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“Check the figures” - variation in English email requests by Finnish and Swedish writers

Anne Kankaanranta

Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration

This article reports on a study of English email requests in a recently merged Finnish-Swedish company. The data consist of messages collected from three Finnish and two Swedish employees over several days. The messages were investigated from two perspectives. First, requests were investigated within the overall discourse in which they occurred by looking into two sample messages in more detail. Second, the linguistic forms used in phrasing the individual requests were investigated. The findings of the article show that both Finnish and Swedish speakers tend to favor on-record strategies, i.e. the imperative and interrogative form, in issuing requests in their English email messages. Differences between the two groups are found in the use of courtesy subjuncts.

Keywords: business communication, lingua franca, email communications, politeness

1 Introduction

To study English and email communications in a business context is like trying to hit a moving target. Both of them are in a state of flux. First, the Englishisation of the world is a reality boosted by globalization (e.g. Svartvik 2000, Graddol 1999a and 1999b, Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1999, Crystal 1997, Widdowson 1997). With the intensifying wave of mergers in the global economy (e.g. Portanger 2000, Lähteenmäki 2000), English is gaining ground as a common corporate language in running the new combines. Even in mergers between close neighbors like Finland and Sweden, its adoption has been recommended for reasons of equality. By choosing a language which is foreign to both parties, neither will gain a more powerful position language-wise (Vaara & Tienari 2001). In this new environment, English is a shared code used between non-native speakers of the language; it is not owned by anybody.

Second, email has undergone several interrelated changes over the past few years: the technology has developed strongly, the user-ship has both grown and diversified and email has also undergone something of a maturation process as users have become more comfortable with the medium (Baron 1998). Today, email is becoming ubiquitous in the corporate world. Not so long ago, it was still a clumsy technology (for the historical development, see Baron 1998). For example, in 1986, it was still regarded as text-based in the sense that it had no picture or sound components (Sproull & Kiesler 1986). Today, however, both pictures, even moving ones, and sound can be sent as attachments. Email communications in the modern business world play a central role – be it in internal communication within the company or external communication between buyers, sellers and other outside stakeholders.

This study investigates the use of English as a common corporate language in email communications in a recently merged

Finnish-Swedish company.¹ In particular, it investigates one rhetorical function, i.e. requesting, because the interplay between the context and the linguistic function can be discussed through the face-threatening quality inherent in a requestive act. In addition, requesting represents an integral function in business messages (e.g. Yli-Jokipii 1996, Ziv 1996, Sullivan 1995).

The role of culture and cultural differences in the integration phase of Finnish-Swedish mergers has been discussed by Vaara (1999), who interviewed employees of recently merged companies. He has not, however, investigated how culture or cultural differences are reflected in the communication and in the actual language use. In contrast, Nickerson (2000) and Akar (1998) have focused on the language, i.e. English, as used by non-native speakers in a shared corporate context. To date, however, nobody – to my knowledge – has analyzed a particular rhetorical function realized in email communications between non-native speakers sharing a common corporate environment.

2 Background

2.1 Requests and politeness

In this study, I have employed Akar's (1998) definition of a request, according to which a request is an expression of a need with which the writer wants the reader to perform either a verbal or a physical act. Yli-Jokipii (1996) also included a third element in her definiti-

¹ This pilot study forms part of a subproject in a large research project "Internal communication in two recently merged Finnish-Swedish companies: Swedish, Finnish or English?" The research project comprises four other subprojects, consisting of a questionnaire survey and related interviews on communication in the companies, studies into spoken interactions in negotiations and meetings, a study on the use of Sweden Swedish and Finland Swedish, and studies into personnel magazines. The project is financed by the Academy of Finland in 2000-2002.

on, i.e. that the writer attempts to change the reader's cognitive state of mind. But as Akar aptly states, that definition is very broad-ranging; in other words "if a cognitive change is requested, then all informative texts can be defined as requests, because by giving information we are asking the reader to change his/her cognitive state" (Akar 1998: 81). Following Akar's definition, even questions are regarded as requests because they are employed to pursue a verbal response. In the following, five examples of requests are given: the first three seek a verbal response and the last two express a need for a physical act.

Please comment. FIT10

Is there anything missing? FHK3

*Also I would like to know who will pay possible fees...*FAH1

Kindly correct 264 gr to be 260 gr. FPM33

*You can also bring samples of your products...*SAL6

The identification of requests in the data was not unproblematic. For example, a formulaic utterance representing business jargon such as *Enclosed please find* was classified as a request even though it can be argued that its function is simply to refer to the enclosed document as it could be replaced by *Here is*. On the other hand, it can also be argued that in business no documents are enclosed for fun – they are enclosed because they are somehow relevant to the matters at hand. Thus, the act of enclosing a document alone can be understood as a request to read it. In this case, the form *Enclosed please find* further emphasizes that "request".

According to Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, requests represent intrinsic face threatening acts (FTAs) as they run contrary to the negative face wants of the addressee, i.e. the want of a member of society to be unimpeded by others. Any rational agent will seek to avoid these FTAs, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat.

There are five strategies for doing FTAs according to Brown & Levinson (1987). Some of those strategies are likely to be used less frequently than others in business contexts, especially within one

company, because of the pervasive efficiency requirements of the modern business world. For example, if somebody needs to have something done, it is unlikely that he² just drops the idea (Strategy 5) because of the FTA involved in it. That may entail problems to the entire organization.

In the same vein, Strategy 4, i.e. going off-record with the FTA, would not keep the company in business for long. For any goal-oriented organization, it is important to know who is responsible for what and thus vaguely and ambiguously worded FTAs are likely to require too much time and effort to be conducive to the company's business in the long run.

