

# Politeness Strategies Used in Requests —A Cybernetic Model—

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## Introduction

Requests are essentially a discourteous act in which the speaker (S) imposes on the hearer (H) to achieve S's goal through communication (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1978). This is a dynamic action because S needs to change H's condition in order to achieve his goal. If S asks H for \$20 and gets it, that means that H has lost \$20, and his condition has been changed. If H's condition has not changed, S has not accomplished his goal.

People use politeness strategies to maximize the possibility of gain in requests without damaging the relationship with H. They are communication strategies used to change H as much as possible in order to achieve S's goal and also maintain the relationship S and H have, or make good impression, if H is a stranger. In most cases, people do not damage the relationship much in making requests if they use an appropriate level of politeness.

Politeness strategies are not used only once when S makes a request, but also as S and H negotiate the request, since H wants to reduce the imposition without damaging the relationship. In this case, politeness strategies are used in the process of negotiation.

In this paper I will discuss a cybernetic model of politeness strategies in the process of making a request. I will review politeness strategies, systems, and cybernetic models and explain how they work together in the cybernetic model which I will present.

### Politeness Strategies in Making Requests

Politeness in making a request is a communication strategy which S uses to achieve S's goals while maintaining a good relationship between S and H. S chooses the level of politeness based on the size of the request in order to reduce the imposition of the request. For example, if S asks H for \$100, the imposition is greater than if he asks for \$20. However, if H carries out S's request, and H shares in the benefit or if only H benefits, the imposition will be smaller (Leech, 1983). If the room is very hot and S asks H to open the window, H also benefits. If S asks H to come to dinner, H benefits. If imposition is larger, a higher level of negative politeness is necessary to reduce imposition. If S is not sufficiently polite, H still feels that the imposition is too great and is embarrassed. If S is too polite, H may feel that S is being sarcastic.

Brown and Levinson (1978) define politeness as maintaining the H's face, that is, being unimposed on and approved of in certain respects. Face refers to wants, and Brown and Levinson (1978) argue that we have two types of wants: ego-preserving wants and public-self preserving wants, which refer to people's desire to have others consider them contributing members of the society. The former generates negative face, and the latter, positive face.

Politeness not only decreases imposition on H but also increases

approval from H for achieving the goal. Reducing imposition helps to keep a good relationship but increases the possibility of rejection. Thus, it is important to increase H's approval of S. Negative politeness is used for negative face (reducing imposition on H) by hedging, indirectness, giving deference, apologizing, impersonalizing S and H, giving H more freedom, etc. Positive politeness is used for positive face (increasing H's approval of S) by increasing familiarity by approval, showing interest in H, expressing group identity, asserting common ground, seeking agreement, making promises, joking, etc. (Craig, Tracy & Spisak, 1986).

The social distance between S and H (familiarity) and social status (power) also affect politeness strategies in requests (Brown & Levinson, 1978, Scollon & Scollon, 1983). S needs to use a higher level of politeness when asking for \$20 from a teacher (low familiarity) than from a parent (high familiarity). If S is more powerful than H, a lower level of politeness is necessary than when S is less powerful than H. If a boss and a subordinate ask H to do the same thing, the subordinate needs to use a higher level of politeness.

There are also three important situational variables which influence the choice of level of politeness. They are necessity of the request, H's ease to carry out the request, and cultural variables.

If H understands that S has a great need to make the request, H feels that it is less of an imposition, and a low level of negative politeness is necessary. If S and H are at a cashier, and S finds that he does not have his wallet and asks H for \$20 to pay the cashier, H understands the necessity of the request. However, if S asks H for \$20 to pay a bill which is not due for a week, the necessity of the request is low

because S can get the money some other way, such as borrowing it from a person that he is closer to. In the latter case, S needs a higher level of negative politeness as well as reasons for the request.

If a request is more difficult for H to carry out, the imposition is also greater, and a higher level of negative politeness is necessary. For example, it is easy for a wealthy person to come up with a loan of \$100, but for a person with financial problems, that same amount of money may be difficult to spare.

Cultural variables are cultural differences that influence levels of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1978). In Japanese culture, for example, imposition caused by requests is, all else being equal, greater than in American culture, so Japanese use a higher level of negative politeness. In American culture, solidarity is more important than in Japanese culture, so a high level of positive politeness is necessary (Goldstein & Tamura, 1975).

