpected or even rude. The unusual introduction was followed by a polite service and just confirmed the important role of small talk, politeness strategies and cultural background in human conversation.

## **2 Previous Research on Request Strategies**

Request strategies are likely to be multifarious in directness, politeness, and structural organisation depending on contextual and cultural factors. The formulation of a request is shaped not only by linguistic choice but also by social relations, power dynamics, and culturally embedded norms. As a result, request-making constitutes a particularly sensitive domain of pragmatic competence, in which linguistic form and socio-cultural knowledge interact closely.

There has been extensive research on request strategies and on the role that social distance, cultural values, and contextual awareness play in the realisation of speech acts. An original and influential contribution in this area is from Blum-Kulka and House (1989), who examined the extent to which request strategies can be considered universal across languages and cultures. Their work highlighted both cross-linguistic regularities and language-specific pragmatic preferences. The speech act of requesting has subsequently remained a central focus of pragmatic inquiry (e.g. Spencer-Oatey–Kádár 2016, Wierzbicka 2003), with particular attention paid to discourse organisation, considering politeness markers and variations across languages and cultures.

### **2.1 Politeness, Culture, and Pragmatic Failure**

Schegloff (2007) investigates the interactional organisation of requests in conversation, focusing on pre-request sequences, indirect cues, and negotiation processes. From a cross-cultural perspective, Hickey and Stewart (2005) examine politeness and request strategies across European languages, demonstrating systematic variation in degrees of directness. There are also researches concerning non-European languages, showing that request strategies and perceptions of (im)politeness can be different between native and non-native speakers regardless of contextual factors (Oo–Vaskó 2025).

House (2016), furthermore, addresses pragmatic failure in intercultural communication, with particular emphasis on request-making and politeness strategies, offering a comprehensive account of how mismatched pragmatic expectations may lead to miscommunication. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, House demonstrates how request strategies vary cross-culturally with respect to directness, mitigation, and face orientation. She shows that different linguistic and cultural communities display systematic preferences for particular politeness strategies, and that these preferences may be transferred inappropriately in intercultural interaction, resulting in pragmatic failure.

### **2.2 Negative Politeness-Oriented Cultures**

In cultures commonly characterised as negative-politeness oriented, such as English, Japanese, Korean, and the Scandinavian languages, requests tend to be realised through indirect and formally mitigated structures. These include the use of modal verbs (*Could you...? Would you mind...?*), hedging devices (*I was wondering if...*), and apologies preceding the request (*Sorry to bother you, but...*).

Such strategies function to minimise imposition and to signal deference towards the hearer.

### **2.3 Interlanguage Pragmatics and L2 Request Strategies**

Within the field of interlanguage pragmatics, which investigates learners' use and development of pragmatic knowledge in a second language (Kasper–Rose 1999), request-making has been extensively examined. A substantial body of research has focused on politeness phenomena (Kádár 2013, Haugh–Chang 2019) and on foreign and second language learners' acquisition and use of pragmatic features (House 2009). These studies demonstrate that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically with grammatical proficiency but requires exposure to, and awareness of, language-specific pragmatic norms.

### **3 Aim of the Present Study**

The present study proposes further theoretical and empirical exploration of the impact of culture-specific norms and language-specific grammatical constructions on requesting practices. Its aim is to investigate selected request strategies used in colloquial Norwegian and their possible Hungarian counterparts, with a view to identifying recurrent request patterns and underlying socio-cognitive mechanisms in the two languages. It is argued that the appropriate interpretation of (im)politeness depends not only on linguistic competence but also on familiarity with the relevant cultural models and normative expectations governing interaction.

