



## **Requests in tourist information office service encounters: An analysis of directness and gender**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Traditionally, the speech act of requesting has been regarded as a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987) due to the impositive nature on the addressee's negative face. Yet, in specific service encounters, requests can no longer be seen as threatening (Antonopoulou, 2001). This is the case of tourist information offices, where mitigators may not be present due to the task-oriented nature of the exchange. This study aims to widen the scope of research on service encounters by examining 147 naturally occurring requests by native speakers of English in a tourist information office taking into account the variable of gender. Our findings suggest that females used more direct questions whereas men employed want statements to a much higher extent. These results have to be understood within the context of this specific service encounter, in which direct requests do not imply impoliteness or threats to the requestee's negative face.

**KEYWORDS:** Requests, service encounters, gender, tourist information offices.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Service encounters (SEs, henceforth) can be defined as “everyday interactions between the customer and the server whereby some commodity (information or goods) will be exchanged” (Ventola, 2005: 19). Some features of face-to-face SEs include their brevity,

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explicitness, predominance of requests and the clearly-defined roles, rights and duties of the participants (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005). In addition, most SEs “constitute a one-time interaction between individuals who have never been in contact before and who will probably never be in contact again” (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017: 667). Of course, there are exceptions to these one-time exchanges, as for example in coffee shops where regulars often visit the shop and some kind of rapport is established between the customer and the server. Merritt’s (1976) work in convenience stores was one of the first attempts to examine interaction in public settings, and since then a growing number of studies on SEs have been conducted in different contexts. Together with some intervening variables such as gender (of both the customer and the server) and age, research has focused on three levels of analysis, as claimed by Barron and Schneider (2009): actional, interactional and stylistic. The actional level looks at different speech act realisations, the interactional level examines elements of interaction such as openings and closings, and the stylistic level focuses on address forms. Regarding the actional level, the vast majority of studies have centred on requests and their mitigating devices, following Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper’s (1989) model, in order to ascertain the impact that specific request formulae may have on politeness (e.g., Placencia, 2008).

Although *a priori* one may think that the language of service encounters focuses exclusively on the negotiation for information, goods or services, an expanding body of research has now revealed that these kinds of encounters follow some general patterns, and include obligatory and non-obligatory elements (Solon, 2013). In this sense, and according to Kidwell (2000), a regular organisation of SEs would be made up of, first, an opening, followed by the request for service and then an optional element that she terms ‘interrogative series’. The fourth step is the provision, or not, of the service, and the pattern ends with the closing as the fifth move. SEs thus exhibit similar patterns due to the goal-oriented nature of the transaction, although “there is room for individuality, idiosyncrasy and even for a small measure of creativity” (Coupland & Yläne-McEwen, 2000: 203).

The recurrent elements in a SE have been garnered primarily from the examination of natural data, collected either by audio-recording or using field notes, following Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s (2005: 29) claim that natural data in SEs should be used to capture “a faithful representation of reality”. To a lesser extent, existing research has also used discourse-completion tests or role-plays simulating interaction in SEs (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Padilla & Martínez, 2017) simply because they are easily distributed, quick to gather, and allow for the comparison of a large number of participants.

Pragmatic variation has been observed in earlier studies of different SEs. In the present study, we focus on requests in a specific service encounter, that of a tourist information office in order to examine, on the one hand, the degree of directness of requests, and on the other, whether gender may have an impact on request realisations. Many studies have been

carried out in the Spanish-speaking world involving several varieties of Spanish (Cuban, Mexican, Ecuadorian, etc.), while other studies have focused on other languages used in the encounters (i.e., English, French, Catalan and Finnish). However, this study expands the body of research on SEs with the analysis of requests produced in English within the Spanish context, in which English is a foreign language. To the best of our knowledge, no study so far has addressed this gap in a non-commercial SE, and, in this way, we intend to contribute to the growing body of research of the speech act of requesting in SEs.