Thus the remaining three strategies seem likely in the business context. In other words, going baldly on record or going on record with redressive action. Doing an act baldly involves doing it in the most direct and unambiguous way possible, for example by using the imperative form, such as *Do it!* Redressive action, in contrast, refers to attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way that indicates that no such face threat is intended. This action can take two forms: either positive or negative politeness. Positive politeness is directed toward the positive face of the addressee, in other words his want to have a good image and to be liked. Positive-politeness utterances are used to imply common ground, familiarity or sharing of wants. Negative politeness, in contrast, is oriented toward the negative face of the addressee, i.e. his want to have his freedom of action unhindered. It is specific and focused on the particular imposition that the FTA, e.g. a request, effects.

² *He* is used for ease of reference only and refers to both the masculine and female gender.

2. 2 Earlier research into politeness and requests in business messages and email

In this section, this study is put in the context of earlier research into politeness and requests in business messages and email. The focus is on the differences found between native and non-native business writers on the one hand, with special emphasis on the comparison between Finnish and English business writers. On the other hand, research into requests on email in general is introduced as there seems to be no research so far into email requests in a corporate or business environment.

Some researchers (e.g. Maier 1992, Sipilä 1997, Paarlahti 1998, Akar 1998) have observed that the use of politeness strategies in business messages is different between native and non-native writers. Maier (1992), Paarlahti (1998) and Akar (1998) studied the phenomenon as a contextual variable and Sipilä focused on the linguistic realizations of the request. Maier (1992) and Paarlahti (1998) used elicited data whereas Sipilä (1997) and Akar (1998) based their research on authentic business messages.

Maier (1992) compared politeness strategies in business letters written by American and Japanese writers in response to a fictional situation. She found that although non-native writers' letters showed an awareness of various types of politeness strategies, the language used to express politeness seemed less formal and more direct than that of native speakers. As a matter of fact, a number of letters gave an impression that the writers were somehow too casual, desperate, personal or detached. Furthermore, the non-native speakers relied on certain strategies and avoided others, mostly due to their limited linguistic competence. Maier's conclusion was that non-native speakers' business writing may be perceived negatively by the native reader. This observation may be extended to business communication in general. For example, Shelby (1998) states: "The greater the perceived discrepancy between the reader's expectations and reality the lower the perceived quality of a text; conversely, quality is seen as highest when the reader's expectations are met." (Shelby 1998: 392). Thus if Finnish and Swedish writers realize requests

differently from each other, the message may be perceived in a way not originally intended by the writer. For this reason, it is important to start the research into this issue from an investigation into the ways in which these two non-native groups actually realize their requests.

Paarlahti (1998) compared the use of politeness strategies between Finnish learners of English and native speakers of (American) English. The data was gathered using elicitation techniques reflecting a problem between a buyer and a seller. Her analysis shows that native speakers used a wider repertoire of strategies than non-native speakers and that the politeness strategies employed were different. Finnish speakers used more direct strategies when expressing criticism, but employed more indirect strategies when making a request. For example, in requests, the most frequently used strategy used among the Finns was conventional indirectness (modal initials), which was practically non-existent in the native English data. Also, only a third of the Finns relied on bald-on-record strategies (imperatives, performatives) whereas they were the most frequently used strategy among the native speakers. In general, Finns showed sensitivity to the contextual constraints and mitigated the FTAs with different politeness strategies.

Paarlahti (1998) recognizes the limitations of her study in writing “Results from naturalistic material could offer true insights to the present state of the business professionals knowledge of foreign language...” In other words, even though her investigation shows well how Finnish learners of English not familiar with the business world make requests in an imaginary business situation, and even though it may even give indications of some cultural traits, it still cannot be generalized to apply to Finnish business people in a corporate environment.

Sipilä (1997) studied external and internal business communication by Americans and Finns writing in English and used a framework developed by Yli-Jokipii (1996) in her study into requests in professional discourse. Whereas Yli-Jokipii’s focus was mother-tongue requests between buyers and sellers representing two languages and three different cultures, i.e. British and American English and Finnish, Sipilä concentrated on requests made in English by na-

tive and non-native speakers of the language in various companies. She studied the linguistic realizations of the requests in her data and the effect of contextual factors was largely ignored. Her findings show that Finnish writers seem to issue requests in much the same way as native American writers. For example, in the distribution of the structural realizations of requests, i.e. the imperative, interrogative, modal-initial and declarative, there were no major differences. The three first structures accounted for over 60% of the requests made in internal messages. One interesting difference between the two writer groups was that Finns seemed to use more *please* in internal messages than Americans. Sipilä explains this by stating that Finns may not fully understand that, in addition to mitigating requests, *please* may also upgrade them, especially in modal-initials, such as *Could you please do this*.

Akar's (1998) study focuses on the patterns and variations in contemporary written business communications in Turkey and also investigates one rhetoric function in English and Turkish internal memos – requesting. Her findings show that various factors have influenced Turkish business communication, and the way requests are realized, such as national business culture, individual corporate cultures, Turkish bureaucratic tradition as shown in official writing; and finally communication medium. Her study shows that the context of writing is reflected in the texts and can explain, at least to some extent, the way the texts, and requests, are realized. For example, in internal English memos the imperative was used in 34% of all requests whereas in internal Turkish memos the percentage was only two. In addition, as Turkish memos also had a strong tendency to avoid personal involvement, it seems that the linguistic manifestations of official correspondence permeate business discourse.

