

Pragmatic Criteria for Distinguishing Commands and Requests	
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Abstract

Commands and requests are two speech acts that fall under the category of directives whose members are issued to influence people to do things. These two speech acts can be realized in similar linguistic forms across situations which might cause a problem of distinction for many people dealing with them. EFL learners, for instance, who do not have enough contact with the target community and are mainly linguistically exposed to them might mistake one for the other thereby resulting in communication breakdown. Hence, it is necessary to identify pragmatic criteria that help in drawing a clear-cut distinction between the two speech acts under study. It is the aim of this work to provide this type of criteria which are derived from observations developed by scholars specialized in the field enriched by those made by the researchers themselves.

معايير بلاغية تداولية (براغماتية) لتمييز الأوامر عن الالتماسات

ملخص

الأوامر والالتماسات نوعان من إنشاء الكلام يدرجان ضمن فئة أشمل من الإنشاء تعرف بالإنشاء الطلبي الموجّه الذي يصدره المتكلمون لجعل الآخرين يعملون أشياء معينة، ويمكن لهذين النمطين من الإنشاء الكلامي أن يتخذا أشكالاً وصيغاً لغوية متشابهة عبر المواقف التي يُصدران فيها مما يؤدي إلى مشكلة في التمييز بينهما للعديد ممن يتعاملون بهما؛ فمتعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الذين ليس لهم اتصال كافٍ بالمجتمع المنشود، مثلاً، المعرضون لصيغهما اللغوية دون السياق بصورة أساسية قد يعتبرون أحدهما إنه الآخر، مما يؤدي إلى انهيار التفاعل التواصلية، ومن هنا، بات ضرورياً تحديد معايير بلاغية تداولية تساعد في رسم خط فاصل واضح للتمييز بين هذين النمطين في الإنشاء الكلامي قيد الدراسة في هذا البحث.

وقد جعل هذا البحث هدفاً له التوصل إلى مثل هذا النوع من المعايير بأشتقاقها من ملاحظات ومشاهدات طورها الدارسون المعنيون في هذا الحقل مدعمة بملاحظات القائمين بهذا البحث ومشاهداتهم في الوقت ذاته.

1. Introduction

Commands and requests are two acts that fall into the category of 'directives'. They have a lot in common. Linguistically, they are realized in mostly similar forms. Pragmatically, they share a wide range of similarity. This has made the distinction between them so fine that some people dealing with them, especially EFL learners, might mistake one for the other or even fail to identify them (see Takahashi 1996; Al-Hindawi 1999:232). Many attempts to draw a clear distinction between them have been made but those attempts have turned either limited to a narrow range of distinction criteria or not well systematized criteria. Hence, it has become necessary to provide a sort of criteria that draw a clear cut distinction between them. It is the aim of this paper to provide this type of criteria which will be drawn from observations developed by scholars specialized in the field supported by those made by the researchers themselves. It is hoped that the distinction made here will be useful to those interested in pragmatic studies, applied linguists and learners of English as a foreign language who do not have enough contact with the target community.

2. The speech act of command

2.1 The nature of command

The term 'command' has been broadly defined by Adler (1980: 1) as an utterance "used to guide, direct or give instructions to others". This definition, however, is not appropriate enough to be adopted in this study since it does not distinguish between utterances that count as commands and those which do not as in the following examples:

- Sit down.
- Sit down if you want to.

Obviously, both of these examples instruct the addressee to sit down; however, the second one allows more freedom for him to respond. Thus, it can be a suggestion, permission or advice rather than a command.

Another definition of 'commands' that is offered by Adler (*ibid.*, 7) treats the term as "a use of language to get someone to do something". Again, this definition is so broad that it cannot be used to differentiate commands from other directives, such as 'requests', that are also used to get people to do things. What is needed in this study is a definition that can help in distinguishing commands

from other closely related speech acts, especially requests. This definition might be derived from Bach and Harnish's (1979: 47) account of requirements and prohibitives which are two categories of directives according to their taxonomy of illocutionary acts. This definition reads as follows:

commands are utterances by which the speaker requires the addressee to act or refrain from acting as a result of the former's belief, in virtue of her/his authority over the latter, that their issuance constitutes a sufficient reason for the addressee to comply.