### Systems

In discussing the use of politeness strategies, a systems approach is a useful one. Systems are "interlinked sets of components hierarchically organized into structural wholes which interact through time and space and are self-regulating yet capable of structural change" (Monge, 1977, p. 20). This means that if a complex phenomenon has holistic properties, the behavior of that phenomenon cannot be discovered by analyzing the components separately. Knowledge about the interrelationships among components is also required.

The systems approach allows the researcher to study the levels of interactions through their courses, which the covering law approach

cannot. The covering law approach uses statements of laws or law-like generalizations, usually made up of one or more independent variables. Independent variables are intended to explain the occurrence of dependent variables (W. R. Donohue, personal communication, October 1, 1986). The limitation of applying the covering law approach to the study of politeness is that a covering law explains how politeness strategies are chosen at one point in time (Kitao, 1988), but it does not deal with how strategies are adjusted over time.

There are three major ways to conceptualize systems (Monge, 1977). One is general systems theory, an approach which seeks to identify the components of a system, their relationship, and the process by which they achieve a steady state, that is, an optimal or desirable state. In general systems theory, the components of the relevant variables and their changes are measured. Another approach to systems is structural-functionalism, which involves interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated. In particular structural-functionalism deals with the range of values for a trait and how those values are kept within the range necessary for the system to stay in operation. The third approach is cybernetics—the study of systems as they communicate and exercise control over their own behavior. In a cybernetic system, the control center sets a goal, attempts to carry out that goal, and compares the results to the original goal. An error signal informs the control center whether the goal has been achieved, and further adjustment is necessary if it has not.

These three major types of systems have been applied to different types of communicative behavior (Monge, 1977). Cybernetic models

are the most dynamic for explaining changes of interactions, and they seem to be the best for the study of requests and the politeness strategies that accompany them. These are goal-directed behavior, and the cybernetic model involves the goal-directedness of the system.

### *Cybernetic Systems*

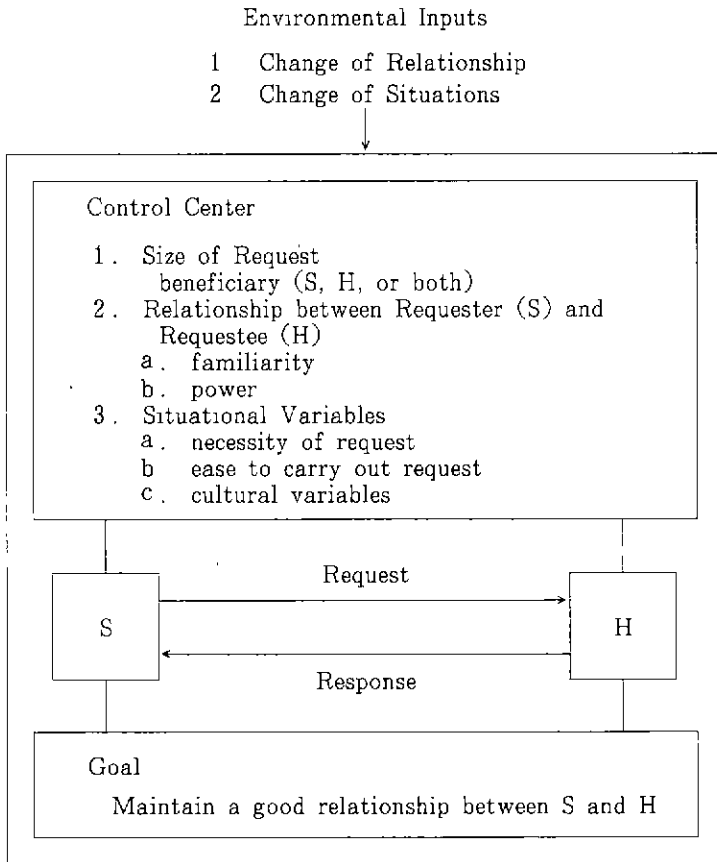
Monge (1977) argues that a cybernetic system has to possess five logical conditions.

1. Goal parameters (reference signals) set in a control center.
2. Influence exerted by the control center, that is, an attempt to achieve the goal parameters in the part of the system being controlled.
3. Feedback provided to the control center, that is, information regarding the effects of the output on the part of the system being controlled.
4. Comparator test conducted by the control center, yielding an error signal.
5. Corrective action taken by the control center, if necessary.

