

## The Use of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies to Express Request in English and Armenian Cultures

Marine Yaghubyan

*Yerevan State University*

### Abstract

Politeness is an indispensable topic in pragmatics. The standard of politeness may vary from group to group, from situation to situation and even from person to person. In pragmatics the principle of politeness is related to the choices that are made in the language usage, the linguistic expressions that give people space and express a friendly attitude.

The present article focuses on the examination and comparison of positive and negative politeness strategies to express request in English and Armenian cultures. The analysis shows that in Armenian culture *positive politeness* is highlighted. On the contrary, in English culture requests are made within *negative politeness* strategies.

**Key words:** *positive politeness, negative politeness, request, culture, positive face, negative face, politeness strategies.*

### Introduction

Politeness is a culturally defined theory. It is possible to treat politeness as a fixed concept, as in the idea of *polite social behavior*, or etiquette within a culture. It includes being tactful, generous, modest, and sympathetic towards each other (Yule 1996:60). That is to say, what is viewed polite in one culture can sometimes be rude, indecent and inappropriate in another cultural context.

It should be stated that all interlocutors are interested in keeping two types of faces while communicating with each other. So every interlocutor possesses both positive and negative faces. Negative face is defined by G. Yule as the need to be independent, and positive face is the need to be connected. It is the main

claim to territories, maintenance of privacy, and rights to non-distraction. Meanwhile positive face can be characterized by positive desires to be liked and regarded with respect (Yule 1996:62).

In this article we aim at examining the differences in the ways of expressing request in English and Armenian cultures, while paying much attention to positive and negative politeness strategies.

### **Positive Politeness**

Positive politeness indicates not only similarities among the interlocutors but also it expresses appreciation of the interlocutor's self-image. As can be observed, we often make use of positive politeness strategy in order to avoid conflicts, to make the hearers feel good about themselves by taking into consideration their desires, needs, wants or interests. It is important to mention that positive politeness strategy is mainly used in situations where speakers and hearers know each other well enough. The tendency to use positive politeness forms, emphasizing closeness between speaker and hearer, can be seen as solidarity strategy. Linguistically, such a strategy will include personal information, use of nicknames, sometimes even abusive terms, particularly among males, and shared dialect or slang expressions (Yule 1996: 64-65). This can be explained by the illustration provided below:

*“Hey ducky, can you give me that cup?”*

(Galsworthy 1976:15)

According to the above-mentioned example, the speaker needs some cup and wants to get it from the hearer, who is presumably his friend, since he calls him by a nickname “ducky” to identify his “friend”, which normally cannot be used with a stranger or an acquaintance to sound in a proper way. It should be mentioned that there might be the risk of confrontation, misunderstanding, and rejection in this case. By the way, speakers do not run the risk of confrontation by utilizing this kind of nicknames in the group of their friends since nicknames show solidarity. Then, we should note that another factor, which should be taken into consideration in this particular situation, is the proper use

of correct intonation since it has an ultimate power to cause misunderstandings between the interlocutors. Frequently, a solidarity strategy will be marked via inclusive terms such as “we” and “let’s” (Yule 1996:65). This can be shown by the following example:

*Let's have a glim' said Sikes, 'or we shall go breaking  
our necks, or treading on the dog.*

(Dickens 1945:396)

It is worth noting that we can make use of positive politeness strategy, in order to offer the hearer something, or give promises as shown by the following example:

*Stand still a moment, and I'll get you one.*

(Dickens 1945:396)

### **Negative Politeness**

Negative politeness is the need to be autonomous and free from imposition. The tendency to use negative politeness forms emphasizing the hearer’s right to freedom, can be seen as a deference strategy. It can be the typical strategy of a whole group or just an option used on a particular occasion. The language associated with a deference strategy emphasizes the speaker’s and the hearer’s independence, marked via an absence of personal claims (Yule 1996:66).

It is worth mentioning that the usage of negative politeness strategies presumes a direct connection between indirectness and politeness. Admittedly, in order to show negative politeness, the speaker should be indirect.

*“Would he have minded you’re going?”*

(Galsworthy 1976:163)

As can be observed, we utilize questions and hedges in order to show negative politeness:

*Could you possibly invite her to lunch tomorrow?*

(Fitzgerald 1941:120)

### **Cross-Cultural Comparison**

It is worth noting that historically independence and freedom in actions have always been crucial values in Armenian culture. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that Armenian culture is a collectivistic one, hence Armenians attach too much importance to the needs and goals of the group (Triandis 2001). They emphasize a group as one unity and relationships within the members of a group play a great role in forming each individual's personality. In Armenian culture families and communities have an indispensable role and people are likely to do what is best for society. In Armenian society people are regarded as *good* if they are kind, generous, helpful, dependable and mostly take into consideration the needs and desires of others. This leads to the conclusion, that Armenians tend to show less social distance, which means that people interact with one another directly. Furthermore, taking into account the above-mentioned characteristic features of Armenian culture, we can state positive politeness strategies are mainly utilized and accepted by Armenian society.