## **2. REQUESTS IN COMMERCIAL AND NON-COMMERCIAL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS**

Pragmalinguistic variation of request realisations is a well-explored area in the literature, stemming from the seminal work by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). In their Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), these authors collected data on requests and apologies in eight languages for an intra-lingual, situational and cross-linguistic examination of similarities and differences in the realisation patterns of those speech acts. From this research, a vast body of studies followed, especially on requests, due to their potentially negative effect on the hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One particular context in which requests have been widely analysed is the service encounter, due to the goal-oriented nature of the exchange in which requests may be performed in a more direct or indirect way. In this sense, in today's world, it has been argued (Sifianou, 2013: 92) that "the sweeping power of globalization" has brought about informalisation, egalitarianism and camaraderie in interactions which are influenced by variables such as the degree of intimacy or the status of participants, and, thus, some face-preserving strategies are needed. Yet the process of globalisation, to some extent, does not allow for the above variables, especially in service encounters, where language is becoming more informal and friendly. For example, in an analysis of interactions in small shops in France, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006) found that frequent contact with customers allowed for the presence of small talk and elliptical requests. In Spanish bars, Mancera Rueda and Placencia (2011) also obtained similar findings, as discourse practices were more oriented towards closeness and convivial conversation. The maintenance of personal relations between interlocutors is an important part of a service encounter, despite the fact that the most relevant element is the transaction.

Félix-Brasdefer's (2015) review of more than eighty studies on SEs reveals that most research on interactions in service encounters has taken place in commercial contexts, that is, settings in which monetary exchange takes place (Dumas, 2008). Some examples of the investigation in these settings include markets (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Solon, 2013), bakeries (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005), corner shops (Placencia, 2008), small shops (Traverso, 2007) and cafés (Placencia & Mancera Rueda, 2011; Taylor, 2015). On the other hand, research on

non-commercial SEs (without monetary transaction) is relatively more scarce, although some studies have been carried out in non-profit institutions, for example, in banks and information desks (Shively, 2013), student exchange offices (Torrás & Gafaranga, 2002), post offices (Ventola, 1983; 2005), or at the reference desk in college libraries (Downing, 2008). As suggested by Shively (2013), cultural variation may explain the differences in the degree of (in)directness of requests. For example, Placencia's (2005) study on requests in Peninsular Spanish corner shops showed that direct requests, realised by means of imperatives, questions and elliptical forms outnumbered other more indirect strategies. These request formulae were also employed by the participants in Shively's (2011) investigation: US learners of Spanish in Toledo (Spain) whose socialisation into the target language made them abandon more indirect request realisations, which would be more typical in their L1 in order to use more imperatives and questions in different commercial SEs.

Yates' (2015) data on recordings of exchanges at two corner stores in Buenos Aires show that requests were mainly realised by means of elliptical strategies and direct questions, suggesting informality and closeness between vendor and customer. The informal tone of these exchanges was further enhanced by either the absence of greetings or short greetings. Félix-Brasdefer (2015) found that, in a visitor information centre, direct requests in the form of questions predominated over other realisations, which were kept to a minimum. Very recently, Ramírez-Cruz (2017) looked at Anglo-American and Hispanic customers' requests at a taco stand in Pennsylvania. While the Anglo-Americans used more conventional request formulations (*Can I have...?*), the Hispanic customers employed more affirmative requests (*Me da un taco de ...*) along with imperatives, resulting in a more friendly stance.

In the literature on SEs, requests are regarded as the main component of these specific transactions (Taylor, 2015) and have been examined taking into account different variables. One such variable is gender, which is the focus of the next section.