### Cybernetic Model of Politeness Strategies in Requests

Now I am going to present a cybernetic model of politeness, in which I will show how the different components of the system work together to achieve the goal of the request while maintaining the relationship (Figure 1).

Figure 1 . A Cybernetic Model of Requests



A dyad, S and H, make a cybernetic system. I will explain the components of the model and how they relate to the choice of politeness strategies.

*Components of the Model*

*Control center.* In this model of politeness strategies, the control

center consists of three major variables: 1) size of request (and who receives the benefit from the result), 2) relationship between S and H (familiarity and power), and 3) situational variables (necessity, ease to carry out request, and cultural variables). These variables control imposition on H and also S's politeness strategies in requests, as I have discussed in the politeness strategy section.

*Input to the Control Center.* This cybernetic system is open and influenced by the environment. The control center changes all the time, because the relationship between S and H is changing, and also the situations in which S makes requests to H are different. Thus, this model obtains inputs, change of relationship and change of situations from the environment.

*Control Center Influence.* The control center influences the interactions between S and H. S's request messages are influenced by the size of requests, the relationship, and situational variables and include negative and positive politeness. H's response is also influenced by the control center.

*Goal of Control Center.* The goal of the system is to maintain a good relationship between S and H, not S's achieving of the request, which is just S's individual goal. S and H cooperate and maintain a good relationship. S also tries to achieve the goal of the request, and H tries to reduce his loss. Both of them pursue the system's goal and their own individual goals. As long as they keep a good relationship, the goal of the system is achieved. If the relationship is damaged, the goal is changed. If they break off the relationship, the system breaks down.



*Negotiation of Requests*

Now I am going to explain how a request is actually carried out and negotiated in the case of S asking H for \$20 (Figure 2).

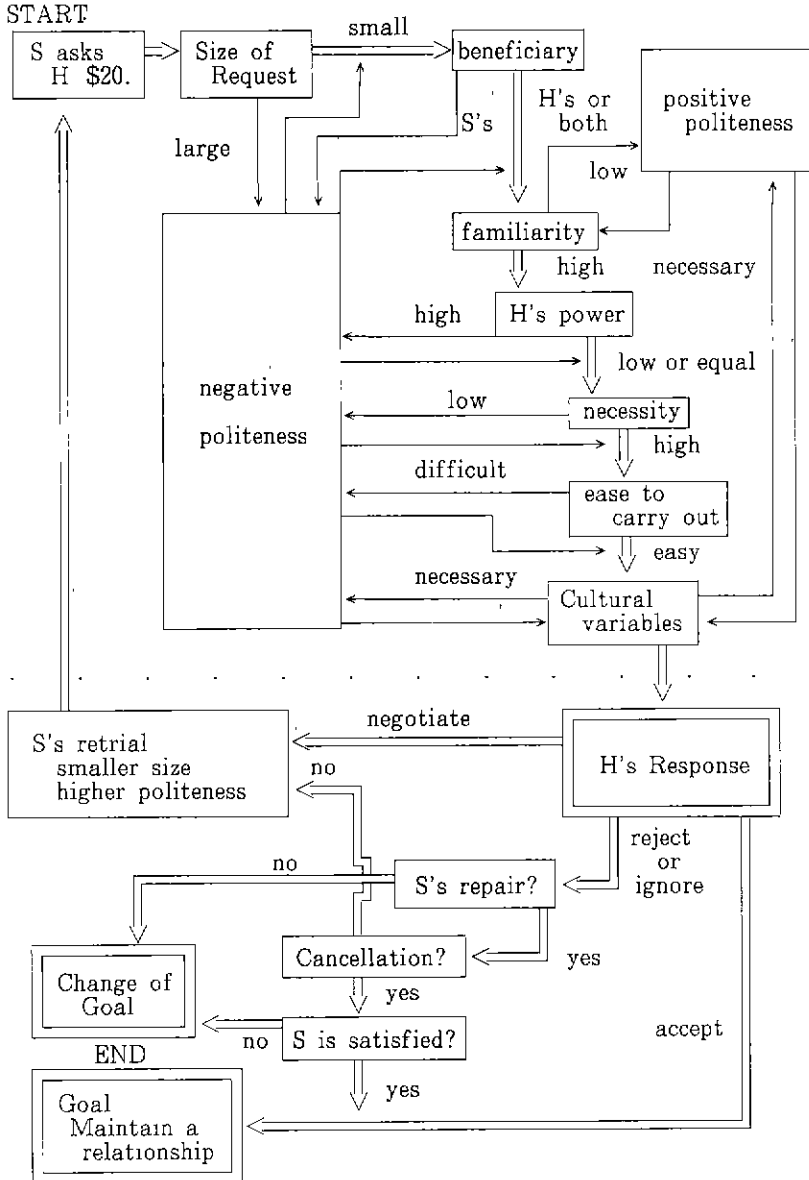
*Making a request.* The process of making a request is shown in the upper half of the figure, above the dotted line. S asks H for \$20 at the upper left corner. He uses an appropriate level of negative and positive strategies based on the influence of the control center (the size of request, beneficiary, familiarity, power, necessity, ease, and cultural variables). The double lines show the flow, and whether negative politeness strategy is necessary or not is indicated. The order in which the variables are presented is not important; the decisions are probably made simultaneously.