As can be observed, Armenians tend to show positive face since each representative of Armenian culture has the need to be accepted and sometimes even liked by others. As a part of a collectivistic culture, Armenians like to be treated as members of the same group and know that their needs and desires can be shared by others. They try to avoid conflicts and make the hearers feel good about themselves, paying much attention to their desires, needs, and interests, hence it can be claimed that positive politeness is highlighted in Armenian culture.

Conversely, in English culture people value individuality and independence, therefore it is a vivid illustration of an individualistic culture. As is stated, individualistic cultures focus on characteristics like independence and assertiveness. They value a person's freedom to act and appreciate personal identity. Thus, in English culture, negative politeness is more stressed and people tend to show negative face, indicating the need to be independent, to keep privacy and have right to non-distraction. In brief, in English culture requests are made within negative politeness strategies.

As can be observed in Armenian culture, the usage of interrogative forms beyond the area of questions is truly bounded. The interrogative form is not valued in the cultural perspective to perform directives, hence there was no cultural need to evolve special interrogative tools for accomplishing speech acts apart from questions and more specifically for carrying out directives such as the usage of “Won’t you?” This idea can be illustrated by the following sentences:

*Won't you join us? They will be delighted, everyone of them.*

(Dickens 1945:658)

*-Չէի՞ք կամենաւ միանալ զվարճացողների խմբին:  
Ձեր ներկայությունը ամենքին մեծ ուրախություն  
կպատճառէր:*

(Dickens 1988:456)

Nevertheless, if there is a possibility of having a context-free, general interpretation of the conversation provided above, then we will presumably hear or read a polite request which is being expressed, and a positive or a negative action will pursue.

In Armenian the avoidance of imperative and the usage of interrogative devices are not connected with the principle of politeness, as it is in English. By the way, there is an obvious similarity related to the expression “would you mind” which is utilized both in Armenian and in English in order to make a polite request:

*Would you mind coming presently?*

(Galsworthy 1932:290)

*-Կգաս ինձ մոտ հետո, դեմ չէ՞ս քեզ:*

(Galsworthy 1975:707)

Nevertheless, it can be indicated that the usage of the interrogative forms in requests is hardly ever expressed in Armenian. Generally speaking, there

might be a slight possibility, but compared to English, the possibilities are truly bounded. Hence, one could express requests, or speech acts closely referring to requests, by apparently *asking* about the addressee's aptitude to act, or about his or her decency or kindness.

*Could you tell me if there are likely to be any more of  
you coming down?*

(Galsworthy 1932:467)

-Ի միջիայլոց, չէի՞ք կարոող ասել՝ ուրիշ որևէ մեկը  
ձերոնցից միտք ունի՞ այստեղ գալու:

(Galsworthy 1975:196)

As can be noted, the polite interrogative request form «Կարող էի՞ք», which equals to the English form “Could you?”, is not commonly utilized in Armenian culture. Instead, Armenians more frequently make use of the form «Չէի՞ք կարող», which equals to the English form “Couldn't you?”

*Couldn't you hear the noise?*

(Dickens 1945:370)

-Իսկ աղմուկը չէի՞ր կարող լսել:

(Dickens 1988:358)

Compared to English, in the Armenian language requests are often interpreted in the imperative form. It is worth mentioning that the teachers are the ones who excessively express requests in imperative forms during their lessons in the classroom as in “Open your copy-books, write the date!” and in Armenian, the same sentence will be as «Բացեք տետրերը և գրեք ամսաթիվը». Let us bring some other examples, which illustrate the usage of request in imperative form:

1. *“Bow to the board,” said Bumble.*

(Dickens 1945:34)

-Խոնարհվիր հանձնաժողովի առաջ,- սուսգ Բամ-  
բլը:

(Dickens 1988:248)

2. *“Come!” said Gamfield; say four pound, gen’lmen say four pound, and you have got rid of him for good and all. There!*

(Dickens 1945:62)

-Դե՛, մեկից չորս ֆունտ սսացեք, այո՛, չորս ֆունտ և ամբիշտ կազատվեք նրանից,- սսաց Գեմֆիլդը:

(Dickens 1988:257)

It can be stated that both in English and Armenian, requests are made with the forms «Կարելի՞ է» and “May I?” in order to express polite requests in various situations:

1. *“May I accompany you?” said the book stall-keeper, looking in.*

(Dickens 1945:268)

-Կարո՞ղ եմ ձեզ ընկերակցել,-սսաց գրավաճառը՝ ներս նայելով:

(Dickens 1988:325)

2. *May I ask the name of the gentleman, who has given us that striking piece of information?*

(Galsworthy 1932:499)

-Կարո՞ղ եմ հարցնել այն ջենտլմենի անունը, որը այդպիսի սքանչելի խորհուրդ տվեց մեզ:

(Galsworthy 1975:210)

However, it must be noted that one could not use literal Armenian equivalents of the phrases “Would you do it?”, “Won't you do it”, “ Why don't you do it” or “Would you like to do it?” in order to express requests and ask people to do something.

It is important to mention that pseudo-questions, such as “Would you like to?” or “Do you want to”, are actually defined as requests, apparently inquiring about the addressee's wants. These questions appear to be odd and amusing from the point of view of Armenian culture. Nevertheless, not only the variety

of reasonable interrogative devices, distinguishing Armenian directives from the English ones are striking, but also the differences in function should be taken into consideration. Hence, interrogative directives sound orderly and elaborately polite in Armenian. As can be mentioned, in this perspective the imperative is impartial, which neither prevents nor invites a verbal response. Beyond any doubt, this is one of the main reasons for it to be preferred in Armenian and avoided in English.

If the speaker wishes to be more polite and at the same time wants to show coldness and lack of intimacy, the infinitive can be combined with a verb used in a performative way:

*I ask you to give this message for God Almighty's sake.*

(Dickens 1945:105).

*-Ես ամենակարող Աստծու անունով խնդրում եմ,  
որ նրան հայտնեք իմ մասին:*

(Dickens 1988:588)

In this perspective it should be mentioned that the infinitive directive functions as a distance-building device in Armenian, similar to interrogative devices, used in English. But in Anglo-Saxon cultures distance is a positive cultural value, related to respect in order to express the individual's autonomy. Conversely, in Armenian culture distance will be associated with hostility and alienation, thus pre-requests such as «Կարո՞ղ եմ քեզ մի բան խնդրել» (*Can I ask you something?*), «Ժամանակ ունե՞ս» (*Have you got some time?*), «Կարո՞ղ ես ինձ օգնել», (*Can you help me?*) are usually used to be more polite.

### Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that Armenians tend to show *positive face* since each representative of Armenian culture expects to be accepted and liked by others. As part of a collectivistic culture, Armenians like to be treated as a member of the same group and to know that their needs and desires can be



shared by others. It is worth remembering that Armenians try to avoid conflicts and make the hearers feel good about themselves by paying much attention to their desires, needs, and interests, hence it can be claimed that *positive politeness* is highlighted in Armenian culture.

On the contrary, in English culture people value individuality and independence, therefore it is a vivid illustration of an individualistic culture. As is stated, individualistic cultures focus on characteristics like independence and assertiveness. They value a person's freedom to act and appreciate personal identity. Thus, in English culture, negative politeness is more stressed and people tend to show negative face, indicating the need to be independent, to keep privacy and have right to non-distraction. So, in English culture requests are made within *negative politeness* strategies.

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**Խնդրանքի դրական և բացասական  
քաղաքավարության ռազմավարական ձևերը  
անգլիական և հայկական մշակույթներում**

Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում են խնդրանք արտահայտելիս կիրառվող դրական և բացասական քաղաքավարության ռազմավարական ձևերը, որոնք հակառակ ուղղվածություն ունեն: Առաջինը հիմնված է մտերմիկ հարաբերություններ ձևավորելու վրա, իսկ երկրորդը՝ վանելու կամ հեռացնելու վրա: Հոդվածում ներկայացվում են դիտարկումներ և համեմատություններ, որոնք վերաբերում են խնդրանքի արտահայտման դրական և բացասական քաղաքավարության ռազմավարական ձևերին անգլիական և հայկական մշակույթներում: Կատարված վերլուծությունների արդյունքում հեղինակը եզրակացնում է, որ հայկական մշակույթում գերիշխում են դրական, իսկ անգլիական մշակույթում՝ բացասական քաղաքավարության ռազմավարական ձևերը:

Received by the Editorial Board 26.02.2019

Recommended for publication by the reviewers 02.04.2019

Accepted for print 22.04.2019