Accordingly, commands will include orders, directions, instructions and prohibitions. It follows that for a command to exist, it should have a source, be it one originator or more, which enjoys some entitlement or authority for giving the command to the recipient, who can be one or more addressees. In other words, the initiator of the command should occupy some status vis a vis the recipient that puts her/him into a position to exact compliance or at least elicit cooperation. According to

Adler (1980: 23), it does not matter that the authority really exists, but what matters is merely that the recipient concedes the status of authority to the source.

In all cases, the command should have some justification. This means that "the source should be in a position to provide a rational and reasonable answer to the question of why he issued a certain command" (Rescher 1966: 16). For McCawley (1977: 18), commands "make something the case by saying that it is to be the case, though what they make the case is not something that is describable by the apparent complement sentence". To illustrate, he gives the following example. When you order someone to shine your shoes, you are not causing her/him to shine your shoes. Rather, you are making her/him indebted to you a shoeshine. The addressee will remain in this debt until s/he shines your shoes or you release her/him from the obligation by canceling your order. Thus, commands cause the person to whom they are addressed to owe the speaker an act of the type in question. Finally, since the speech act succeeds only when it is recognized by its hearer (see Clark 1991: 204 ; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996: 640), a key factor in

determining if an utterance is a command is the addressee's recognition of it as being issued to her/him as a command and thus considering her/himself committed to obey it.

2.2 Command violation

For a command to be possibly complied with by the recipients, it requires to fall within their physical and mental capacities. In this regard, Rescher (1966: 29-30) argues that a "command must be realizable ... Thus, any possible human doing, i.e. anything using within the power of man to do or not to do, can serve as a command requirement. Anything impossible logically, physically, or conceptually (e.g., altering the past) has to be excluded". Accordingly, a command is violated when it requires the addressees to do more than what can possibly or reasonably be done as in the following example:

- Henry, lift that weight! (where it weighs 1000 pounds)
(*ibid.*, 17).

According to Lakoff (1977: 98), a command can be ill-formed when (a) the addressee cannot obey (and the speaker knows it), (b) the thing required has been done already, and (c) the speaker asks the addressee to do

something the former does not have the right to expect the latter to do.

The ill-formation of commands, as Haverkate (1984: 32) argues, might be exploited by speakers to create irony. Such an occasion occurs in jokes that are built upon the biological constraints of human beings as in, for instance, ordering a person with a broken leg to participate in a football game.

2.3 Felicity conditions:

The characterization of commands as a type of speech act can be achieved by establishing a set of felicity conditions. Searle (1969: 66) introduces these conditions as follows:

Table 1: Felicity conditions for commands

Types of condition	The formulation of the condition in the case of command
Propositional content	The speaker (s) predicates a future act (A) of the hearer (H)
Preparatory	1. H is able to do A 2. S believes H is able to do A 3. S is in a position of authority over H.
Sincerity	S wants H to do A
Essential	The utterance counts as an attempt to get H to do A in virtue of the authority of S over H.

In the light of these conditions, commands can be distinguished from other speech acts. Slightly different conditions are offered by Labov (1972: 255), and Allan (1986: 199). However, commands felicity conditions that might be more compatible with the definition of commands, as adopted by this study, can be derived from those proposed by Bach and Harnish (1979: 47). These conditions can be formulated as follows:

In uttering a command, the speaker requires the hearer to act (or refrain from acting) if the speaker expresses:

1. the belief that her/his utterance, in virtue of her/his authority over the hearer, constitutes a sufficient reason for the hearer to (or not to)act, and
2. the intention that the hearer do (or not do) the act.

2.4 The command as an impositive act

In issuing a command, the speaker in fact commits the addressee to do something. This is generally done at the cost of the person to whom the command is addressed. The commander in some way imposes on the addressee

when demanding goods or services. According to Haverkate (1984: 107), impositive speech acts “are described as speech acts performed by the speaker to influence the intentional behaviour of the hearer in order to get the latter to perform, primarily for the benefit of the speaker, the action directly specified or indirectly suggested by the proposition”. The degree with which the speaker intrudes on the addressee is called degree of ‘imposition’ (Trosborg 1995: 188). This degree varies from small favours to demanding acts and it can be measured in terms of the scale of optionality of action (Leech 1983:123; Hernandez and Mendoza 2002: 267). In the case of ‘commands’, the degree of imposition is very strong since the action in question is a demanding one and not a favour, i.e., the speaker allows her/his hearer no option but compliance.