Next, the focus is shifted to research into requests on email. In Nickerson's (1999) data of 200 email messages collected from a Dutch-British multinational company, the most prevalent action was exchanging information. Thus requests, i.e. the initiation of an exchange, can be said to form part of the essential "substance" or "socially recognized communicative purpose" (Orlikowski and Yates 1994: 543) of the email genre in organizational settings. Even

though email communications have attracted a lot of research interest in the past few years (see e.g. Baron 1998, Herring 1996, Markus 1994, Murray 1991, Ferrara 1991), there seems to be only one study whose focus is on requests on email. Chang & Hsu (1998) investigated differences in request emails written in English by Chinese learners of English and native American English speakers. The variable applied by them was thus the nationality or the mother tongue of the writer. They concluded that politeness in Chinese writers' messages was mainly realized through information sequencing, i.e. the request appeared late in the message and thus the recipient had time to prepare for it. The linguistic form of the request was mostly direct. In American writers' messages, in contrast, the request appeared early in the discourse but the linguistic form was worded more indirectly. As the ways to express politeness are different, some confusion may be due when Chinese learners read and interpret Americans writers' requests, and vice versa. These findings are thus comparable to those of Maier (1992), Paarlahti (1998), Sipilä (1997) and Akar (1998) as it can be suggested that the differences found in expressing politeness may have consequences not intended by the writer.

Some studies in email communications have touched upon requests by investigating, among other things their frequency: for example, Gains (1999) found that 32% of the commercial emails in his data were employed to make requests; a case study by Ziv (1996) of the use of email between three team members showed that email was used most frequently for requesting or providing short answers; Sullivan (1995) reports that requesting information was ranked as the second most important communication activity realized via email among staff members of a US state legislature.

Also, politeness - closely intertwined with requesting - has been investigated in email communications. For example, Mulholland (1999) concludes that email users seem to avoid longer phrases to show politeness (such as *We would be grateful if you could*) and prefer linguistic realizations such as *Please do this*, possibly for reasons of brevity. Her respondents employed in an Australian university also said that they were conscious of uncertainty in politeness conventions but were not clear if it was technologically driven or personally designed. This individuality of email texts, according

to Mulholland (1999: 74), is enhanced by the lack of training in best practices - in contrast to the training most people receive about letter writing or business letter writing.

As Mulholland (1999) states, brevity may be one of the reasons for favoring short politeness markers. Another may be the informal style often invoked in email and discussed by e.g. Maynor (1994), Baron (1998), Rice (1997) and Gimenez (2000).

The studies discussed above show that there are differences in the way requests, and politeness, are realized by native and non-native writers of English in business contexts. By the same token, the strongly developing technology of email seems to have an effect on the language used. An investigation into English email requests written by Finnish and Swedish speakers may give interesting insights into the interplay between language and the social action in a recently merged Finnish-Swedish company. After all, requests are employed to make things happen in the real world.

3 Present study

3.1 Objective of the study

The objective of the present study is to investigate the variation in English email requests by Finnish and Swedish writers. Specifically, the study aims at investigating linguistic support for the anecdotal evidence for the cultural differences between Finns and Swedes in post-merger situations (e.g. Vaara 1999; also Ekwall & Karlsson 1999, Laine-Sveiby 1987).

The research questions read as follows:

- How does the context of writing affect email requests?
- How does the nationality of the writer affect the linguistic realization of the request?

The context refers to the general characteristics of the writer, the recipient and the topic at hand. In addition, the social distance between participants and the power relations between them are investigated to explore the politeness phenomenon in a shared corporate environment (Brown & Levinson 1987).

The effect of one of the contextual factors, i.e. the nationality of the writer, is investigated by classifying all the requests in the data according to the nationality of the writer and according to the linguistic realization of the request.

3.2 Data

The data for this pilot study were collected from one of the leading paper companies in the world in spring 2000. The company was formed as a result of a merger between a Finnish and a Swedish paper company in 1997; in 2000 the company acquired a major US player in the market. The number of employees totals 45000, of which around 32% are Finnish, 24% Swedish, 16% North American and 10% German; the rest come from Spain, Portugal, the UK, France and the Benelux countries. Ever since the merger in 1997, the corporate language of the company has been English.

Email messages were collected from three Finnish and two Swedish employees, who also replied to some questions about the context of writing, such as how well they knew the recipients, what their work relation was like and if the number of messages sent and received was typical for the period in question. The rationale was to explore, i.a. the factors influencing politeness such as the social distance and the power relations between participants. All but one informant held managerial positions in the company (a vice-president, two project managers, a development manager and a market supervisor). Four of them were in their 30s and one in his mid 40s.

Two of the informants sent me the messages they themselves had written in English; one collected them over a week and the other over six weeks. Three of the informants (two Finnish and one Swe-

dish), however, said that they forwarded nearly 100% of their incoming and outgoing email messages over the period of one week. They also said that the week in question had not been as busy as usual. The total number of messages forwarded to me was 165. In many cases, however, the messages contained more than one message as the latest contribution had been appended to earlier exchanges. In total, the number of messages was thus 255.

Of these 255 messages 105 were classified as internal English messages, i.e. they were written in English and exchanged between employees of the company. The number of writers was 27, of whom 13 were Finnish and 24 Swedish. The four internal messages written in English by a Chinese speaker and a German speaker were ignored in the analysis.

Table 1 presents the break-down of the internal messages written in English.³ The figures in brackets refer to the number of messages

Table 1. Break-down of the internal messages written in English into messages with and without requests, and into requestive messages written by Finnish and Swedish writers, respectively.