### 3. REQUESTING IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: THE VARIABLE OF GENDER

In the mid-90s, Holmes (1995), drawing on previous research on linguistic politeness (e.g., Tannen, 1990) characterised women's speech as more polite than men's, in the sense that women tended to use more mitigation devices so as not to threaten their hearer's negative face. This polite behaviour was apparent in speech acts such as apologies and requests, where face-related issues are at stake. Since then, some research has started to analyse and challenge the dichotomy regarding male and female speech in an attempt to consider gender and politeness as a more flexible concept in which several factors also come into play to determine the language employed. In an early study on requests made by Peruvian Spanish speakers, García (1993) noted some differences in the way males and females formulated

their requests in role-play interaction. Specifically, females used more hints (the least imposing request realisation in Blum-Kulka and House's (1989) classification) and expressed pessimism and concern. In turn, males were more direct, prepared the interlocutor for the request, and did not make emotional appeals. Márquez-Reiter (2000) used an open role-play to elicit requests in 12 situations set in the university context, including variables such as social distance and power, among others. The results emerging from her data comparing British females to British males showed that the latter favoured the use of non-conventional indirect requests. In the Uruguayan data, females were more direct in interactions with other females and more indirect when interacting with the opposite sex.

Macaulay (2001) conducted research on interviewers' requests for information. The participants, two females and two males, formulated their requests either as imperatives (*Tell me...*) or as interrogatives in which the interviewer ordered that information be provided. Differences in requests between male/female interviewers point to the use of more indirect requests for information on the part of the females in order "to ask tough questions, to maintain a line of questioning, and to maintain status" (2001: 312). Men used direct requests with greater frequency than females and their indirect strategies were mainly employed to foster adaptation to the interviewee.

In the specific context of SEs, there are some studies which have taken into account the degree of directness of requests and gender. For example, Antonopoulou's (2001) study of regular customers in a newsagent's in Athens showed that males produced more elliptical and silent requests while females opted for fully verbalised requests. Also, Bayyurt and Bayraktaroglu (2001) studied the use of pronouns and terms of address in Turkish SEs. The participants had to respond to six questionnaires eliciting a request for goods in different contexts, ranging from a local grocer to a reputable supermarket. The authors found that males used more bald imperatives softened by the use of kinship terms (*amca*, 'uncle', *kizim*, 'my daughter'). Women prefaced their requests with more attention-getters, and also employed fewer familiar pronouns T (second person singular from Latin *tu*), possibly in an attempt to maintain distance from the male seller.

Differences in request production by male or female customers are also apparent in other SE interactions. For instance, Ruzickova (2007) investigated naturally-occurring requests in Cuban Spanish in a variety of SEs (e.g., post office, library, etc.) and found that men used more indirect request strategies than women. Her data contrast with some gender theories which regard women's speech as less invasive and prone to use more softening strategies (Holmes, 1995). In a café setting, Taylor (2015) examined request formulae taking into consideration the gender of both the customer and the server (barista). She found that in face-to-face exchanges (as opposed to drive-through exchanges), females expressed more conventional indirect requests, assertions and want statements than their male counterparts, who produced a larger number of elliptical requests. These results suggest that the gender of

the customer is a significant variable in the selection of request realisations. In the same vein, Félix-Brasdefer's (2015) study in Mexican markets revealed that gender had an impact on the type of request formulated: males used more imperatives and elliptical requests than female customers, whereas the latter preferred implicit requests and assertions. Gender variation was also examined by Yates (2015) in her study of requests at corner stores in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Her results showed that females employed three request realisations (imperatives, want statements and performatives) more than their male counterparts. In turn, males tended to use more elliptical requests and direct questions. These findings suggest that both males and females opted to use direct request types, contrary to common assumptions that women are less direct and soften their speech.

In an attempt to shed more light on the scarcely-researched setting of non-commercial SEs, and taking into account the variable of gender (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015), two research questions, along with two hypotheses, have been formulated to guide the present study:

RQ1.- What request realisations do native speakers make in a tourist information office?

Hypothesis 1: Due to the fact that SE interactions tend to be explicit and brief, direct requests will be used in detriment of conventionally indirect realisations. (Antonopoulou, 2001; Yates, 2015)

RQ2.- Are request realisations influenced by the gender of the requester?

Hypothesis 2: Females will use more conventionally indirect requests, as attested in previous research of gender in service encounters. (Bayyurt & Bayraktaroğlu, 2001; Fink, 2013)

## 4. THE STUDY

### 4.1. Participants and setting

The requests were made by 147 native speakers of English (mainly British, but also some Americans and Australians). Although there were informants of all ages, in the present study we selected those who represented the majority (over 55 years). After completing the transaction in the tourist office, the customers were systematically handed a 'Tourist Information Survey' to collect some demographic information (age, gender, country of origin, mother tongue, place of residence and academic level, among others).

