A study on gender differences in the length of requests in Turkish

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Abstract

Gender can be considered as an important variable in language use and research suggest that men and women use language differently. Speech acts are not exception and this study aimed to find out whether gender played a role in making requests. To analyze this, a Discourse Completion Task in Turkish consisting of five situations was given to 54 students (30 male / 24 female) studying at a state university and were asked to write how they would make requests for each situation. Then, the number of the words used for each requests and in total were calculated and compared according to the gender of the participants. The results of the independent samples *t-test* showed a statistically significant difference between the female and male participants in the number of words used in total and for each request, in favor of females. The results were similar to the previous research suggesting that women had a tendency to include more details and men tended to be more direct. Discussion of the results and implications for future studies are presented in the final section.

Keywords: Indirect speech acts; politeness; requests; gender differences; word count.

1. Introduction

The society an individual is brought up in has an immense effect on the way s/he acts. In this sense, many researchers make a distinction between "sex" and "gender." While "sex" refers to the innate and biological aspect, "gender" refers to the roles assigned to an individual, implying a social aspect (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Sunderland, 2006). Children learn to behave differently from the other sex via the stereotypes they observe, create and reflect in their groups (Spolsky, 1998), which are formed homogenously: inclusive of either all boys or girls (Brooks-Gunn and Matthews 1979, cited in Sunderland, 2006). As a result of "the very different social contexts in which they (children) learn how to carry on friendly conversation" (Sunderland, 2006: 116), the difference between boys' and girls' use of language is reinforced. In fact, male-female difference found within the groups of children even younger than 5 years old (Maltz and Borker, 1982). For example, like many studies considering school children, Haas (1979b) showed that boys had a tendency towards direct requests but girls tended to give information towards compliance in conversations. In this sense, "genderlect", as it is called by Haas (1979a,b), can be considered as a learned linguistic behavior depending on the social construct of the gender roles in the society and seems to be present in every utterance.

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There is a great body of research towards the language use of males and females (see Sunderland, 2006 for a review). To sum up briefly, among other differences in terms of language use, men are more directive, use more nonstandard forms and talk more about sports, money, and business while women are more supportive, polite, and expressive about emotions (Haas, 1979a). Parallel with these, male speech is considered to be competitive and individualistic while female speech as cooperative and other-oriented (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003). As many would suggest, the differences between male and female language use seem to be related with gender, the social aspect of sex.

Besides other functions of language such as communicating or informing, there are things people do only by speaking and they are called as "speech acts." As Trask (1999:189) explains, a speech act is "an attempt at doing something purely by speaking." In other words, speech acts can be defined as "the action performed by the speaker with an utterance" (Yule, 2006: 118) and confirming, making promises or requests are all speech acts. When the differences between men and women in language use are considered, it is inevitable to see gender related differences in speech acts as well. For instance, as mentioned above, research showed that men had a tendency to be more direct while women preferred to be more supportive and use different strategies in the language they use. In this sense, one can suspect that making requests might differ as well.

This study is based on the assumption that the number of words used in speech acts can give a hint about the features of requests made by men and women. Therefore, this study focused on the length of requests made by male and female users of Turkish to see whether the number of words used differed according to the gender of the user. Although there are some studies analyzing and categorizing the speech acts and requests in Turkish (e.g., Bikmen and Martı, 2013; Tabar, 2012), to the best knowledge of the researcher, such a study to compare the number of words for requests in Turkish has not been conducted before. Although more and more studies are needed, the results of this study can help researchers to understand whether there is really a relationship between gender and making requests.

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. Direct and indirect speech acts

Briefly, "through the use of language, people do things or have others do things for them" (Reiter, 2000: 31) and speech acts are utterances to make these happen. Making apologies, requests, promises or threats are all speech acts. Searle (1975) makes a distinction between direct and indirect speech acts. Direct speech acts have a propositional content and they carry an illocutionary force-an intention (Searle, 1975). In other words, asking questions with the expectation of a real answer is an example of direct speech acts. For instance, "can you swim?" can be described as a direct speech act if the question asked solely for the purpose of providing information (Yule, 2006). On the other hand, an indirect speech act is "an act performed 'by means of another'" (Searle, 1979: 60). In other words, when the syntactic structure is similar to that of a question but the function is that of a request, it can be called as indirect speech act (Yule, 2006). For example, "can you turn the music down?" is not truly a question. As a result, depending on the intended meaning, a speech act can be direct or indirect.