2.5 The commands as a face –threatening act

The notion of ‘face’ as employed by Brown and Levinson (1979: 66) refers to “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (See also Goffman 1967). ‘Face’ consists of two aspects: negative and positive. Negative face is concerned with the want of

people to act with no impedance by others; positive face is to do with the desire of a person to have her/his self-image approved and appreciated by others. Some acts are intrinsically face threatening because they involve imposition on the addressee. By its nature, the command runs contrary to the face wants of the addressee. It impedes the hearer's freedom of action by pressing her/him to do or refrain from doing the act. This means that in issuing commands, one threatens the negative face of the addressee. Thus, if commands are measured on a 'cost-benefit scale' which estimates the cost or benefit of the proposed action to the hearer (cf. Leech 1983: 123), they will be placed on the top of the scale in terms of cost to the hearer and at the bottom in terms of benefit. Similarly, if commands are measured on the 'optionality scale' (.bid) which orders speech acts in terms of the amount of choice which the speaker allows to the hearer, they will occupy the position where the hearer is allowed the minimum choice. Hence, speakers recourse to mitigating their utterances in terms of their intention to reduce unwelcome effects of their commands. One of the perlocutionary aims, as Haverkate (1992: 505) points out,

the speakers wish to achieve through mitigating their commands is making their (the speakers) authority more acceptable to the hearers.

3. The speech act of request

3.1 The nature of request

Requests, like commands, are directive acts. As far as the source and recipient of the request are concerned, the request might originate in one source as in 'Help me' or in more than one source as in 'Help us'. It can be addressed to one or more addressees as in 'Give me a hand, John' and 'Give me a hand, boys'. Requests also share with commands the illocutionary point of getting people to do things. Both requests and commands can be characterized as 'pre-event' acts. The desired act is to take place post-utterance, either in the immediate future 'act-now' or at some later stage 'act-then' (Trosborg 1995: 187). Both can be used for achieving verbal, i.e., eliciting information, or non-verbal goods and services, i.e., performing some act of somekind. However, requests differ from commands in various respects. The requester, for instance, does not enjoy any kind of authority over the requestee. Green (1975: 121), for instance, defines

requests as “the method used in polite society for getting someone to do something”. In English culture, Green (ibid.) proceeds, “the utterer of a request is someone who has or is acting as if he has no authority or power to compel compliance”. Similarly, Partridge (1982: 94) argues that the success of the request is not accounted for by the fulfillment of authority conditions. Requests “are not challenged on grounds of authority. Everyone is entitled to make a request”. As compared to issuing a command which expects nothing but compliance, the requesters expect the requestees to grant the request but they do not insist on it and the latter have the freedom to refuse the request (Green, ibid.). For Trosborg (1995: 187), a “request is an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker”. In this sense, Trosborg does not make any clear distinction between requests and commands. Many commands are issued to achieve an act for the benefit of the speaker, e.g. ‘I’m thirsty. Bring me some water!’. A better distinction is made by McCawley (1977: 18). For him, a request is an act which commits the

person to whom it is addressed to considering it and commits the speaker to being grateful if the request is complied with. For Bach and Harnish (1979: 47), requests are expressions which convey the speaker's desire that the hearer do an action. Again, this account of requests fails to provide a clear distinction since commands also express the speaker's desire, though a strong one, for an action. Hence, to accord with the purposes of this study, a comprehensive definition that takes into its account all the aforementioned views could be more useful. Such a definition can be spelled out as follows:

Requests are expressions that can be uttered by anyone who has, or is acting as if he has, no authority or power over the hearer to convey the speaker's desire that the hearer do some action for the benefit of the former and the speaker is committed to being grateful if the hearer complies.

Accordingly, requests will include acts such as asking, begging, entreating, imploring, pleading and praying. All the same, requests must be reasonable and

this reasonableness, as Gordon and Lakoff (1975: 90) argue, consists of only if the speaker has a reason for wanting the request done, assuming that the hearer can do it, assuming that the hearer would be willing to do it and assuming that the hearer would not do it otherwise. These principles seem to stem from the felicity conditions of requests as set by other philosophers, especially those of Searle (1969).

3.2 Felicity conditions

As is the case with commands, requests can be characterized in terms of felicity conditions which distinguish them from other related speech acts. These conditions, as Trosborg (1995: 191) reports, relate to the speaker's and hearer's beliefs and attitudes, on the one hand, and to their mutual understanding of the use of linguistic devices for communication, on the other hand. Searle (1969: 66) specifies the conditions which underlie a sincere request as follows:

Table 2: Felicity conditions for requests

Types of condition	The formulation of the condition in the case of request.
Propositional content	The speaker S predicates a future act A of the hearer H.
Preparatory	1. S assumes H can do A. 2. It is not obvious that H would do A without being asked.
Sincerity	S wants H to do A.
Essential	The utterance counts as an attempt by S to get H to do A.