According to Kecskés (2014) "intercultural (im)politeness research should integrate the micro level and macro level perspective on language, culture, and interaction by postulating that interlocutors, to some extent, rely and/or are under the influence of their own cultural models, norms, and conventions (macro) while co-constructing interculturalities in the communicative process (micro)" (2014:206). I would complement this with an observation that in the performance of FL learners not only their own cultural model, but the previously acquired knowledge of certain foreign attitude, communication patterns, and presupposed concepts could also have a significant function. In teaching Norwegian to native speakers of Hungarian, English plays the role of a modern lingua franca, sometimes misleading a beginner: a universal marker of politeness that works very well in one foreign language, namely in English, does not necessarily have the same function in another, in our case the target language, Norwegian, as we shall soon see in particular examples of *please*.

Cultural norms shape how direct or indirect a request is considered appropriate. Differences in request styles across languages can lead to miscommunication and pragmatic failure in intercultural interactions. Intercultural communication tends to support the decisive role of hearer interpretation as for what is considered polite or impolite. Or we can put it the other way round: an utterance or behaviour is considered to be polite if it matches the hearer's expectations.

The Norwegian egalitarian cultural background and social traditions are reflected in language use and expressions of politeness alike. The use of some culture specific conventional markers indicating positive politeness may be regarded as exaggerated in intercultural comparison. However, their use is part of regular conversations. In intercultural interactions where techniques and strategies for resolving communication troubles are not necessarily shared by the interlocutors, their role can be even more important. I am going to present examples for different ways of requesting in Norwegian and in Hungarian alike, taking into account important cultural and sociolinguistic features and differences. Certain forms of expressions are commonly associated with politeness or impoliteness, but they may also be used with an ironic undertone, or for indicating irritation, impatience. Can the actual situational context help both interlocutors to process the utterance in a way they are expected to? Do they share a common ground that they need for processing the given utterance?

#### **4 Norwegian politeness**

The Norwegian language is not particularly rich in conventional expressions of courtesy. Different L1 language learners or tourists who want to learn a few polite phrases are often puzzled over this fact. The informal way of communication can sometimes be misinterpreted and considered to be impolite. This observation may be true at first glance, especially when we compare Norwegian with some languages, such as English, French and German. We find that the choice of conventional means of expressions of positive and negative politeness is really not very broad. For example, it is quite rare that the vocative *Sir*, *Mr* or *Madam* are used, as – together with other honorific terms – they have completely disappeared in Norwegian. The last century saw the loss of linguistic markers of vertical politeness such as the pronoun *De* (*Sie* in German) and titles such as *fru* (*Frau*) and *herr* (*Herr*). While speakers in many languages often adapt politeness markers such as *please*, in employing requests, Norwegian lacks a word meaning *please*. The Norwegian counterpart of the English politeness marker is not as easy to replace either, as the German *bitte*, or the French *s'il vous plait*.

Norwegians are often cold and aloof, but maybe they simply do not want to disturb others as Reidun Aambø (2005) Norwegian researcher explains that politeness is based on our expectations specified by our cultural background, and traditions. She argues that every culture has the courtesy it needs. It is when we get a mix of cultures that we can interpret each other as rude. According to Aambø politeness cannot be defined objectively because it's not about right or wrong, but about expectations.

If we identify the language elements of politeness with the speaker's strategy, it can be said that the Norwegian speakers' clear intention is to avoid superficial conversation, and keep communication to a minimum because that is what a considerate communicator does. Let alone Leech's (1983) politeness principle, these examples can be seen as minimized interactions keeping Grice's (1975)

maxim of quantity in mind, communicating as much information as the situation requires.

#### **4.1 T/V languages**

Many languages have a sociolinguistic device similar to the tu–vous (T/V) distinction observed in French. Using the T-form in the Scandinavian countries is not surprising based on cultural background and social traditions. There is no conventionalised use of titles or address terms referring to the addressee's occupation (Mr. teacher/ Mr. boss) in the overwhelming parts of the society.