The employee at the tourist information office who gathered the data (the second author of this paper) is a female in her mid-20s who works full-time. She has a C2 level of proficiency in English and holds an MA in Secondary Education, Vocational Training and Language Teaching. She works from 9 am to 2 pm and from 4 pm to 7 pm. The tourist information office is located in a Spanish town of around 18,000 inhabitants on the

Mediterranean coast, which is a beach resort in the summer for foreigners, especially Europeans.

#### 4.2. Data collection procedure

Data for the present analysis consist of 147 requests (78 made by females and 69 by males) formulated by visitors to a tourist information office between December 2016 and June 2017, the duration of the employee's six-month contract. This time of year is off-season and therefore not a busy period, so a larger corpus of requests could not be collected. Although some Spanish tourists visited the office asking for information in Spanish or Catalan, the largest proportion of customers used English to request information. Therefore, the data gathered for this study were only taken from English-speaking customers, and the requests collected in other languages have not been examined. Typically, the interactions followed a similar sequence: visitors 1) entered the tourist information office, 2) approached the counter, 3) greeted the employee, 4) were greeted back 5) made the request, 6) were given the information needed, 6) thanked the employee, and 7) filled out the survey and left the office. The actual collection of requests took place in step 5 of the above sequence. Immediately after the request was uttered, the second author of this study made a note of it while she was looking for the appropriate leaflet, map, etc.; therefore, the "field notes" method was used (Beebe, 1995). Despite the fact that the use of a recording device would have helped in obtaining more accurate data, the employee at the tourist information office was not granted permission to do so. Moreover, at that time of the year, only one employee was in charge of the office, so no help could be provided by a second person who could have acted as a transcriber. Still, care was taken to write down verbatim the request that was formulated.

#### 4.3. Data analysis

For the purposes of this paper, only the head act (i.e., the request) was analysed; peripheral modification and instances of 'small talk' or phatic communication in the data which took place in the exchanges and may impact on the degree of politeness of the request fall out of the scope of the present investigation. The requests were examined following the taxonomies suggested by Fink and Félix-Brasdefer (2015) and Félix-Brasdefer (2015). However, the taxonomy we present in Table 1 below has been slightly modified since two realisations present in the research mentioned above (Imperative and Elliptical) did not occur in our data. The remaining 7 request realisations were coded by two different coders with experience in the field of pragmatics, and an inter-rater agreement of 100% was reached.

Table 1 illustrates the request realisations in the first column along with the different variants to encode these requests in the middle column. The examples extracted from our data are provided in the third column. As can be seen below, direct questions refer to

interrogative sentences in which information or action is demanded, they are straightforward and the request is formulated without mitigation. In previous research (Antonopoulou, 2001; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005), requests realised by means of questions were regarded as unmitigated formulae, and we followed this classification.

The modals *can*, *could* and *may* are variants included in conventionally indirect requests, together with some other expressions such as *Is it possible to...?* or *How about...?* The category Looking for (either *I am*, in present, or *I was looking for*, in past) stands by itself, as illustrated in Félix-Brasdefer (2015). Want statements included variants such as *want* (in present or past) and *would like*. In turn, two variants are comprised in the need statement (again, in present or past). The request realisations in terms of hints or imperatives only include one single variant, and assertion comprises the forms *will*, *going to* and *let*. Finally, elliptical requests refer to verbless requests in which the item or information demanded is directly expressed.

