Emergent communicative norm in a contact language: Indirect requests in Heritage Russian

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in memoriam

Nellia Dubinina       Ellen F. Prince
who taught us more than we can express
& to love and respect variability in language
Requests: speech act universals

- Direct requests: imperatives, often softened via lexical marker
  - Peredaj sol’, pozhalujsta!
    pass.IMPERA.SG salt please
  - Pass me the salt, please!

- Russian & English both prefer indirect strategies (notably, interrogatives)
  - Ne podbrosiš do doma?
    NEG give.lift.PFV.2.SG to home
  - Can you give me a ride?
Requests: speech act universals

- Conventionalized indirect R may involve sentences concerning (Searle 1965, 1975)
  - S’s wish or want that H do A
  - H’s ability to do A
  - H’s desire or willingness to do A
  - H doing A

- Linguistic conventions for marking polite indirect requests offer a range of options (like most pragmatic functions)
  - This range, and preferences within it, are language-specific
Present study

• No significant studies of HL pragmatics to date
  Exception: Pinto & Raschio 2007 – requests in HL Spanish

• Yet, HS can function in the language performing a
  variety of usual daily communicative tasks well
  enough despite grammatical and lexical deficiencies

• Initial data collection and analysis to explore
  communicative competence of HS in the framework
  already used for L1 and L2 pragmatics (Blum-Kulka
  “CCSARP”)
Research questions:

- Is the linguistic variable – the form of polite indirect requests – correlated with the population (Heritage Russian vs. Monolingual Russian)?

- How do the differences play out?

- Do HS have their own communicative norms, i.e. have they restructured pragmatic rules?

- If yes, did these new norms develop under the influence of English and/or as a result of grammatical restructuring?
Outline of the talk

- Methodology:
  - Corpus studies
  - Production study
- Requests in English vs. Russian
- Production study: Heritage vs. Native speakers
- Discussion: Heritage Russian as a contact language
- Conclusions and future research
Methodology: Corpus studies

- Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English
  - 1,848,364 words
  - College students, professors, and staff
  - Text-searchable only – a sub-corpus was analysed

- Russian National Corpus (spoken sub-corpus)
  - 8,870,387 words
  - Diverse age and background, so corpora not fully comparable, though academic speech is included
  - Text, lexical, morphological, and some grammatical information searchable
Methodology: participants

- 48 heritage speakers
- 33 monolingual Russian native speakers
  - never lived outside Russia
Age-matched
Education-matched

- Reported here: initial analysis only
Methodology: heritage speakers

- All college students enrolled in beginning Russian literacy for HS class

- Mean age of immigration to the U.S. – 3.52
  (62% left Russia before the age of 6; 21% were born in the U.S.)

- 89% never had any prior schooling in Russian (formal or informal)

- Self-reported language use:
  Mean % using Russian with mother – 85% (SD = 27)
  Mean % using Russian with father – 82.89% (SD = 33)
  Mean % using Russian with grandparents – 95% (SD = 20)
  Mean % using Russian with siblings – 19% (SD = 27)
Methodology: heritage speakers

• Native language (self-evaluation):
  English – 25.5%,
  **Russian – 51%**,  
  Russian and English – 12%,
  could not say – 6%

• Average speech rate:
  in Russian – **88 wpm** (min – 36, max – 199), SD = 26
  in English – **148 wpm** (min - 76; max- 198), SD = 29

• Average speech rate of native Russian speaker – **105**
  (Polinsky and Kagan, 2007)
Methodology: initial analysis

• 2 role-enactments
  • SIT 1: asking to borrow lecture notes from a classmate
  • SIT 2: asking to borrow a rare book from the instructor

• 10 HS; 10 NS
  • (raw statistics representative of other HS and NS speakers in the study)

• Head acts identified and analyzed, using a modified version of the CCSARP taxonomy (Blum-Kulka and Kasper 1989)
Requests in English vs. Russian

Languages have tendencies/preferences to exploit different felicity conditions in making indirect requests:

- **English** – H’s ability to perform A
- **Russian** – either H’s ability **OR** H doing A (perfective future).