*Feedback to the control center* The feedback is H's response, in the middle of the right side. H accepts, negotiates, rejects, or ignores S's requests. If H carries out the request, the good relationship is maintained and the goal of the system is achieved (left bottom).

*Detection of an error signal and corrective action to reduce error signal.* In other cases, H threatens the relationship by rejecting or ignoring the request and S needs to retry request with the higher level of politeness strategies or work on repair with reduction of the size of the request or even cancellation of the request through the negotiation with H.

H may negotiate to reduce the size of a request or even reject it. In these cases, S can try to increase the level of the politeness strategy (Case A), or reduce the size of the request (Cases B & C).

Figure 2: Negotiation of a Request



(Case A)

H: Well, \$20 is a lot of money.

S: I know it is, but I need to pay it today. I'll get my salary next Monday, and I'll return it as soon as I get it. (high necessity and positive politeness)

H: OK. Here it is.

(Case B)

H: Well, \$20 is a lot of money.

S: How about \$10. That will do.

H: OK. Here it is.

(Case C)

H: Well, \$20 is a lot of money.

S: I understand it is. But I do not have anybody else to ask. You are the only person I can ask this.

H: Let's see. I'm sorry, but I have only \$10 now.

S: That will do.

H: Here it is.

If H rejects or ignores the request, he is threatening the relationship, and S needs to work on repairing it. The easiest way is to cancel the request, and if S is satisfied with the situation, the relationship is maintained.

(Case D)

H: I'd like to offer you \$20, but I paid a bill yesterday and I do not have any money now

S: Oh, I see.

Even if S cancels the request, if he is not happy with the way H rejects or ignores the request, this may damage the relationship (change of

the goal).

If S cannot cancel the request, he needs a higher level of politeness strategy and probably some reduction of the size of request, and then he can retry it. In this case, he needs a much higher level of politeness than the previous negotiation (Cases B & C).

If S does not repair the relationship, it will be damaged to some extent (change of goal).

Negotiation may be done several times (going around several times in the upper two-thirds of this figure). As long as they repair the relationship and both people are satisfied with the results, whether the request is carried out, partially carried out, or not carried out, the goal of the system is achieved. However, if the relationship is even slightly damaged, there is a change in the goal of the system. If strong dissatisfaction causes one person to decide to leave the relationship, the system breaks down.

#### Evaluation of the Systems Approach

In order to study this process, we could take a covering law perspective and seek variables which cause changes of politeness levels, but this does not explain the dynamic process of negotiation at all. It only explains how politeness levels are set when a request is made.

On the other hand, systems theory treats requests as a dynamic process rather than one static scene, which would reduce an obviously complex organization by analysis into individually comprehensive units without regard to relationships among them. A systems model, however, is more difficult to operationalize and study than one developed from a covering law perspective. Since systems inherently operate in a

particular time sequence, an initial concern is the level of measurement.

Monge (1977) argues that the detection of error signal must be measured. In this model, a comparison of H's response (feedback) with the goal state must be measured. S's retrial and repair also must be measured. There are a number of possible ways to approach this research. One would be to give participants a situation to role play with a confederate of the researcher. If the confederate was H, he would use previously designated responses to the request. If the confederate was S, he would make different types of requests and see how H responded to different repair strategies. Another approach would be through self-reports of different situations.

The study of this model would not be easy. However, researchers could use relatively new techniques such as interaction analysis or path analytic techniques to identify the different kinds of messages being employed, as well as their relationships with other components in the goodness of fit of the proposed model.

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#### Author Notes

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