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Looking In, Looking Out

# Written requests in German and Japanese emails

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Acquiring communicative L2 writing competence is a challenging task: However, the adequate performance of potentially face-threatening speech acts, such as requests, is crucial when it comes to maintaining good personal relations with readers; nowadays most notably in email correspondence. In order to facilitate the teaching of L2 written speech acts, the author compares requestive behaviour in German and Japanese emails. 200 emails were collected and described according to their formal, structural, and linguistic properties. The results shall contribute to develop teaching materials that will enable Japanese students to write German emails more appropriately.

Kommunikative Schreibkompetenz in einer Fremdsprache zu erlangen ist sicherlich ein hoch gestecktes Ziel. Allerdings ist, beispielsweise in der E-Mail-Korrespondenz, eine angemessene Realisierung potentiell gesichtsbedrohender Sprechakte wie Bitten besonders wichtig, da hierdurch die persönliche Beziehung zwischen dem Schreiber und dem Leser gefährdet ist. Um die Vermittlung schriftlicher Bitten in der Zielsprache zu fördern, werden im vorliegenden Aufsatz deutsche und japanische Bittstile verglichen. Zu diesem Zweck wurde ein Datensatz mit 200 E-Mails erstellt, die auf formale, strukturelle und sprachliche Eigenschaften untersucht wurden. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie sollen dazu beitragen, Lehrmaterialien zu erstellen, die japanischen Deutsch-als-Fremdsprache-Lernenden das Schreiben zielsprachlicher Bitten erleichtern.

E-メールで依頼を行う場合に、「適切な言葉遣いをする」というのは、たとえ母国語話者であっても容易なことではない。まして、丁寧さを表す仕組みが、母国語のそれと明確に異なる外国語で表現するとなるとなおさらである(vgl. Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989)。本稿では、E-メールで依頼を実行する際に、ドイツ語と日本語の筆記において、どのような慣習的相違が見られるかを明確にするため、実験的な調査(n=200)に基づいて、E-メールにおける依頼のやり取りを分析する。その際、Brown/Levinson (1987)の理論およびBlum-Kulka, House, and Kasper. (1989)による調査を手がかりにして、状況的な要因に依存した異なる依頼のストラテジーの使用に焦点をあてる。その際、とりわけ、対象とした言語(ドイツ語・日本語)で同じストラテジーが使用される点を示すとともに、その使用に対しては、言語により異なる重点が置かれること、また状況に応じてどのストラテジーが使用されるかという点で相違が見られることも明示する。

Previous research revealed cross-cultural differences in the performance of spoken requests (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989); and it has been pointed out that Japanese politeness structures differ considerably from those of Western languages (Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989). Giving the lack of research on written requests, the aim of this paper is to describe differences in requestive behaviour in German and Japanese emails in order to contribute to the comparison of politeness styles in Eastern and Western languages.

For this study 200 emails written by German and Japanese students were collected in an experimental design based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) situational variables of power, distance, and rank of imposition. Although Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989) justifiably consider Brown and Levinson's concept of negative face as inadequate for reflecting Japanese politeness structures, their politeness model, in particular the three situational variables, still offer a suitable framework for comparing requests German and Japanese. By taking these variables into account, the emails in this study were analysed according to their formal, structural, and linguistic properties. Of particular interest was the performance of the request sequences, which were investigated by means of a coding scheme developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) to compare speech acts cross-culturally.

The following section will provide some background information on previous studies and some theoretical findings. In section 3 the data collection and the analysis scheme employed in this study will be described. The final section will give a detailed account of the quantitative results, which will be illustrated by means of tables and samples from the data.

## Theoretical background

In this paper, the methodological approach employed in the comparison of Japanese and German requests has been inspired by a number of studies in the field of pragmatics. The investigation of speech acts goes back to the studies of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975). Among the different speech acts studied in various languages, requests have received most attention by scholars. This is not only due to the relevance this speech act has in everyday interaction, but also to its complexity. In order to avoid a potential face threat, requests need to be formulated with great caution. Next to other situational variables, the speaker has to take into account his relation to the hearer as well as the imposition he might cause by uttering the request.

Most studies on the situational variations of speech acts are based on the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) who claim that there are three universal factors by which the weightiness of the face threat can be calculated: *power*, *social distance*, and *rank of imposition*. A combination of these three variables comprises dimensions such as friendship, status, authority, profession, ethnic identity, etc. (76–80). Based on examples from English, Tamil, and Tzeltal (the Maya language) Brown and Levinson (1987) set up 30 politeness strategies, which they see as options on a directness continuum: direct strategies are seen as potentially more face threatening than indirect ones. A more detailed discussion on politeness and indirectness with regard to German and Japanese speech acts can be found in Harting (2007).