Among different categories of speech acts, requests are a sub group of *directives*, which is "an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to do something" (Searle, 1975: 13) and requests, regardless of their type, involve "an action of some kind from another person" (Reiter, 2000: 35). Reiter (2000) goes on to say that requests "imply an intrusion on the addressee's territory" (35) and "can also denote closeness and intimacy" (36). In this sense, requests can be said to be closely related with politeness, face and indirectness.

1.1.2. Politeness, Face and Indirectness

Politeness, as a linguistic phenomenon, can be described as "the formulation of linguistic utterances in such a way that they contribute to good social relationships between participants in an exchange" (Terkourafi, 2009: 157). In this sense, the notion of politeness is related with the social position and courtesy (Trask, 1999) and it highly depends on the sociocultural structure of a society. One of the most important models of politeness is put forward by Brown and Levinson (1978). Based on the notion of face, which is simply 'public self-image', Brown and Levinson (1978) make a distinction between positive and negative face. As Terkourafi (2009:158) summarizes, "positive face refers to the desire to be liked and approved of, while negative face corresponds to the wish for privacy and freedom from imposition." Related to the notion of face, face threatening acts are the acts which can result in damaging one's face (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Every time one makes a request, s/he takes the risk to lose his/her face since requests have the potential to be threatening the face if the request is not complied (Ardissono et al., 1999). As Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest, prior to a speech act, regardless of its type, a speaker calculates the possible outcomes and then makes the request at the potential expense of taking the risk of losing the face. To avert losing face, language users seem to employ some strategies and using indirect requests is one of those strategies (Thimm et al., 2003). In fact, Holmes (1995) suggests that indirect requests are a means of politeness. As a matter of fact, there are many studies focusing on politeness and indirectness (see Bowe and Martin, 2007 for a review) and in various cultures, making requests is parallel with indirect speech acts and politeness (Ogiermann, 2009). Therefore, in this sense, one can expect indirectness, politeness and making requests to be all inter-related.

1.1.3. Requests and Gender

As mentioned above, indirectness is a strategy to save face and is employed commonly by both men and women. When the related literature is examined, it is seen that there are some commonly believed ideas about gender and making direct or indirect requests. For instance, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) presented feminine speech to be indirect and male speech to be direct as part of "widely cited features of 'feminine' and 'masculine' interactional style" (574). Parallel to that, in a study Thimm et al. (2003) found that "in the potentially face-threatening situation (RPS), women used significantly more indirect requests than any other strategy, and they completely avoided orders or commands (…) Men, on the other hand, showed a greater preference than women for direct requests in both conditions" (544) and concluded that gender stereotypes appeared to be confirmed.

However, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) criticized such features as results of ignoring "stylistic variation arising from contextual factors, including the social and discourse context of an interaction, and the participants' goals" (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003: 575). In other words, although female language might be expected to be more indirect in the first glimpse, disregarding the context might yield different results. For instance, Walters (1981) studied bilingual children making requests and found that gender did not have an effect on directness of requests but rather the addressee was important. He found that when the addressee was female, the children were more polite, which might support the claims of Holmes and Stubbe (2003) about the role of context. Similarly, there are many studies where the inter-group relationships and dynamics are effective in terms of directness and requests (see Coates, 2013 for a review). As a result, the role of the context should not be underestimated.

1.2. Research questions

The current study sought answer to the following research question based on a corpus obtained from written data:

1.   Is there a difference between males' and females' length of written responses of requests as speech acts in Turkish?

2. Method

2.1. Sample / Participants

Fifty four (thirty male / twenty four female) native speakers of Turkish studying at preparatory English class at a state university in Turkey participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 (M = 3.44, SD = 1.42).

2.2. Instrument(s)

A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) in Turkish was prepared by the researcher parallel to that of Bikmen and Martı (2013) in tasks. The tasks were piloted in November in a similar group of participants to check whether the instructions and situations were clear and necessary modifications were made prior to actual administration. The final version of DCT (see Appendix A for the original and Appendix B for the English translation) consisted of five situations where the participants were asked to write how they would make requests related to each imaginary situation presented in a context. The participants were also asked to provide some demographic data such as their age and gender. The time allotted for completion was 25 minutes.