Request realisations	Form variants	Example
Direct question (interrogative)	Do you have...? Have you got...? Do you know...? Are there any...?	<i>Do you have a map?</i>
Conventionally indirect	Can Could May Wonder Is it possible to...? How about...?	<i>Can I have a map?</i>  <i>Is it possible to get a taxi?</i>  <i>I was wondering if...</i>
Looking for	Looking for	<i>I was looking for the post office.</i>
Want statement	Want Wanted Would like	<i>I would like to have a map.</i>
Need statement	Need Needed	<i>I need to go to X.</i>
Hint	...	<i>I've been told that...</i>
Assertion	Will Going to Let	<i>Will you have a map, please?</i>  <i>Let me have a map, please.</i>

**Table 1.** Request realisations in the present study.

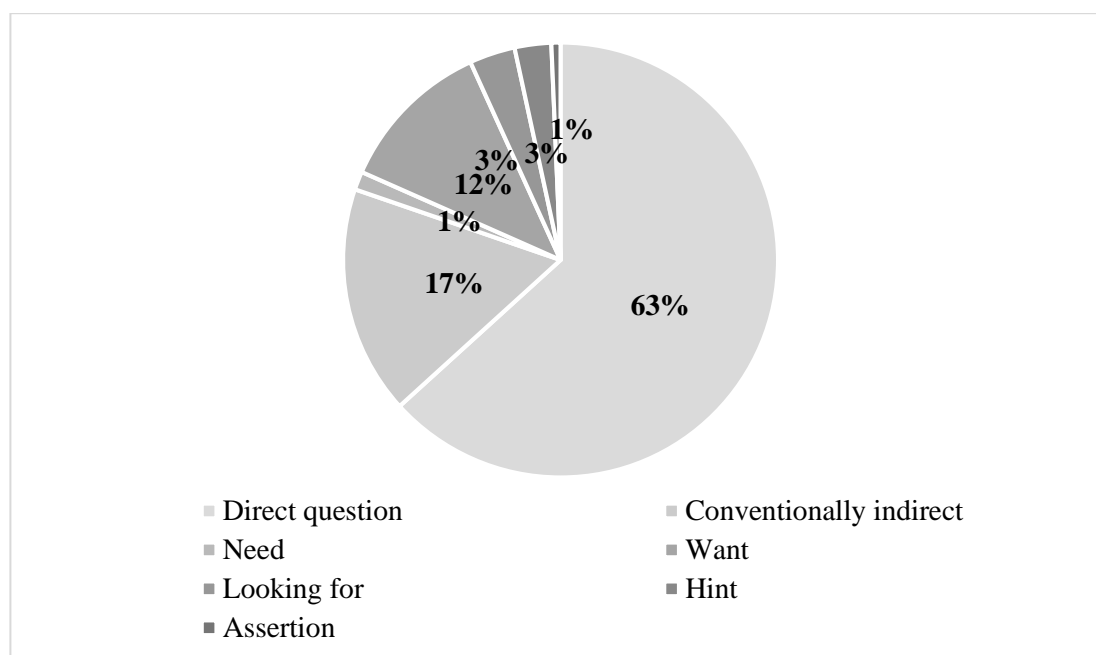
Requests were classified using the taxonomy presented above to answer RQ1 and then further analysis aimed at distinguishing females' vs. males' production of requests was carried out to answer RQ2.



## 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It should be observed that only the first request by each visitor was analysed. This means that if one visitor uttered two requests or asked for information with two different requests, only the first one was written down for analysis. Moreover, and in contrast with other SEs featuring a scripted salutation by the employee (Márquez-Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017) which, in a sense, triggers the request (*How can I help you?*). In our data, the employee always waited for the visitor to greet first, she reciprocated the greeting and then the visitor formulated the request.

The first research question we put forward asked about what request realisations native speakers of English made in the specific context of a tourist information office. A total of 147 requests were formulated, 78 by female and 69 by male visitors. The requests were classified according to the taxonomy presented in Table 1 above and are depicted in the following figure:



**Figure 1.** Request realisations in the tourist information office.

The percentages in Figure 1 reveal that more than 60% of the requests were realised by means of direct questions, and to a much lesser extent, conventionally indirect and want requests followed (17% and 12%, respectively). Request formulae in the form of need (1%), looking for (3%), hints (3%) and assertion (1%) were minimal. There was no occurrence of elliptical requests, perhaps due to the fact that, as explained above, the customer initiated the interaction and the production of an elliptical request immediately upon entering the tourist information office would have been regarded as too direct and thus impolite. Contrary to previous research (Taylor, 2015), this specific context does not allow for a high degree of

variability in request production, since customers tended to formulate their request, in 80% of the cases, either by means of a direct question or by using formulae such as *Can I...?* or *Could you...?* A partial statistical analysis (Chi-square test) was run to ascertain whether there existed significant differences among request realisations, but they proved to be non-significant.