Taking the essential role of indirectness into account, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) investigated

situational variations of requests and apologies in their large scale Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project, which formed the basis for many studies in the cross-cultural comparison of speech acts. For Spanish, English, French, German, and Hebrew the authors established a set of 9 strategies for the performance of requests. They ranked these 9 strategies on a directness scale ranging from direct imperatives to indirect hints. Based on their comparison of the languages under investigation they argued that speakers are more or less direct in certain situations, but that the preference in relation to choosing a particular strategy differs across languages. To date there are no comparative studies on German and Japanese request strategies. However, useful information can be retrieved from studies which compare one of the two languages to English or another language.

### Data collection and analysis

Based on the experiences of a study on German and Japanese apologies I decided to collect the data through an experimental design (cf. Harting, 2006a) which facilitates the comparability of the data and allows control of situational variables. The data collection was carried out at Bielefeld University (Germany) and Hiroshima University (Japan). At each university 100 randomly selected students – native speakers of German and Japanese respectively – were asked to write an email based on a writing task aimed at eliciting a request. The participation in the study was voluntary and the subjects were paid for their effort. In total the writing tasks displayed ten request situations that frequently occur in a university context (see Table 1). To

Table 1. Writing tasks for eliciting requests

Situation	To ask the addressee ...	D	P	R	S
1	... to pass on a message to a teacher.	–	–	–	
2	... to explain the contents of a missed lesson to the writer.	–	–	+	–
2(a)	... to explain the contents of a missed lesson to the writer.	–	–	+	+
3	... to change the date of a presentation of the writer.	–	+	–	
4	... to correct an L2 letter of the writer.	–	+	+	
5	... to provide the writer with information concerning studying abroad.	+	–	–	
6	... to explain a computer program to the writer.	+	–	+	–
6(a)	... to explain a computer program to the writer.	+	–	+	+
7	... to lend the writer a book.	+	+	–	
8	... to help the writer filling several L2 forms.	+	+	+	

D = Distance, P = Power, R = Rank of Imposition, S = Seniority

account for situational variation, different combinations of positive (+) and negative (–) manifestations of Brown and Levinson's (1978) parameters of *power* (P), *social distance* (D), and *rank of imposition* (R) were created. Since these three variables do not capture speech differences existing between peers (students in the same academic year) on the one hand, and students and their seniors in a higher semester on the other, an additional variable, which I will call *seniority* (S) was included in the study. The variable *power* was operationalised by choosing a fellow student (*power* –)

and a teacher (*power +*) as addressee. The variable *distance* was operationalised by addressing the email to a well known teacher or student (*distance -*) or to a teacher or student whom the writer does only know by sight (*distance +*). The variable *rank of imposition* was represented by requests which imply more (situations 2, 4, 6, 8) or less (situations 1, 3, 5, 7) effort and/or time for the addressee. To account for the variable of *seniority* two extra situations (2a and 6a) were created, which differ from situations 2 and 6 only in that the addressee is a senior student and not a peer as in 2 and 6.

For each situation ten emails were collected per language, which constitutes a total of 200 emails. The emails were subsequently subjected to a formal, content, and linguistic analysis. This article will focus on the request sequence, which will be analyzed according to the strategy employed to realize the request and to situational factors influencing the choice of a certain strategy. For the analysis, an approach set by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989:275–89) was adopted. The authors analyze requests according to a scheme consisting of nine different strategies and a set of syntactic and lexical modification devices. Since not all of the categories were relevant for comparing written requests in German and Japanese, the coding scheme was modified.

First, the number of request strategies was reduced to six. The first strategy will be called *directives* and it includes *mood-derivable* (realized by the imperative mood) requests, such as “Please lend me your book”, *performatives* (realized by a performative verb), such as “I am asking you to lend me your book.” and *hedged performatives*, such as “I wanted to ask you to lend me your book.” Such a simplification was judged necessary, because a distinction between *imperatives*

and *performatives* is difficult in Japanese. The second strategy I will call *locution derivable* for the purposes of this study. It is conceptually identical to the strategy *obligation statement* in the CCSARP. In this strategy, the intention (illocutionary force) can be derived from the meaning of the utterance (locution) as in “It would help me a lot if you lent me your book.” Strategies 3 to 5 are adopted from Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989), they include *want statements* (realized by an expression of want), such as “I would like to borrow your book.”, *suggestory formulae*, in which the request is formulated as a suggestion, like “How about lending me your book?”, and *query preparatory*, such as “Could you lend me your book?”. In the final strategy *hints*, the intended request is only implicated. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper’s distinction between *strong hints*, like “Your X book would be really helpful to me.” and *mild hints*, such as “I am struggling with my knowledge on X.” did not seem to be necessary in view of the few items relating to these categories found in the data.