2.3. Data collection procedures and Data analysis

The Discourse Completion Task was administered in December 2015 in the classrooms of the students simultaneously. The number of words including all content and functions words in the written responses were counted and calculated for each situation and for total in respect with the participants' gender. An independent-samples *t-test* using SPSS 22 was employed to see whether the length of requests for each situation and in total differed according to gender of the participants.

3. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to find out whether there was a difference in the length of requests in terms of gender and the data was analyzed as a whole and separately for each task. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the males' and females' word use in making requests in total (t (52) = 7.91, $p < .001$). The number of words females used for requests ($M = 45.29, SD = 10.56$) were higher than the ones males used ($M = 24.73, SD = 8.56$). When the number of words used in requests for each situation was compared, similar results were seen. For instance, such a statistically significant difference was seen for situation 1 (males: $M = 5.07, SD = 2.16$, females: $M = 9.25, SD = 3.83, t$ (52) = 5.07, $p < .001$), situation 2 (males: $M = 5.03, SD = 2.14$, females: $M = 9.79, SD = 3.23, t$ (52) = 6.37, $p < .001$) and situation 3 (males: $M = 4.97, SD = 1.85$, females: $M = 9.92, SD = 3.12, t$ (52) = 7.26, $p < .001$). The number of words used for situations 4 (males: $M = 5.07, SD = 2.70$, females: $M = 9.04, SD = 3.20, t$ (52) = 4.96, $p < .001$) and situation 5 (males: $M = 4.60, SD = 1.45$,

females: $M = 7.29$, $SD = 2.58$, t (52) = 4.84, $p < .001$) also showed a statistically significant difference in terms of gender.

Results of data analysis showed that both in total and for each request, female participants used more words than male participants in this study. In fact, in the number of words used for requests, females nearly outnumbered the male participants by twice to one in this study. This means that females used a more detailed and elaborated language for making requests while males preferred a more direct and less detailed language use.

Apart from the stereotypical features of female speech, one of the reasons for the female participants to include more details in their requests can be based on the tendency of females to be more cooperative and to avoid losing face. Inclusion of more details might help the other interlocutor to develop empathy for the speaker and/or understanding the need for complying with the request better. In this sense, females' giving more detailed reasons might be considered as a support strategy for averting face lost. For instance, interestingly, some of the female participants who responded to the situation where the participants were asked to borrow a dress from their friend/sibling mentioned an imaginary "red dress." This "red dress image" might be included to trigger a similar image in the mind of the addressee and get her to cooperate to comply with the request made.

On the other hand, as mentioned as a part of stereotypical male language, male participants' shorter requests were clearly seen in the results. They did not include any details like females and made more direct requests, which might have seemed as norms for male language, which might be resulted from reflecting the typical language use of males within their social groups. All of the situations given in DCT included an imaginary close friend as the interlocutor and both males and females might have considered those imaginary friends as the same sex as themselves. Therefore, the requests they made might have reflected the norms they tended to follow within their own social groups.

Although there are studies focusing on the biological differences between males and females, in most cases of linguistic use, "the causes are social rather than biological" (Spolsky, 1998: 37). As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) state, "the gender order and the social categories … exist in virtue of social practice" (50), which refers to "human activity when emphasizing the conventional aspect of activity and its relation to social structure" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 50). "Genderlect" can be considered as a socio-culturally oriented learned behavior (Sunderland, 2006) and as put forward by Coates (2013), gender stereotypes seems to be learned in very early childhood and "widely cited features of 'feminine' and 'masculine' interactional style" (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003: 574) are results of such learned behaviors. The results of this study seems to be supportive of this notion but yet, further research is required to take this notion as granted.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, the findings of this study suggest that females tend to include more details than males in requests. Such inclusion might be regarded as a social and/or cultural support strategy to avoid losing face. Yet, further studies are needed to undercover the phenomenon of making requests since there might be diverse reasons for such a tendency.