Most of the obligatory markers of positive politeness which frequently occur in many other languages would have a specific pragmatic, often ironical function in a Norwegian conversation or would be perceived as a sign of insincerity. If someone uses a different form, it is usually easy to read from the context what the speaker's motivation is for deviating from the accepted norm. Surveys show that even the older generation considers it entirely natural. Several studies have shown that there may be links between T/V systems found in various languages and the cultures of the societies that use those languages. Since the Norwegian society has a long tradition of equality, equal treatment, the linguistic manifestations of social distance and the potential power relations between the interlocutors have vanished.

#### **5 The Hungarian case**

The situation in Hungarian is slightly more complicated. There is not only a T/V system, but there are parallel sets for the formal V-forms. The choice of the informal *te* (T)-form or the formal *ön* (V)- and *maga* (V)-address, as well as whether they are used reciprocally or not, depends mostly on the conditions proposed in the classic study by Brown and Gilman (1960). We can find a confusing mixture of address forms, some of which are really very old fashioned, nevertheless are still in use sometimes, like—*magácska*—the diminutive V-form for ladies, as well as more or less creative slang forms. However, it is quite clear that the informal T-form is used increasingly, especially under a certain age, and I really don't envy young adults working at cafés and (fastfood)restaurants when they have to greet the customer either with a *Szia* (Hi) or a formal *Jó napot kívánok* (Good day), risking all sorts of replies: replying in the formal way to an informal greeting or vice versa. One can get offended being considered too old for an informal greeting – my male colleagues often complain about it – and some people may feel the informal welcome too cheeky. The relationship between indirectness and politeness is interpreted differently across cultures, but differences on the micro level within one culture cannot be neglected either. My students like to avoid the whole misery by switching to Norwegian, if the situation permits. The transparent, egalitarian system makes no such challenges for the FL learner.

## 6 Cross Cultural & EFL Insights

Studies comparing learners show a tendency to favour direct strategies: *Can/could you...* over sophisticated forms like *Would you mind....* The case of requests is not always so easy to distinguish or understand. The speech act of requesting has always been the centre of interest as far as theoretical and empirical work on politeness is concerned. Since requests threaten the hearer's negative face it is crucial to formulate it in a socially and culturally appropriate way. As mentioned previously there is no "one-to-one" equivalent of the politeness marker *please* in Norwegian (Aijmer 2009, Fretheim 2005), but of course there are several ways to indicate politeness, depending on the illocutionary force associated with *please* or on its use as a politeness marker depending on different linguistic and non-linguistic features present in the speech situation, as we can see in the examples (i – v) below, taken from everyday conversations<sup>1</sup>. Markers of politeness in Hungarian requests vary also according to the communicative process, very much depending on how formal or informal the relation is between the interlocutors.

- i. Vis litt forståelse, **er du snill**. / *Mutasson némi megértést, **kérem***. / Show some understanding, **please**.
- ii. **Vær så snill** å ikke ringe meg igjen. / ***Kérem**, ne hívjon többet*. / **Please** don't call me again.
- iii. **Vær så god** å forsyne dere. / *Vegyetek, **kérlek***. / **Please**, help yourselves.
- iv. Kassen er stengt, **vennligst** benytt neste kasse. / *A pénztár bezárt, **kérjük**, használja a következőt*. / Checkout is closed, **please** use the next one.
- v. **Vær så vennlig** å parkere innenfor oppmerket felt. / ***Kérjük**, hogy a kijelölt területen belül parkoljon*. / **Please** park your car within the marked area.

As far as the Norwegian politeness markers are concerned both the semantic content and the pragmatic function may differ depending on the situational context. The point however is that in all three languages—Norwegian, English and Hungarian—the speaker uses a courtesy expression to mark his or her politeness in the given request.