## Results

The analysis of 200 emails yielded 136 request sequences in the German data and 124 in the Japanese data. The distribution of the individual strategies can be seen in Table 2.

As far as the distribution of the strategies is concerned, it can be seen that the most frequently employed strategy in both German and Japanese is *query preparatory*. In both languages this strategy was used in more than half (in German more than two thirds) of the total number of requests. Making up around a fifth of all requests, the second most frequently used strategy in German is *directives*, while in Japanese *want statements*

Table 2. Quantitative distribution of strategies

	German	Japanese
Directives	18.4%	4.0%
Locution derivable	4.4%	11.3%
Want statements	4.4%	21.0%
Suggestory Formulae	2.2%	4.0%
Query Preparatory	66.9%	58.9%
Hints	3.7%	0.8%
Total:	100%	100%

take the second place. Apart from *locution derivable* requests in Japanese (11.3%), all other strategies are used only marginally with less than 5% each.

In the following sections the use of the most prominent strategies (i.e. *query preparatory*, *directives*, and *want statements*) will be discussed individually. Tables 3 to 5 show the use of these strategies according to the ten situations created for the study in total numbers. In order to investigate preferences for a certain strategy in terms of situational variables, the figures of the individual situations containing either a negative (–) or positive (+) manifestation of the factors *distance*, *power*, *rank of imposition*, and *seniority* (cf. Table 1) were added. Consequently, the variable *power* (+) is the sum of situations 3, 4, 7, and 8, and *power* (–) the sum of situations 1, 2, 5, and 6. The situations 2a and 6a were only included in the calculation to investigate differences according to the variable of seniority; situations 2 and 6 representing *seniority* (–) and 2a and 6a representing *seniority* (+). The individual strategies will be illustrated by samples taken from the data. The individual data samples

are coded according to the situation in which they appeared, thus a sample coded S2 is taken from an email written to the writing task 2 (cf. Table 1). English translations will be provided, the translations may sound strange in some cases, because they are translated literally in order to show exactly by which means the individual request strategies are realized in German and Japanese.

### Query Preparatory

The strategy *query preparatory* (e.g. “Could you lend me your book?”) was the one most widely used in German (66.9%) as well as in Japanese (58.9%). As Table 3 shows, it appeared frequently in all situations in both languages: in German most notably in *passing on a message*, *explaining the contents of a missed lesson*, *providing information*, *explaining a computer program*, and *helping to fill in forms*; in Japanese in *explaining the contents of a missed lesson* and *explaining a computer program*.

While in Japanese no significant tendencies were revealed according to situational variables, in German *query preparatory* revealed slight preferences to be used to addressees of equal status, but who are not familiar. German items for this strategy are mostly realized by verbs and expressions of potentiality, such as *können* [can], and *möglich sein* [be possible] as in »Ich wäre Ihnen sehr dankbar, wenn Sie mir bei der Anmeldung helfen könnten. [I would be very thankful, if you could help me with the registration forms] (S8)« and »Wäre es Ihnen möglich, mich in Kürze zu einem kurzen Gespräch zu empfangen? [Would it be possible to have a discussion with you some time soon?] (S8)«. Furthermore, a number of expressions of

Table 3. Situational distribution of *query preparatory*

Situation:	1	2	2a	3	4	5	6	6a	7	8	Total
German	12	8	10	4	6	12	12	11	6	10	91
Japanese	6	10	11	7	6	7	6	8	5	7	73
Factor:	(-) Power (+)		(-) Distance (+)		(-) Imposition (+)		(-) Seniority (+)				
German	44	26	30	40	33	37	21	21			
Japanese	29	25	29	25	25	29	16	19			

volition, realised by *bereit sein* [be willing to] and *würden* [would] were also found in the data, as in »Anbei schicke ich [...] mit der Bitte, ob [S]ie ihn auf Rechtschreibung und Grammatik korrigieren würden. [Please find attached ... and I would like to ask you, if you would correct it regarding spelling and grammar] (S4)« und »Wärst [d]u eventuell bereit dazu, mir zu helfen? [Would you perhaps be prepared to help me?] (S6a)«. Apart from these conventionalised references to preparatory conditions, the data also contained some ‘authentic’ *query preparatory*, some of which were realised by means of an appealer (*doch ... oder?*), as in »Du hast doch letztes [S]emester in diesem [S]eminar auch mit SPSS gearbeitet, oder? [Last semester you also worked with SPSS, didn’t you?] (S6a)«.