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Internal English messages (101) | |
| 100% | |
| With requests (55) | Without requests (46) |
| 55% | 45% |
| By Finnish writers (32) | By Swedish writers (23) |
| 58% | 42% |

³ As the collection method – the period and the messages included in the package forwarded to me – was not the same in every informant’s case, I will not start the break-down from all the messages in the data.

As Table 1 shows, requests appeared in 55% of the internal messages written in English. The 13 Finnish writers wrote slightly more requestive messages than the 24 Swedish writers. When the percentage is compared to that in Yli-Jokipii's (1996) study on external business letters, the difference is striking. In her data, 99% of the messages contained requests. This difference can be explained in at least three ways. First, as mentioned above, Yli-Jokipii's definition of a request was more extensive. Second, it seems that email as a medium encourages interaction. In other words, if a request is made in one message, the response will be given by the recipient in the following message. This is also confirmed by the data, as the messages without requests seem to be responses to the requestive messages. Finally, the nature and purpose of these internal messages is different, as they are used to run the everyday business in the company and are not employed to buy and sell, as was mostly the case in Yli-Jokipii's external messages.

3.3 Analysis

The requests in the data are investigated from two perspectives. First, an attempt is made to show how the context (e.g. writer, recipient, topic) influences the way requests are realized in company-internal email messages. Two messages are taken as examples. In the analysis, the three principal factors - the social distance between participants, the power relations between them and the weightiness of the imposition - which govern linguistic choices about politeness according to Brown & Levinson (1987) are employed.

Second, the influence of one contextual factor, i.e. the nationality of the issuer of the request, is studied. This is done by classifying the requests according to the linguistic forms used in realizing them. The coding manual used in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) proved useful because it offers a hierarchy of the different ways of realizing the request. The modi-

fied categories relevant for the present study are presented below with some examples from the data. The classification is based on nine categories ranging from the most direct to the least direct request. The last two, i.e. Ellipsis and Other, are not likely in their “correct” place in the continuum from direct to indirect.

- Imperative (with or without a courtesy subjunct)
Please revert to me a s a p. SAH3
Check the figures and the final meeting ...FAH8
- Interrogatives
Do you take only one trainee this year or two. FAL21
Could you please help me to find a case from Germany?
FAL2
- Obligation/need statement - obligating either *you*, *we* or an inanimate subject
He said you should reply to Sven vH that he does not want to take part at this stage. FAH3
The WEB functionality we need to talk about but I can give ... SAH22
Also the resource needs of suppliers should be estimated.
FAH1
- Want/desire statement - expressing the writer’s desire
I would like also discuss the possibility of some trainees spend time in S. mill. FAL3
- Suggestory expression - the illocutionary intent phrased as a suggestion
So you could also tell something from the recruiting process.
FAL14
- Request preparatory statement - expressing a condition for feasibility of the request, typically one of ability, willingness, or possibility
I also think it would be good if I could add something more about the survey in the invitation...SHK2

- Hints - the illocutionary content not immediately derivable from the illocution
I do not know if the English language is correct but I guess someone could check that. SHK9
- Ellipsis - no verb used to express the illocutionary intent
Delivery immediately after the production. FPM5
- Other
Thank you very much in advance for arranging the trucks.
FPM5

Even though the categories used by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) were employed to classify spoken requests, they seem adaptable to written email requests as well. As mentioned above, with minor adjustments of the categories, it was possible to classify every request in the data. For example, Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) use Obligation statement to express the “requester’s” illocutionary intent in terms of a statement of the listener’s (recipient’s) obligation. In the above modified version of the category, Obligation/need statement also covers the writer’s obligation and an obligation expressed in the passive voice by using an inanimate subject.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 Requests in context

This section investigates the request within the overall discourse in which it occurs. An attempt is made to relate the requestive utterances to a larger context and elaborate on the effect of external factors, such as the gender, nationality and status of the writer and the recipient and the relationship between the writer and the recipient. Only two cases will be taken up. I have tried to choose them so that they represent the extremes in the data set and thus the variation involved.

4.1.1 Case 1

Message 1⁴ is written by a Swedish speaker, Saga, who is a Project Manager, to her Finnish speaking superior, Matti. No copies of the message were sent, so it is a message from one person to another. Saga and Matti know each other and have also met, which seems to be reflected in both the salutation and complimentary closing with first names being used. The message deals with one topic and is fairly easy to understand without recourse to any other documents.

Message 1

Från: Svenson Saga

Skickat: den 15 maj 2000 12:13

Till: Suominen Matti

Ämne: Info meeting XY Focus

Hello matti,

(1) I hope everything is fine with you. (2) It seems to be difficult to find a suitable date for the info meeting-XY Focus before the vacation. (3) I guess we are all very busy!!! (4) Would it be possible to arrange one in August instead. (5) For me it would be ok with 12th, 17th, 18th 21 22nd of August. (6) Please come back to me if any of these dates are ok for you.

(7) I also think it would be good if I could add something more about the survey in the invitation, at least the timetable and the purpose/objective of the survey. (8) I think this would make people more interested and eager to come. (9) Could you please send me some lines about this.

Best regards,

Saga (HK2)

⁴ All text samples are authentic in the sense that no corrections to the language have been made. However, all names, dates etc. have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

Message 1 contains four requests (4, 6, 7, 9) with reasons and explanations placed between them. The first request (4) is preceded by three sentences focusing on face work and explanations, and thus the text is structured in an indirect sequence. Two of the requests (6 and 9) are classified as on-record as they are expressed in the imperative and the interrogative (a modal initial, to be exact). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), request 6 (*Please come back...*) represents a bald-on-record strategy, and in request 9 (*Could you please...*), the modal initial represents the conventional indirect way of issuing a request. However, as there is no difficulty in interpreting modal initials as requests in my data, I have classified them as on-record strategies and included them in the same category with interrogatives.