The possibilities to formulate a request can vary; past tense, politeness markers, question forms, imperative are among the language tools. The most common type of request is the explicit performative, the least common is the derived mode (*A coffee / Egy kávét!*) with an unexpressed performative taken for granted. Culture-specific meanings and politeness functions are conventionally associated with certain expressions and it is well-known that a request in an English-speaking

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<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian and the English translations are provided by the author.

cultural community cannot be considered polite unless the politeness marker *please* is used. Like in the following example in a pub:

*Can I have a beer, please?*

In the abovementioned examples (i – v) we have seen that a possible Norwegian translation for *please* can be realised with the help of various politeness expressions, as for example *vær så snill/literally be so nice*. So asking for beer in a polite way according to a L2 learner (regardless of L1) would sound like:

*Kan jeg, vær så snill, få en øl? Kan jeg få en øl, vær så snill?*

No doubt that the particular situation, broader and narrower context plays an essential role, still most native speakers of Norwegian would agree that this utterance sounds a bit odd. Using the politeness marker *vær så snill* in this case can give the utterance a special connotation. The request can be interpreted like: *Can I get a beer, ... though I can't pay for it or I know, I have drunk enough, and I won't get any more, still I give a try, please, please, please ...* Or with an appropriate prosody *vær så snill* can signal the speaker's irritation, especially in case of a repeated request, when (s)he hasn't got her/his drink yet: *Can I get a beer, please.*

The cultural transfer from one FL to another FL in this case can be easily misinterpreted, although there is no doubt about the importance of the context, for example whether the request was made at an elegant hotel or in the local pub.

## **7 Thanking in advance**

Thanking normally differs from requests in that it is always connected to a prior, or sometimes a subsequent, act, either verbal or non-verbal. Nevertheless it seems that while the English way of asking for beer is a real speech act of a request, the Norwegians say thank you in advance for the supposed service: *En øl, takk!—A beer, thanks!*

This straightforward way of presenting a request fits well into the Norwegian cultural background, but the short practical request forms are preferred by the younger generation in general. I am sure that it is also strengthened by the language forms used in social media globally.

## **8 Emerging Request Constructions in Hungarian and Norwegian**

A broadly comparable development can be observed in contemporary Hungarian language use. In recent years, the future tense of the copular verb *lenni* (to be) has increasingly appeared in request-like constructions, particularly in service encounters. Typical examples include *lesz egy kávé* or *lesz egy pizza* (there will be a coffee/pizza), optionally reinforced by the addition of a beneficiary phrase (e.g. *nekem lesz egy...* for me there will be a...). In such cases, the speaker does not explicitly formulate a request but instead projects the desired outcome into the future, thereby foregrounding the result of the action rather than the act of requesting itself.

This strategy seems to contrast with Norwegian, where speakers may express gratitude in advance within the speech act of requesting, explicitly thanking the addressee for an assumed service. The Hungarian construction apparently lacks overt politeness markers and relies on the future-oriented description of the desired state of affairs. In line with the assumption that politeness is evaluated relative to the hearer's expectations, this type of request can occasionally be perceived as inappropriate or impolite. Indeed, some service providers reportedly encourage customers to avoid such formulations altogether, suggesting that the construction fails to meet prevailing pragmatic norms, however, can be considered trendy or cool among youngsters. Time will show whether it is only a temporary phenomenon or not, but linguistically an interesting development, especially if we consider another variety of this construction.

A noteworthy variant of this construction involves namely the conditional form of the copula, as in *lenne egy üveg víz* (there would be a bottle of water). Although this form is less widespread than the simple future, it clearly indicates an attempt to introduce mitigation and to mark politeness indirectly. By contrast, the expression *lenne egy kérdésem* (I would have a question) is highly conventionalised and widely accepted as an appropriate request formulation. In this case, the corresponding future-tense form *lesz egy kérdés* (there will be a question) is unacceptable as a form of a request, suggesting that grammatical tense interacts with conventionalised pragmatic meaning in a non-uniform manner.