In Japanese *query preparatory* are mainly realised by potential forms of the verbs *itadakeru* [humbly receive] and *moraeru* [receive], as in »moshiyokereba, oshiete itadakenai deshō ka. [If it is possible, couldn’t you possibly teach me] (S6)« and »honto ni môshiwakenain dakedo, zemi no shiryō to moaen kana [I am really sorry, but could I get the handouts of the seminar] (S2)«. As these two examples show, the verbs expressing potentiality were always negated in the

Japanese data, while in the German data this modification was not used to downgrade the request. Other less frequently used expressions of potentiality are *dekiru* [can], as in »yoroshikereba sensei ni go shidō itadakitai no desu ga, o-negai dekimasu deshō ka. [If its possible for you, can I ask you a favour to provide me with some guidance?] (S8)« and (*yoroshi*)i [be possible] as in »itsumo iroiro to meiwaku kakete waruin dakedo, sanshūkan no aida de kubareta shiryō nitsuite, modotte kitara setsumei shite moratte i kana ?? [I am sorry to bother you again, but after I come back, could you explain to me the contents of the handouts which were passed out during the three weeks of my absence?] (S2)«. As was the case with German, there were also some authentic queries of preparatory conditions containing an appealer, in this case *yone*, as in »izen kanada ni ryūgaku shita koto atta yone?? [You were studying in Canada before, weren’t you?] (S5)«.

### Directives

The most direct request strategy *directives* (e.g. “Please lend me your book”) was found in 18.4% of the German requests

but in only 4.0% of the Japanese requests. The total figure of individual request sequences was 25 in German and 5 in Japanese; detailed figures can be seen in Table 4.

As Table 4 shows, there were five times as many *directives* in the German data as in the Japanese data. In German this strategy was often used in situations like *changing the date of a presentation, correcting a letter, and borrowing a book*. While in German these requests were mainly directed to teachers (status +), in Japanese they were preferred in emails to fellow students. In both, German and Japanese, *directives* tend to be used in requests that are considered as less imposing and to readers whom the writer knows well (distance -). As far as the variable of seniority is concerned, Japanese *directives* were only addressed to peers, while the German data displayed no trends in this respect.

In Japanese *directives* are mainly realised by the *-te* form of the verb in combination with the politeness marker *kudasai*, as in »*dekireba kijitsu o sukoshi nobashite kudasai*. [If possible, please postpone the date a little] (S3)«. In only one case the performative verb *negau* was used: »*môshiwake arimasen ga, ashita no zemi o kesseki shinakerebanaranai*

*mune, sensei ni o-tsutae onegaimasu ka?* [I am sorry, but I ask you to tell the teacher, that I cannot attend tomorrow’s seminar] (S1)«. In the German data, *directives* were mainly realised by the performative verb *bitten*, as in »*Ich möchte Sie daher darum bitten, das Referat auf die darauffolgende Woche zu verschieben*. [I would like to ask you, to postpone the date of my presentation to next week] (S3)«. As the example shows, the performative verb is hedged by the modal verb *möchte*. Such a modification was found in most *directives*; along with *möchte* the verbs *würde* and *wollte* were also used as hedging devices. Apart from performatives one imperative was found in the German data, which in that case was only used as a pre-request »*aber zuvor, sei so lieb und erfüll mir eine bitte* [But before, be kind and do me a favor] (S1)«.

**Want statements**

*Want statements* (e.g. “I would like to borrow you book.”) are more frequent in Japanese than in German. While only 4.4% of German requests were realized by using this strategy, more than a fifth (21.0%) of the Japanese requests

**Table 4. Situational distribution of directives**

Situation:	1	2	2a	3	4	5	6	6a	7	8	Total
German	3	1	1	5	4	1	1	1	5	3	25
Japanese	2	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	5
Factor:	(-) Power (+)		(-) Distance (+)			(-) Imposition (+)		(-) Seniority (+)			
German	6	17	13	10	14	9	2	2			
Japanese	4	1	4	2	3	2	2	0			

were performed with a *want statement*. For further details, see Table 5.