Yet, due to time constraints, this study was limited to the difference in the number of words and an in-depth analysis of requests were not carried out. However, in a future research, a similar group of participants might be asked to think aloud prior to and during making requests. This would give a better understanding of the phenomenon. Another limitation of the study was the age groups of the participants. Since they were all prep class students, their ages were similar to each other and this

might also have affected the data to yield similar results. A more diverse group of participants might give different results in a future study. Also, in another study, both male and female participants can be asked to choose among alternative requests for situations from a multiple choice questionnaire and explain their reasons for ignoring other choices. This might give ideas about the rules of "genderlect" and how the participants see their linguistic roles fit for themselves. Finally, as mentioned above, as it was not controlled, the participants might have considered the imaginary friends in the situations in DCT as same sex and this might have affected their word choices. In another study, participants might be asked to consider the "friends" as other sex and their responses can be compared. Such studies on "genderlect" might help people to have a better understanding of how society shapes individuals and their languages.

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Appendix A.

The Discourse Completion Task (Turkish)

Ana dili Türkçe olan konuşucuların rica ifadelerindeki cinsiyetlere göre olan farkları ortaya çıkarmak amacıyla yürütülen bir çalışma kapsamında aşağıda bir grup hayali durum verilmiştir. Durumları okuduktan sonra verilen boşluklara sizce uygun olan ifadeleri yazmanızı rica ediyorum.

Teşekkür ederim.

1. Akşam arkadaşınızla sinemaya gitmek için bir başka arkadaşınızdan arabasını istemeyi düşünüyorsunuz. Ona ne dersiniz?

_____
_____.

2. Hafta sonu şehir dışına çıkacaksınız ve arkadaşınızdan kedinize hafta sonu bakmasını istemeyi düşünüyorsunuz. Ona ne dersiniz?

_____
_____.

3. Akşam sevgilinizle yemeğe gideceksiniz ve arkadaşınızdan/kardeşinizden giyecek bir şeyler ödünç almak istiyorsunuz. Ona ne dersiniz?

_____
_____.

4. Haftaya yetiştirmeniz gereken bir ödev var ve arkadaşız o konuyu iyi biliyor. Size yardım etmesini istiyorsunuz. Ona ne dersiniz?

_____

_____.

    5. Evde kahve bittiği için ev arkadaşınızdan gelirken kahve almasını istiyorsunuz. Ona ne dersiniz?

_____

_____.

Appendix B. The Discourse Completion Task (English)

A set of imaginary situations are given below to reveal the gender differences of Turkish native speakers in making requests. After reading each situation, please write the appropriate request sentences you would make for each situation.

Thank you.

    1. You want to borrow your friend's car to go to cinema with another friend tonight. What would you say?

_____

_____.

    2. You are leaving town for the weekend and want your friend to look after your cat. What would you say?

_____

_____.

    3. You having dinner with your boyfriend/ girlfriend tonight and want to borrow a dress/suit from your friend/sibling. What would you say?

_____

_____.

    4. You have a project due next week and one of your friends is quite good at the subject. You want him/her to help you. What would you say?

_____

_____.

    5. You want your flat mate to buy some coffee on the way back home because there is no left. What would you say?

_____

_____.

Türkçe rica cümlelerinin uzunluğunda cinsiyete göre farklılıklar üzerine bir çalışma

Öz

Cinsiyet dil kullanımında önemli bir değişken olarak Kabul edilebilir ve araştırmalar kadın ve erkeklerin dili farklı kullandıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Söz edimleri de bu anlamda bir istisna değildir. Bu çalışma cinsiyetin rica edimlerinde farklılık yaratıp yaratmadığını ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunu incelemek için bir devlet üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 54 öğrenciye (30 erkek / 24 kız) beş hayali durum içeren Türkçe bir Söylem Tamamlama Görevi Testi uygulanmış ve öğrencilerden ilgili durumlarda yapacakları ricaları yazmaları istenmiştir. Ardından katılıcmların cinsiyetlerine göre her bir rica cümlesinde kullanılan sözcük sayısı ve kullanılan toplam sözcük sayısı hesaplanarak karşılaştırılmıştır. Bağımsız örneklem t-test sonuçlarına göre kadın ve erkek katılımcıların her bir rica durumu için ayrı ve toplam kullandıkları söcük sayısında istatisksel anlamlı bir fark görülmüştür. Elde edilen sonuçlar kadınların daha fazla detaya yer verme, erkeklerin ise daha doğrudan olma eğiliminde olduğunu öneren önceki çalışmalar ile benzerlikler göstermiştir. Bulguların tartışılmasına ve ileriki çalışmalar için öneriler çalışmanın sonunda yer verilmiştir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dolaylı söz edimleri; kibarlık; ricalar;cinsiyet farklılıkları; sözcük sayısı

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