### 8.1 Implicit Performatives and the Visibility of (Im)Politeness

Another relevant phenomenon concerns the increasing use of implicit performative utterances. Performatives cannot be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity; rather, they are judged with respect to the appropriateness or legitimacy of the action performed. Implicit performatives lack an explicit performative verb but nevertheless carry a clear illocutionary force that is recoverable from the context: *Next! / Neste! / A következőt!* The hearer infers the intended performative on the basis of shared pragmatic knowledge, with morphological cues such as accusative case marking often facilitating interpretation.

Whether such utterances are perceived as polite or impolite remains an open question. What makes the absence of overt politeness markers particularly salient is that, in certain interactional contexts (e.g. service encounters), the interlocutor's responses may closely adhere to conventional norms of polite behaviour, thereby accentuating the pragmatic asymmetry between speaker and hearer.

### 8.2 Imperative-Based Requests in Norwegian

In informal Norwegian speech, a striking and relatively understudied request construction involves the somewhat mysterious use of the imperative form of *få* (get) with a meaning approximating *give me*, as in *Få en skrutrekker!* (Get me a screwdriver!) or *Få litt til!* (Give me some more!). These utterances may be perceived as blunt commands; however, their pragmatic force can be mitigated

through the addition of polite expressions, as in *Få en serviett, er du snill!* (Give me a napkin, please!).<sup>2</sup>

The grammatical status of combinations such as *Vær så snill og få en serviett* (Please give me a napkin) is debatable, and raises questions concerning the interaction between imperatives and politeness formulae. However, it is important to distinguish these cases from constructions such as *Få tak i Aftenposten!* (Get hold of the Aftenposten!) or *Få fatt i broren din!* (Get hold of your brother!), where the imperative has a conventional second-person interpretation. By contrast, in utterances such as *Få tilbake det du lånte!* (Give back what you borrowed), the implicit subject of the imperative appears to refer to the speaker rather than the addressee, which runs counter to canonical imperative syntax. One possible explanation is that expressions like *Få litt til!* (Give me some more!) may represent reduced forms of interrogative requests such as *Kan jeg få litt til?* (Can I get some more?). If such a historical connection exists, the grammaticalisation of imperative *få* with a *give me* meaning would involve a substantial and typologically unusual reanalysis. Comparable phenomena have also been detected in Swedish and Danish. However, further research is necessary to be able to answer this question, but it is out of the scope of this paper.

### 8.3 Negative Interrogatives and Politeness in Norwegian Requests

A further phenomenon of potential relevance concerns the use of **negative interrogative constructions with modal verbs**, particularly *kan* (can), in Norwegian request-making. While similar structures exist in English, they are considerably more frequent in Norwegian and occur in a wider range of constructions. These negative questions have traditionally been interpreted as reflecting a politeness strategy based on pessimism, whereby the speaker appears to lower expectations with respect to compliance.

However, pragmatic development appears to have progressed in such a way that negative interrogatives may now be perceived as less polite than their positive counterparts. For example, *Kan du ikke spare litt kake til lillebroren din?* (Can't you save some cake for your little brother?) often sounds more face-threatening than *Kan du spare litt kake til lillebroren din?* (Can you save some cake for your little brother?) which could be considered an open information-seeking yes or no question.

Related constructions include *Kan du ikke tenke deg å...*, *Kunne du ikke...*, and *Skal du ikke...* (Can't you imagine..., Couldn't you..., Aren't you going to...), as in *Skal du ikke hjelpe til?* (Aren't you going to help?). Such utterances cannot straightforwardly be explained in terms of politeness or humility, as their positive counterparts *Skal du hjelpe til?* (Are you going to help?) are more readily interpreted as genuine information-seeking questions. English, as is well known,

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<sup>2</sup> Examples are from personal communication.

displays comparable constructions (e.g. *Aren't you going to...?*, *Won't you...?*, *Can't you...*), though with different, context depending, pragmatic distributions.