The results seem to indicate that in this specific non-commercial setting, the focus is on exchange of information and thus, making direct questions without mitigation devices or another type of peripheral modification is not considered a face threat to the employee. Consider the following examples of each request realisation taken from our data:

Example 1 (Direct question): *Hi. Do you have a map of hiking routes?*

Example 2 (Conventionally indirect): *Hello, can I have one of these leaflets?*

Example 3 (Need): *Good afternoon. We need to know when the last bus to Oropesa is leaving.*

Example 4 (Want): *Hi. I want to go to Valencia.*

Example 5 (Looking for): *I'm looking for the post office.*

Example 6 (Hint): *Hello, have you heard about the 'Big Stone'?*

Example 7 (Assertion): *Hello, will you have a map of Morella?*

Our findings, thus, confirm our first hypothesis in that most requests were performed directly by means of questions. In the same vein, they are in line with Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (2005) results in a French bakery setting, since her data revealed that, in most cases, the request was expressed as an assertion (*Je vais prendre X*) or a question (*Vous avez X?*). Likewise, Downey Bartlett (2005), in her research on requests in two coffee shops and a coffee cart showed that ordering coffee or other products in these settings without a polite request was not seen as impolite, and was in fact pragmatically correct in these types of contexts. In a visitor information centre in the US, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) also found that direct questions outperformed the rest of the request variants, with conventionally indirect variants being the second most-used realisations. Although this author had data taken from American native speakers, and in the present study we had mainly British visitors, we believe that comparisons can be drawn as both settings are non-commercial and, since requests are mainly for information and fall within the employee's duties/tasks as provider of information, the degree of imposition is low.

Despite the fact that, as stated above, no significant differences were found among the use of specific request realisations, we decided to divide the realisations into two groups (more direct and more indirect) to ascertain possible levels of significance. In this way, and following the classification by Félix-Brasdefer (2015), within the more direct realisations we included Direct Question, Need, Want, Looking for and Assertion. In turn, Conventionally indirect and Hint were grouped into the more indirect requests. The number of direct requests

was 118, whereas the number of indirect requests was 29. A Chi-square test showed that the differences in the use of direct requests are statistically significant, as depicted in Table 2.

	Value	df	Sig.
<b>X<sup>2</sup></b>	53.8	1	.000*

\* $p < .05$

**Table 2.** Chi-squared test for Direct and Indirect request realisations.

The above results show that participants favoured the use of more direct requests, confirming previous research which suggests that a preference for directness in SEs does not entail impoliteness. The extensive use of direct requests may be explained by the type of request the customers employed most. In this sense, our data show that requests for information (e.g., *Where can I buy the tickets for the concert tonight?*) outnumbered, not unexpectedly, requests for action (e.g., *We would like you to explain to us the bus combination to the city*). Table 3 provides a more detailed analysis of requests realisations taking into account the type of request.

	Type of request: information (n=102)	Type of request: action (n=45)
<b>Direct question</b>	65	28
<b>Conventionally indirect</b>	13	12
<b>Need</b>	2	0
<b>Want</b>	14	3
<b>Looking for</b>	5	0
<b>Hint</b>	3	1
<b>Assertion</b>	0	1