The other two requests (4: *Would it be possible to arrange*, and 7: *I also think it would be good if I could*), on the other hand, are more indirect, using request preparatory statement and suggestory expression (see 3.3 for details). It seems that the more indirect requests are used to prepare the ground for the request proper. In both cases, the reader's face is protected and the reader is given freedom to refuse the request.

The polite tone in the indirect requests (4, 7) is further increased by distancing the writer from the recipient. The writer writes *Would it be possible to arrange* and not *Would you arrange*. In the same way, she writes *I also think it would be good if I could add some*, and not *I would like to add*. In the requests proper (6, 9), in contrast, both the recipient and the writer are explicitly present, i.e. *Please come back to me* and *Could you please send me*.

In addition, the message contains other elements that seem to increase the face redress. To begin with, the first sentence feels like an opening in a telephone conversation or a personal letter. It emphasizes the personal relationship between the writer and the recipient and, from the traditional business letter's point of view, feels out of place in written business communication. On the other hand, it can also be regarded as evidence of the writer's attitude to email: for Saga, email may be like written speech, including features traditionally connected with spoken interactions. The utterance *I hope everything is fine with you!* could be an opening in a personal letter.

It seems that this message also contains other features that are more typical of spoken interactions, and simultaneously represent negative politeness strategies. All through the text, for example, the writer uses expressions to indicate her own hesitation or opinions such as *I guess* (3), *I also think* (7), and *I think* (8). In addition to these devices, she also uses pronouns to mitigate the imposition, such as *if I could add something more about the survey* (7) and *Could you please send me some lines about this* (9). In both cases, the vagueness of the imposition serves as mitigator for the request.

What is particularly interesting in the message is that, in spite of the overtly polite style, it is writer-focused. The first person pronouns (*I, me*) outnumber those of the second person (*you*) by eight to three. Again, this is a feature characteristic of spoken discourse (see e.g. Collot and Belmore 1996). Only once does the writer use inclusive *we* to claim common ground with the recipient (*we are all very busy*).

In sum, the four requests in the message only pursue two needs, i.e. finding a suitable date for the meeting and adding more information in the invitation. The impositions as such may not impress as very demanding, but as Saga is writing to her boss, the weight of the impositions increases. The whole message is worded carefully to reduce the face threatening act. As it is a message to a superior, some redress may be expected but this one feels somewhat overwhelming. An interesting detail about the message is that Saga writes her boss's name with a lower case letter, and *Matti* becomes *matti* - otherwise there are no major typos or mistakes.

This message is an interesting example of how the requestive function may be realized on the discoursal level. It is difficult to explain why Saga worded the message as she did without studying comparative material from her other messages. That research is needed to determine the effect the recipient and the imposition may have had on the message. Similarly, more research is needed into the messages of other Swedish speakers to determine the effect of Swedishness; and into the messages of other female managers to determine the effect of gender on the language used.

Some questions to be answered by having recourse to a larger sample are the following. To begin with, is the approach so polite

because Saga is writing to a superior? Or maybe Matti is a difficult person and Saga wants to show negative politeness not to sound imposing. On the other hand, are not Finns supposed to be tolerant of directness as they are characterized as direct in their communication (e.g. Vaara 1999; also Ekwall & Karlsson 1999, Laine-Sveiby 1987)? Are Swedish women always this indirect? Or is it a characteristic of all women? Or maybe the approach came out this way because Saga regards email as written speech and allows features of spoken language to take over, resulting in a loosely structured, repetitive message, which resembles spontaneous genres such as personal letters (Collot and Belmore 1996).

4.1.2 Case 2

Message 2 is written by Pekka, a Finnish man, and it is sent to eight recipients, including both Finnish and Swedish speakers, all male. The salutation *Hello all* is used to greet the recipients, and Pekka signs off by using his full name. Mats, who is one of the recipients of the message (and one of my informants, too), is on the same hierarchical level in the organization as the writer. Pekka and Mats have met face-to-face but Pekka's relation to the other recipients of the message is not known, which may account for the formal closing with his full name. The topic of the message – the figures – appears to be shared knowledge among the participants. For an outsider the message is somewhat difficult to understand because of the grammatical problems in sentence (2).

Message 2

Från: Suominen Pekka
Skickat: den 12 juni 2000 07:21
Till: Vaho, Jussi; Suominen, Pekka; Ahven, Jari; Sund, Lars; Svensson, Håkan; Lindh, Pelle; Peltonen, Pasi; Karhu, Usko
Kopia: Kuokkanen, Jukka
Ämne: Product strategy/streamlining

Hello all,

(1) Pls find attached the file, which was made on 1.6. in Place X. (2) Check the figures and the final meeting to fix the table will be on 12.8. in Place X.

(3) The other sheet is RF-demand.

(4) Contribution margins are not yet updated. (5) Pls ask your controllers to update these figures and send updated files to me latest by 8.8.

Best regards,
Pekka Suominen

Attachment Converted: "C:/Program Files/Eudora/Attach/
2340A0.XLS" (AH8)

The structure of the message differs from Saga's message as this one opens with a request *Pls find attached*. The request is not preceded by any preparatory elements. The function of this rather formulaic example of business jargon is simply to refer to the attached file. The utterance could be replaced by e.g. *Here is the file*, which would be regarded as an explanation used to prepare for the following request (2). As the writer has chosen to use the expression with a requestive tone, i.e. the imperative and *please*, the utterance is classified as a request.