## 9 Conclusion

The Norwegian and Hungarian request constructions discussed above can be systematically related to the study's core hypotheses concerning pragmatic conventionalisation, mitigation, and cross-linguistic variability in request realisation. From an interlanguage pragmatics perspective, these phenomena highlight the extent to which politeness is encoded not in isolated linguistic forms but in language-specific configurations of grammatical structure, discourse convention, and interactional expectation.

The first core hypothesis underlying the present study is that politeness in request-making is evaluated relative to culturally entrenched expectations of appropriateness rather than the mere presence or absence of overt politeness markers. This hypothesis is supported by the Hungarian future-copula constructions *lesz egy kávé*, *lesz egy pizza* (There will be a coffee/a pizza), which lack explicit mitigation yet function as requests by projecting the desired outcome into the future. While formally grammatical, these constructions increasingly fail to meet hearer expectations in service encounters, resulting in negative pragmatic evaluation. In contrast, the Norwegian strategy of expressing gratitude in advance embeds the request within a reciprocal interactional frame, thereby aligning more closely with prevailing politeness norms.

A second hypothesis concerns the role of conventionalisation and pragmatic fossilisation. Certain constructions, such as *as lenne egy kérdésem* (I would have a question), are highly conventionalised in Hungarian and readily interpreted as polite requests, whereas structurally similar but less conventionalised forms *lesz egy kérdés* (There will be a question) are judged infelicitous. This asymmetry supports the view, central to interlanguage pragmatics, that pragmatic meaning cannot be derived compositionally from grammatical form alone but depends on historically sedimented usage patterns. For learners and cross-cultural interlocutors, this creates zones of high pragmatic vulnerability, where formally analogous constructions may carry sharply divergent pragmatic values.

A third hypothesis addresses implicitness and performativity in request realisation. The increasing use of implicit performative utterances in Hungarian illustrates how illocutionary force may be inferred from contextual and morphological cues rather than explicitly encoded. From an interlanguage perspective, such constructions pose particular challenges, as their pragmatic force relies on shared contextual assumptions that may not be accessible to non-native speakers. The absence of overt politeness markers thus heightens the risk of pragmatic misalignment, especially when interlocutors operate with different expectations regarding explicitness and mitigation.

The Norwegian imperative-based *få*-constructions further support the hypothesis that request strategies may undergo grammaticalisation processes that

obscure their original pragmatic motivation. If forms such as *Få litt til!* (Give me some more!) are historically related to interrogative requests *Kan jeg få litt til?* (Can I get some more?), their current use reflects a reanalysis in which imperative morphology coexists with requestive illocutionary force. From an interlanguage pragmatics standpoint, such constructions exemplify how surface form may be misleading for learners, who may interpret imperatives as inherently directive rather than pragmatically softened through convention and prosodic mitigation.

Finally, the Norwegian data on negative interrogatives challenge traditional accounts that equate indirectness or pessimism with politeness. The observation that negative questions (*Kan du ikke...?*) may be perceived as less polite than their positive counterparts suggests that pragmatic values are diachronically and interactionally dynamic. This supports the broader hypothesis that politeness strategies cannot be universally ranked but must be analysed within specific linguistic and cultural ecologies.

Taken together, the Norwegian–Hungarian comparison underscores a central claim of interlanguage pragmatics: pragmatic competence involves mastery of language-specific mappings between form, function, and social meaning. The phenomena discussed here illustrate how grammatically well-formed utterances may nevertheless result in pragmatic failure when transferred across languages, generations, or interactional settings. For learners, this implies that successful request-making requires sensitivity not only to grammatical correctness but also to conventionalisation, prosody, implicitness, and evolving pragmatic norms.

Cultural assumptions and situational factors present a complexity that can never be adequately captured by teaching rules, but it can definitely be an advantage if FL learners and SL learners get familiar with cultural models and norms of a given language. Hungarian and Norwegian do not share many universal politeness markers, however, an awareness-raising approach regarding perspectives of language, culture, and interaction can help avoid embarrassing situations.

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