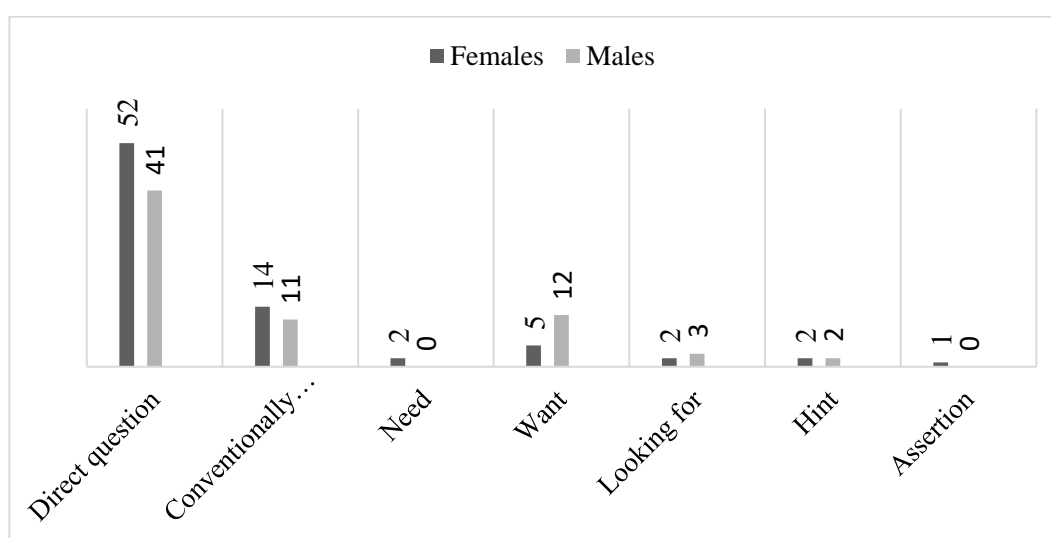
**Table 3.** Classification of request realisations per type of request.

Out of the 147 requests, the vast majority (n=102 or 69.4%) were for information, and the remaining 45 (30.6%) were for action. Irrespective of type of request, direct questions predominate, followed by conventionally indirect strategies. In the case of want requests, there exists a wide difference in production depending on the type: while in the information type want expressions outnumber conventional requests, in the action type they are hardly used (14 occurrences vs. 3). This may be explained by the potentially more imposing force on the employee if action is expected. However, when asking for information, want requests may seem less imposing and are therefore used more.

Still, our results show that both types of requests (for information and for action) entail a low level of imposition, as argued by Félix-Brasdefer (2012), in these types of settings.

These two factors (low imposition and the specific context in which the requests were formulated) may explain the preference for direct questions, which may have resulted in overpoliteness if requests had been too polite in relation to the expected behaviour (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005). Direct requests in the form of questions (in the majority of cases introduced by greetings such as ‘Hello’ or ‘Hi’) seem to be the unmarked request type in this study. Other investigations (e.g., Fink & Félix-Brasdefer, 2015) have claimed that the unmarked type of request in US café SEs is the conventionally indirect realisation, posed after a scripted salutation by the barista. Clearly, there seems to be a link between the specific setting of the SE and the request that is formulated.

In an attempt to answer our second research question (*Are request realisations influenced by gender of the requester?*), the total number of request realisations were classified by gender, as Figure 2 shows:



**Figure 2.** Request realisations per gender.

Upon making a request, female participants preferred direct questions and, to a much lesser extent, conventionally indirect realisations. Taking into account these two request strategies, the same pattern emerges with the males’ requests, although men produced more want statements (12 vs. 5 cases) and no occurrences of need statements. The categories of looking for and hint obtained almost the same number of instances, and there was only one assertion in the females’ data. In light of these results, a Chi-square test was chosen to analyse the levels of significance of request variants in males and females. The results showed no statistically significant differences in the production of request realisations per gender, ( $X^2=7.21$ ;  $df=6$ ;  $Sig.=.301$ ;  $p<.05$ ), meaning that the null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