In German this strategy was only used in situations in which the addressee is not familiar, as well as to seniors. It was also slightly preferred in low-imposition requests and between interlocutors of equal status. Half of the items of this category found in the German data displayed a wish, realized by the expression *würde gerne* [would like to], as in »Falls Sie am Mittwoch im Büro sind (laut Ihrer Sekretärin), würde ich es mir gerne für circa 2 Std borgen. [If you are in your office on Wednesday, as your secretary told me, I would like to borrow it for two hours.] (S7)«. The other half displayed a need, usually realized by the verb *brauchen* [need], as in »wie du schon sicher in der Betreff[z]eile lesen konntest brauche ich unbedingt deine Hilfe.....( bitte bitte ). [As you might conclude from the subject, I really do need your help, please, please] (S2a)«. All expressions of need were intensified by adverbs, such as *dringend* [urgent] or as in the example above by *unbedingt* [really].

In Japanese *want statements* were found in all situations, except for *passing on a message*. They were particularly

frequent in *providing information*, *borrowing a book*, and *helping to fill in forms*, in which the reader has a higher status. As in German this strategy was also preferred when the reader is not familiar. In Japanese *want statements* are realised by suffixes expressing volition, in most cases *-tai*, as in »soko de sensei no tensaku shite itadakitai desu [that is why I would like to receive your corrections] (S4)«, but also by means of *hoshī* [want], as in »watashi ga kesseki shite iru aida no jugyō no shiryō nitsuite, setsumei shite hoshī no desu ga ... [I would like you to explain to me the contents of the handouts passed around during my absence] (S2a)«, or *-ō* as in »genshi wa donna kanji datta ka oshiete moraō to omotte mēru shimashita [I wrote this mail, because I thought I would like you to tell me what it is like in that country] (S5)«. This last example shows a modification by means of subjectivizers, such as *to omou*, *to kangaeru*, and *-na(a)*, in this category.

**Table 5. Situational distribution of *want statements***

Situation:	1	2	2a	3	4	5	6	6a	7	8	Total
German	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	6
Japanese	0	0	2	1	5	7	4	3	6	8	36
Factor:	(-) Power (+)		(-) Distance (+)			(-) Imposition (+)		(-) Seniority (+)			
German	2	1	0	3	2	1	1	3			
Japanese	11	20	6	25	14	17	4	5			

## Conclusion

As the results presented above indicate, the choice of request strategies in German and Japanese follows a similar trend. However, there are some language-specific preferences: In both languages the strategy most often used in almost every situation is *query preparatory*, while hints hardly occurred at all in the emails under investigation. This may be due to the fact that this context-reduced medium forces the writer to be more explicit. Apart from *query preparatory*, German requests are often realized by *directives*, while Japanese tend to prefer *want statements* and *locution-derivable* requests.

Due to differing linguistic repertoires in the languages under investigation different linguistic means are used to realize the individual strategies. For example, *want statements* in German are mostly expressed by a modal verb, while in Japanese this strategy is realized by means of suffixes. *Directives* in German tend to be expressed by a performative verb, while Japanese *directives* are accomplished by a particular verb form in combination with a politeness marker. In the strategy *query preparatory* possibility in German is expressed by modal verbs, while Japanese verbs are commonly changed to their potential form, a form which does not exist in German.

As far as implications for German teaching in Japan are concerned, the results suggest that the *query preparatory* strategy is the most important one to teach, since not only it is used most frequently in German, but it can also be considered as a “safe” strategy in terms of its situational use. In order to perform *query preparatory* adequately, students have to learn how to use the modal verbs *können* and *würden* in a request context. Likewise, the second most

frequently used request strategy in German, the *directive*, should also be taught explicitly; not only in terms of its linguistic realization (use of the performative verb *bitten*), but also in terms of its restricted situational use (preferred when addressing readers with higher status), which differs from Japanese. Finally, students should be made aware of the restricted use of *want statements* in German, care is required to avoid the risk of users appearing impolite.

As is often the case with data gathered in an experimental study, the data samples presented above may not adequately reflect ‘real’ speech behavior. The writing tasks implemented in this study only contained basic information about the request situation. In reality, there are many factors that may influence the choice of a certain strategy and its linguistic realization. However, given the fact that certain trends could be observed based on the 200 emails analyzed, some tentative conclusions can be drawn. However, in order to gain a greater understanding of this field, the study has to be complemented by an analysis of authentic data.

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