The three remaining requests are realized in the imperative form too: the first one *Check the figures ...* is realized by using an imperative alone whereas the third one *Pls ask your controllers to update ...* contains a courtesy subjunct *please* (in an abbreviated form) and is preceded by explanatory elements. The final request *...and send*

updated files to ... again is realized in the imperative without *please*.⁵

All the requests in the message represent bald-on-record politeness strategies and are expressed in the imperative, one of them without *please* and the others with it. The force of the courtesy subjunct *please* seems to be weakened by the fact that it is abbreviated to *pls*. As to the second request in (5), i.e. .. *and send updated files to...* there is a possibility of misinterpretation of the request in spite of the fact that a bald-on-record strategy has been used. Literally, the request means that the controllers should send the files to Pekka. In this context, it may be more likely, however, that it is the recipient of the message who is expected to send the files.

Message 2 emanates efficiency and effectiveness - it is strictly business. In contrast to Saga's message, it is highly structured and dense. Only 57 words are used to convey the ideas and thus an attempt to reduce the imposition on the recipient's time is obvious.

The message seems to contain a lot of shared knowledge and for an outsider it is difficult to determine, e.g. how much time and effort is required in "checking the figures". As a matter of fact, the message lends itself easily to at least three interpretations about its politeness. Leech's (1983) Cost-Benefit Scale is used to illustrate the point. First, if the imposition is small and thus not costly to the recipient, the imperative form will be "polite enough". If, on the other hand, *checking the figures* requires a lot of work and is thus costly to the recipient, the imperative form will convey the request bluntly. Thirdly, if the imposition, in spite of requiring time and effort, is routine in that particular situation in the corporate environment, the request using a bald-on-record strategy will be "justified". Even though there is no information about the weight of the imposition, it is likely to be either small or then routine, as the whole message does not sound blunt, but, it clearly reflects efficiency as discussed above.

⁵Even though the influence of *please* in the preceding request can be classified as "reaching out" to the final request, a decision was made to consider each request as an independent utterance.

The tone of the message is very different from Saga's message. Pekka is in charge and there is no room for negotiation. The message is direct in its sequencing and in the linguistic realizations of the requests. The social distance between the writer and the recipients is invoked in signing off with a full name. On the other hand, the salutation is an informal *Hello all*, whose effect is the opposite as it reduces social distance. Another alternative would have been to start the message without any salutation, but it is easy to see that the result would have been abrupt.

Is Pekka a busier person than Saga and thus does not have time to spend on wording his message? Or does he go straight to the point because he appreciates his recipients' time and does not want to make them read unnecessarily? Or does the message reflect the Finnishness of the writer? Or is the style like this because he is a man - and all his recipients are male? Or is it because the issue at hand is merely routine; or maybe the issue is so pressing that there is no need, or room for face redress. Would face redress even be expected in this situation?

The two cases discussed above are very different and there seem to be many plausible explanations for their differences. More research is needed to determine how the various contextual characteristics influence the way requestive messages are realized in email communications. One possible characteristic, however, not mentioned above, may be the writer's attitude toward the medium. For example, Saga may regard email more as a social medium than Pekka, for whom it may represent only an efficient way to get things done. The difference can be compared to the difference between a letter and a memo. Letters tend to be more personal with their salutations and complimentary closes whereas memos traditionally focus on one issue and are often highly transactional (for more about the memo in Anglo-American business communication see e.g. Bové & Thill 2000). Interestingly, Hildebrand (2000) has coined a neologism to be used for email communications which seem to merge the genres of letter and memo. He suggests that *mem-let* be used for this type of text.

4.2 Individual requests

This section investigates the linguistic forms most frequently used in phrasing the request itself in Finnish and Swedish writers' messages. Apart from imperatives and interrogatives, only a few examples of each category presented in 3.3 was found in the data (the exact numbers are irrelevant because of the small overall amount of data). As imperatives and interrogatives represent the majority of the linguistic realizations of requests in the data, they will be discussed in more detail.

Table 2 presents the share of imperatives and interrogatives of all requests in the data. The figures in brackets refer to the number of requests.

Table 2. The share of imperatives and interrogatives of all requests by Finnish and Swedish writers.

| Nationality | Imperative | Interrogative | Total of all requests |
|-------------|------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Finnish | 43% (40) | 24% (22) | 67% (62/93) |
| Swedish | 40% (27) | 22% (15) | 62% (42/68) |

Both Finnish and Swedish writers used imperatives and interrogatives in over 60% of all their requests. The imperative was used in around 40% and the interrogative in around 20% of the requests. The percentages are similar even though the number of requests by Finnish writers was larger, i.e. 93 compared to 68 by Swedish writers.

4.2.1 Imperatives

Imperatives represent the most direct form of imposition according to Leech (1993:13). They stand as a distinct example of issuing a face threatening act (FTA) "bald-on-record" (Brown & Levinson 1987), and the reason for doing this is simply that efficiency is more important than face redress, i.e. politeness. The issuer of the request thus simply ignores the FTA or considers it irrelevant (Brown & Levinson 1987: 94-97). However, it is vital that both participants recognize the urgency of the situation. The following example illustrates this; it is the only one realized in the imperative form in a message containing three other requests, which are either modal-initials or request preparatory statements. Compared to the other topics in the message, the subject at hand - deciding the date on which to meet - is pressing and needs to be settled urgently (see Case 1).