In view of these findings, our second hypothesis cannot be confirmed as females did not opt for conventionally indirect requests. Moreover, these results seem to challenge the

stereotype that women's linguistic behaviour includes more features of friendliness and positive politeness compared to that of males (Holmes, 1995), because, as Figure 2 above reveals, the two most-used realisations (i.e., direct question and conventionally indirect) are used by both genders. Contrary to our results, in US café SEs, Antonopoulou (2001) and Félix-Brasdefer (2012) demonstrated that males were more direct, using more elliptical realisations than women, who preferred conventionally indirect requests and fully verbalised requests. Yet our results seem to concur with Félix-Brasdefer's (2015) study, which found no differences with regard to the gender of the visitor as male and female customers requested by means of direct and conventionally indirect strategies with similar frequencies. A possible explanation for this coincidence may be due to the context of the SE, as in this last piece of research it was a US visitor information centre, where visitors wish to ask questions and it is the clerks' duty to provide information, very similar to the setting in which the present study was carried out.

A closer inspection of the distribution of request by type reveals that percentages are similar in terms of gender: from the 78 requests made by female visitors, 68% demanded information, similar to the result for male visitors (71%). As for action requests, 32% were uttered by females and 29% by males. Example 8 illustrates a request for information, whereas Example 9 deals with a request for action:

Example 8 (Female): *Hi, do you know where we can park our caravan?*

Example 9 (Male): *Good morning, do you have a map?*

In spite of the inconclusive findings about gender and requests in SEs, we adhere to Mills' (2003) contention that gender is not a factor which determines the production of requests. Rather, we may argue that the setting where the interaction takes place constitutes the main key variable to decide whether speakers' production is pragmatically appropriate or not.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study is a contribution to the body of research on request production in non-commercial SEs in which English is the foreign language. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research had been carried out in this regard. Our findings of naturally-occurring requests in a tourist information office have revealed that direct questions are, by far, the most frequently used request realisations. Obviously, this result comes as no surprise since, in this specific SE context, the customer needs to ask for information and direct questions do not represent face-threatening acts. In a similar vein, even the use of imperatives is not considered impolite in certain SEs, as a marked form might be perceived as "overly polite at

best, or odd at worst” (Myers Scotton & Bernsten, 1988: 382). Therefore, specific pragmatic formulae are appropriate in only certain SEs as they are unmarked and somehow expected by the server.

The findings for the first research question suggest that there is a preference for the use of direct requests, mainly in the form of questions; this does not imply impoliteness on the part of the customer. In this sense, the present study corroborates previous research (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005).

As for the second research question, statistical analyses taking into account the variable of gender did not indicate significant differences. Our results have thus shown that, in line with Mills (2003), it is hard to state that women and men speak differently, at least in this context. As claimed by Fink and Félix-Brasdefer (2015), it is rather the setting of the SE that has an impact on the language used to make the request.

The study is subject to a number of limitations; first, the small sample of requests collected due to the limited data collection time and the fact that only the sentence realising the request was analysed, leaving aside other elements in the exchanges, such as more turns involving further requests, and the opening and closing sequence. Although previous research (e.g., Placencia, 2005; Taylor, 2015) found no or minimal greetings used as a way to open the interaction in SEs, we believe that openings and closings deserve further analysis to ascertain how they may mitigate the request. The second limitation refers to the target age-group, with people of over 55 years of age. Thus, the age of the requester should be taken as a research variable to examine whether older customers produce more polite request realisations than younger ones. Obviously, a more wide-ranging sample and the analysis of other age groups may have resulted in different findings. Therefore, our results are strictly context-specific and no generalisation applies.

Other non-commercial SEs should also be investigated to confirm whether context influences the directness of the requests. Moreover, Fink and Félix-Brasdefer (2015) call for more research on whether request production is different depending on the gender of the server, as some earlier studies (e.g., Hall, 1993) point to this difference. In our research, the requestee’s gender was held constant, as the requests were addressed to a female. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to gather data on requests addressed to a male server at a tourist information office to compare the results from this study. Moreover, further research incorporating the use of video-recording would be desirable, so that paralinguistic information (i.e., gestures, gaze) could complement the verbalisation of requests, as suggested by Fredsted (2005). In this way, triangulation of verbal data with paralinguistic clues downgrading or upgrading the imposition of the request would be possible.

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