It is obvious from this set of conditions that requests are different from commands (see Table 1) basically in terms of preparatory conditions.

According to Bach and Harnish (1979: 47) a request consists in uttering an expression if the speaker S expresses:

1. the desire that the hearer H do the act A, and
2. the intention that H do A because (at least partly) of S's desire.

Hence, it is the speaker's desire, not the utterance itself as with commands, that stimulates the hearer to consider the request.

Allan (1986: 199) takes a slightly different stand as he conceives that requests occur according to the following conditions:

Preparatory condition: S has a reason to believe that H can (or might be able to) do A.

Sincerity condition: S wants the deed D done, perhaps specifically by H.

Illocutionary intention: S reflexively intends the utterance U to be recognized as a reason for H to agree to do A.

According to this account, what mostly matters for the speaker when performing a request is doing the act and not, as with commands, the act and person doing it. The act is preferably but not, as with commands, obligatorily done by the hearer. Additionally, the utterance is intended to be recognized by the hearer as a motivation and not a requirement for doing the act.

3.3 The request as an impositive act

As pointed out in 3.1 and 3.2 above, when speakers issue requests, they, in fact, express a desire that their hearers do them a favour. Generally, the act requested is for the requester's benefit but at the cost of the requestee. In so doing, as Trosborg (1995: 187-188) asserts, the requester imposes on the requestee in some way. However, the degree of imposition is not as strong as that of commands because the requestee has the option not to comply without causing offense. Consider the following example:

Requester: Can you help me tidy up this room?

Requestee: I wish I could but I have to meet some friends soon.

3.4. The request as a face-threatening act

As impositive acts, requests are by definition face-threatening acts. When speakers carry out requests, they affect the face of their conversational partners. In their attempts to direct control over the hearers' intentional behaviour, the speakers press on the former's freedom of action. Thus, requests run contrary to the face wants of the addressee. Precisely, as Brown and Levinson (1979: 70) argue, requests threaten the addressee's negative face

want because they indicate that the speaker intends to impede the former's freedom of action. In terms of benefit and cost measures, requesters intend to achieve some benefit at the cost of their requestees. In this sense, the position of requests on the cost-benefit scale is similar to that of commands. However, requesters also run the risk of losing face themselves because they put the power of granting the request in the hands of the requestees who may choose to refuse to comply with the former's wish. Consequently, requests occupy a different position from that of commands on the optionality scale because the hearers are allowed more choice.

Being face-threatening acts, requests have the danger of producing unwelcome effects if not expressed in accordance with face requirements. Hence to ensure cooperative reaction on the part of the requestees, requesters will have to express themselves politely. Haverkate (1992: 513, for instance) argues that since directives, to which requests belong, are face threatening acts, speakers uttering them "tend to express themselves in a polite way in order to reduce the risk of bringing their reactional relation with the hearer out of balance". One

way of avoiding undesirable consequences in this regard is the use of 'mitigating devices' (Fraser 1980) or 'modality markers' (House and Kasper 1981).

4. Pragmatic criteria for distinguishing commands and requests

The previous sections have revealed that both commands and requests share the illocutionary force of getting people to do (or not to do) things. However, commands indicate that their issuers are superior to the hearers in terms of power or authority. The face threatening element which commands bear runs contrary to the face wants of the hearers only. By contrast, requests indicate that speakers enjoy no authority over hearers. The face wants of both requesters and requestees are threatened when requests are issued. The former make themselves subservient to the latter who may choose to refuse granting the requests. Meanwhile, the addressee's freedom of action is impeded when speakers issue requests. Additionally, when a command is issued, the hearer takes the utterance itself as a motivation to act or refrain from acting. Compliance is fulfilled only when the action required is performed by the person specified by

the utterance. As for requests, it is the desire which is conveyed by the utterance, not the utterance itself, that motivates the hearer to, or not to, do the act. Compliance is achieved when the action is performed preferably but not obligatorily by the addressee. Furthermore, while commands commit the addressee to do the action and nothing is expected but compliance, non-compliance is possible with request, and requesters owe their requestees gratefulness in case of compliance. Thus, it is believed in this work that the type of compliance can be used as a scale to distinguish commands from requests and both from other related speech acts. The scale, recommended here, moves in terms of optionality from the highest to the lowest degree of compliance as illustrated below:

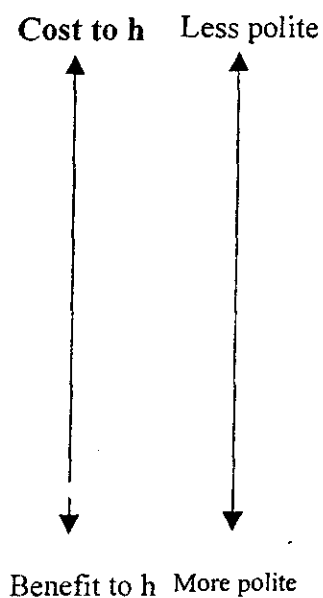
Types of compliance

- | | |
|--|------------|
| 1. Set the dog free (command) | obligatory |
| 2. Watch out for the dog (warning) | necessary |
| 3. Help me set the dog free (request) | preferable |
| 4. Let's set the dog free (suggestion) | optional |

Both acts are done at the cost of hearer. However, requests are done for the benefit of the speaker which is

not necessarily the case with commands (cf. Bax 1986: 676, for instance). This point is crucial in distinguishing both acts from other impositive acts. The act of suggestion, for instance, is beneficial for both speaker and hearer. When giving advice, the act to be performed is exclusively for the benefit of the hearer. In a threat, as Trosborg (1995: 188) states, the speakers indicate to their conversational partners that unless compliance with the former's wish is achieved, the latter will have to suffer some sanctions. Thus, if we keep the mood of expressing these speech acts constant, we can measure them in terms of cost and benefit to the hearer, and hence we can determine how polite they are with respect to the hearer as illustrated in the following scale which is derived from Leech (1983: 107).

- 1- Peel these potatoes or
I punish you (threat)
- 2- Peel these potatoes (order)
- 3- Help me peel these potatoes
(request)
- 4- Let's peel the potatoes
(suggestion)
- 5- Eat the potatoes after they are
Peeled. (advice)



The distinguishing pragmatic features of commands and requests pinpointed by this subsection can be summarized by Table 3 below:

Table 3: Pragmatic criteria for distinguishing commands and requests.

Criteria of distinction	Command	Request
Illocutionary point	S wants H to do A	S wants H to do A
Time of action	A is a future act by H	A is a future act by H
Social status	S is superior to H	S enjoys any status
Social face	H's face is threatened	S's and H's faces are threatened
Cost	A is done at the cost of H	A is done at the cost of H
Benefit	S does not have to benefit from A	S benefits from A
H's motives (not) to act	S's utterance	S's desire
Compliance	Obligatory	Preferable
H's action from S's and H's points of view	An obligation	A favour
The doer of the required action	Obligatorily the one assigned by the speaker	Preferably the one assigned by the speaker

Key: A = act

H = hearer

S = Speaker

The table above shows that the criteria developed here differ from those developed by others (see for example Searle 1969 Tables (1 & 2) and Bax 1986 Table (4) below) not only in the scope of distinction but also in being systemized.

Table 4: Properties of requests and orders*

	Request	Order
Illocutionary point		<i>X</i> wants <i>Y</i> to do <i>A</i>
A-related information		
Action		<i>A</i> is a future act by <i>Y</i>
Action/ <i>Y</i>		<i>A</i> is at cost for <i>Y</i>
Action/ <i>X</i>	<i>X</i> benefits from <i>A</i>	<i>X</i> does not have to benefit from <i>A</i>
Social information		
<i>X/Y</i>	Reciprocal relation	<i>Y</i> is inferior to <i>X</i>
<i>Y/X/A</i>	<i>Y</i> wants to do <i>X</i> a favor in Doing <i>A</i>	<i>Y</i> has to do <i>A</i>
<i>X/Y/A</i>	<i>X</i> is indebted to <i>Y</i> for doing <i>A</i>	<i>X</i> is not indebted to <i>Y</i> for Doing <i>A</i>

**X/Y* = *X* is in relation to *Y*

X = requesting person; *Y* = addressee.

A = requesting/ ordered action.

5. Conclusion

The study conducted in this paper reveals that though commands and requests share many pragmatic features, they differ from each other in various pragmatic aspects that can be useful in drawing a demarcation line between them. They can be distinguished from each other in terms of social status, social face, benefit, motives, compliance, how hearers and speakers view the action required and the doer of the required action.

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