Please come back to me if any of these dates are ok for you. SHK2

Similarly, the imperative is used in purely task-oriented situations, such as in giving instructions like *Check the figures ...FAH8* (See Case 2). This usage is also illustrated in the data when a writer reminds the participants of a working group about their "home-work" due before their next meeting. The issuer acts as an instructor and he seems to regard his addressees as students who need to be reminded of the tasks at hand.

Please do not forget to do home works ; -)

(1) check questions and texts,

*(2) Try to fill a CV from address "Test job, english CV-builder"
FHK3*

As we have seen in the above examples, *please* can be used to miti-

gate the request and reduce its impositive force. Other expressions used in a similar way in the data were *kindly* and *be so kind* as in *also be so kind to arrange the shipment as soon as possible (SPM7)*. The courtesy subjunct *please* may also be regarded as an empty token, like a default mode, and its use may be more or less automatic. Whatever the case, there were major differences between Finnish and Swedish writers in this respect.

Table 3 below shows the use of imperative, with and without *please, kindly* etc. by the Finnish and Swedish writers. The figures in brackets refer to the number of requests.

Table 3. The use of imperatives, with and without *please, kindly* etc. by the Finnish and Swedish writers.

| Nationality | Imperative alone | Imperative with <i>please, kindly</i> etc | Total imperatives | Of all requests |
|-------------|------------------|--|----------------------|--------------------|
| Finnish | 38% (15) | 62% (25) | 100% (40) | 43% (40/93) |
| Swedish | 8% (2) | 92% (25) | 100% (27) | 40% (27/68) |

As can be seen from Table 3, the share of requests realized in the imperative form of all requests amounts to around 40% for both language groups; Finnish writers used it slightly more frequently, i.e. 43% versus 40%. It seems that it is like a default mode of asking for something in the everyday running of the business, as the topics at hand seem to be more or less routine. Some common verbs employed frequently in the imperative form illustrate this. They include e.g. *ask, send, confirm, revert, check, contact, inform* and *comment*.

There was a major difference between Finnish and Swedish speakers in the employment of courtesy subjuncts such as *please* and *kindly*. The Swedish writers used them more frequently than the Finnish writers. In 92% of their imperatives courtesy subjuncts

were used, whereas Finnish speakers used them only in 62% of their requests in the imperative form.

There were also differences in the choice of the subjunct. Finnish writers employed *kindly* six times but Swedish writers did not use it at all. Instead they employed the structure *be so kind*, which was absent from Finnish writers' requests and which seems to have a similar function to *please* and *kindly*, as in the following example:

...also be so kind to arrange shipment as soon as possible. SPM7

This use may be due to the Swedish language and its way of preparing for a request, i.e. *var så vänlig*, which translates into English as *be so kind*. And *kindly*, favored by the Finnish writers, may also have its motivation in the Finnish language, which frequently employs *ystävällisesti* in connection with requests - in written business messages in particular. *Kindly* can be a translation of the Finnish word.

One feature occurring only in the Finnish writers' requests is that the imperative is put into the first person plural form, i.e. *let's*. By using an inclusive *we*, the writer can call upon cooperative assumptions and thus reduce the FTA by employing this type of positive politeness. This usage can be regarded as an indication of a way to create proximity and solidarity in a shared corporate context.

Lets discuss this on the phone on Tuesday ... FHK5

These findings, showing an extensive use of the imperative form as a realization for a request, seem to speak for the urgency of the matters at hand in a corporate environment. The niceties of the language are not so important. In these cases, the imposition is routine and thus the request is made without redress, i.e. "bald-on-record". What is interesting, though, is the difference in the use of *please* between the two non-native groups. The Swedish speakers' strong preference for its use may indicate a rather more indirect approach. This finding seems to support Vaara's (1999) findings concerning

cultural differences in Finnish-Swedish companies. In the interviews he conducted with both Finnish and Swedish managers in recently merged Finnish-Swedish companies, Finns were described as being direct whereas Swedes were said to be more indirect in their communication (see also Ekwall & Karlsson 1999, Laine-Sveiby 1987).

4.2.2 Interrogatives

Interrogatives and modal initials also represent a "bald-on-record" politeness strategy, as a response is explicitly expected (Brown & Levinson 1987). They are understood as elicitations of a verbal response and their illocutionary content is explicit. Even though modal initial requests, i.e. expressions starting with a modal verb such as *could, can, may and might*, represent a conventional indirect way of issuing requests, there is usually no difficulty in interpreting them as requests. The examples in this data posed no difficulties and that is why they have been classified as "bald-on-record". Because of the efficiency and rationality inherent in business writing it is quite obvious that the issuer of an utterance such

as *Could you please send me some lines about this* (SHK2) is asking the recipient to send the

lines (and is not asking about his ability to send them) and the addressee is likely to send them (and not reply *Yes, I can*).

The interrogatives in the data ranked second highest - directly after the imperatives. Both the Finnish and the Swedish writers used them in around 20% of their requests. In the following, some examples are given:

Is there anything missing? FHK3

Do you like the Swedish one? FHK8

When in time is this survey going to start? SHK1

Could you please add me to the Internet-site mailing lists. FIT7

In modal initial requests, both Finnish and Swedish writers employed *please* in 90% of the cases. As we saw earlier when imperatives were discussed, *please* can mitigate or weaken the imposition. However, it can also function as an upgrader to reduce the ambiguity inherent in modal initial requests. Planting *please* into the utterance makes it more "on-record". For example, if *please* is taken out of the following utterance *Could you, please, take care of the invitation* (SHK4), the effect will be less imposing. In this particular case, the commas around *please* seem to reinforce its force. Another example in which *please* appears in the abbreviated form, *could you pls comment on this!* (SAH3), does not sound as forceful at first reading but then, on the other hand, the exclamation mark at the end seems to upgrade the request. As stated earlier, Sipilä (1997) found that Finnish writers used *please* more frequently than native American writers. It seems that Finns and Swedes share this trait and thus make their modal initials more "on-record".

As already stated earlier, imperatives and interrogatives account for over 60 % of the linguistic realizations of requests in the data - 67% for Finnish speakers and 62% for Swedish speakers. A comparison with Sipilä's (1997) findings shows striking similarities. The native English speakers in her data realized 63% of their requests in the imperative, interrogative and modal-initial structure. However, it needs to be borne in mind that her figure is not fully comparable to that of this study as her definition of request was more extensive.

Her Finnish writers realized 73% of their requests using these on-record forms. The comparison seems to suggest that Finnish and Swedish writers use direct strategies in a similar way to native American writers.

In Akar's (1998) data on English requests issued by Turkish speakers, however, around 34% were realized in the imperative and 9% in the interrogative. In other words, these two structures accounted for 44% of all the requests in her data. That is clearly less than in the present study.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this pilot study show that in spite of the variation in English email requests by Finnish and Swedish writers, bald-on-record strategies, i.e. the imperative and the interrogative, clearly dominate in the requests by both non-native groups. The two messages studied in more detail reflected sensitivity to contextual constraints such as the gender and nationality of participants; the number of recipients; the social distance and the power relations between participants and the weightiness of the imposition. At this stage, however, it is impossible to explicate how these features affect the message. The investigation into individual requests confirmed the observation about a wide repertoire of requestive strategies as there were sample requests for each category used by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and the requests under each category also had various linguistic forms.

In spite of the wide repertoire of requestive strategies used by both non-native groups, bald-on-record strategies, i.e. imperatives and interrogatives, were used in over 60% of the linguistic realizations of requests. So, why do Finnish and Swedish writers prefer these on-record strategies in issuing requests in their English email messages in a shared corporate context?

One possible explanation for the use of on-record strategies may be the general characteristics of society in the Nordic countries. The societies are strongly based on the equality of all their citizens, be it men or women, rich or poor, educated or not, and this is likely to reduce the force of the power variable in Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework. This may also partly account for the difference, even though small, in comparison with native American speakers' requests as reported in Sipilä (1997), and Akar's (1998) findings on Turkish business communication.

In addition, there are at least three other possible explanations, more connected with the business context, on offer. First, the use of the on-record strategies may be explained by the urgency of the matters at hand; there is a need to focus on the main message and the

niceties of the language are not so important. This was shown in Case 2, in which all three requests were realized in the imperative. In addition, the main requests in Case 1 also had direct linguistic realizations even though they were preceded by more indirect, or “polite”, alternatives.

Second, even though there is not background information on all the writers in the sample, it seems likely that many of the people exchanging messages had met each other at some point. So the social distance in Brown & Levinson’s (1987) terms is minimal. By the same token, as Nickerson (2000) points out in her investigation of the genres and discourse strategies used by employees of a multinational company, the great number of direct questions in her data may have been a result of the participants’ proximity to each other within the social system of the organization. In other words, “it seems plausible that a decrease in the corporate distance between participants and an increase in their shared context, will lead to the incorporation of more of those features, such as direct questions, that would otherwise be associated with spoken communication.” (Nickerson 2000: 183). This phenomenon is also reflected in the extensive use of first names in salutations and complimentary closes in the data.

Third, the proximity of the participants in the shared environment may also be connected with the nature of impositions in these internal messages. To simplify, the company’s success is to everybody’s benefit and the smooth running of affairs contributes to that. In other words, if and when requests are considered more or less routine and essential in that pursuit, there is no need to use face redress. For example, if a superior asks his subordinates in a sales team to submit sales reports, he is not likely to write *I would be very grateful if you could send me the reports*. Or if he did, his subordinates may think that he is in need of a holiday.

In spite of this preference for on-record strategies in the messages of both Finnish and Swedish writers, the fact remains that 35% of the requests were realized in more indirect forms. As they were not investigated in more detail, only one cautious remark will be made here. Some of those indirect forms may be explained by the writers’ attitude to email, as discussed earlier: some users may regard email

more as a written medium and others as a spoken medium (e.g. Baron 1998). This “choice” will affect at least the social dynamics, format and style in the messages. If email is regarded as primarily a spoken-like medium, the message will give an impression of written speech with its features of spontaneous genres such as interviews or personal letters involving personal tone and social niceties. If, on the other hand, it is considered a hard copy memo – strictly business and focusing on the facts - it will come closer to the features of written language.

As we have seen, Finnish and Swedish writers realized their English email requests in a similar way; both groups favored on-record strategies. However, there were also differences between the two language groups. Swedish writers mitigated their requests more frequently with *please* than Finnish writers. Can Finnish writers’ avoidance of *please* in the imperative structures be interpreted as an indication of their more direct communication style, and vice versa, is Swedish writers’ preference for its use to be regarded as an indication of a more indirect approach? In Vaara’s (1999) study on cultural differences experienced in Finnish-Swedish mergers by employees, Finns were described as direct and Swedes as more indirect (also Ekwall & Karlsson 1999, Laine-Sveiby 1987). Vaara’s research and this study seem to address the same issue, but is this really the case? This question remains unanswered at present. With more data, however, I hope to come closer to the answer.

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