- *Ty ne možeš/ne mog by podbrosit’ menja do doma?*
  
  You.SG NEG can.2.SG /NEG can.SBJV give.lift me.ACC to home

- *Can/could you give me a lift home?*

- *Ty ne podbrosiš menja do doma?*
  
  You.SG NEG give.lift.PFV.2.SG me.ACC to home

- **Will you give me a lift home?**
Direct vs. Indirect expression of request

Informal Situation 1 \( p = .11 \)  
Formal Situation 2 \( p = .96 \)
Marking indirect requests: syntax

Informal Situation 1 $p = .73$  
Formal Situation 2 $p = .2$
Marking requests: syntax - results

- NS have a broader repertoire of syntactic forms used in indirect polite requests
- HS seem to have an impoverished repertoire
- HS use a form absent in NS data (esp. in formal sit. 2): Interrogative embedded under performative
  \[\text{Ja hoču sprosit', jesli ja jejo mogu odolžit'}.\]
  I want to ask if I can borrow it
- Transfer from English? – 1 instance in MiCASE
  Further investigation needed
Morpho-syntactic politeness

- **English** conventionally uses **mood (subjunctive)**
  - Can/Could you give me a lift home?
  - Can/Could I have this book?

- **MiCASE search**
  - 347 indicative “can” requests, of them 17 also have “please”
  - 72 subjunctive “could” requests, of them 13 have “please”
  - Initial analysis (50 results from each set):
    “could” set contains higher percentage of power discrepancy between S and H (e.g., S is student, H is professor)
Morpho-syntactic politeness

Morpho-syntactic means of expressing politeness

- Russian uses antithetical particle (NEG)
  - alone or together with subjunctive mood-marker particle.

Ty ne možeš /ne mog by podbrosit’ menja do doma?
You.SG NEG can.2.SG /NEG can SBJV give.lift me.ACC to home

?#Ty možeš /mog by podbrosit’ menja do doma?
You.SG can.2.SG /can SBJV give.lift me.ACC to home
Morpho-syntactic politeness

Informal Situation 1 \( p = .05 \)

Formal Situation 2 \( p = .35 \)
Morpho-syntactic politeness: results

HS seem to have an impoverished repertoire of strategies to make indirect polite requests in Russian both

- in types of utterances
- and morpho-syntactic means of politeness

- NEG in NS productions: 70% of indirect requests
  - Other requests use marking where NEG is ungrammatical.
- HS productions have NO instances of NEG
Morpho-syntactic politeness: Russian

S questioning H performing A

- Same propositional content as info-seeking question:
  - *Ty ne zakroes okno?*
  - You.SG NEG close.PFV.2.SG window.ACC
  - Literally: ‘Won’t you close the window?’

- In such context, use of NEG is near-obligatory to mark requestive intent
  - 100% in NS production data
  - No instances of NEG in HS, even in this context
Lexical politeness markers

- English often inserts “please” even in interrogatives
  - *Could you give me a lift home, please?*

- MiCASE: 159 requests with “please”
  - 67% in the direct requests
  - 33% in the indirect requests (30% in interrogatives)
Lexical politeness markers

- **Russian** rarely uses “please” in interrogatives, especially in H doing A
  - #Ty ne mog by menja podbrosit’ do doma, požalujsta?
    You.SG NEG can.SBJV me.ACC give.lift to home, please
  - ## Ty ne podbrosiš menja do doma, požalujsta?
    You.SG NEG give.lift.PFV.2.SG me.ACC to home, please

- RNC: 10124 occurrences of **požalujsta** (“please”)
  - 5647 are within 2, 6057 within 5 words of an imperative verb
  - 7 are in an interrogative indirect request
  - Almost all of the rest are non-requestive
Lexical politeness in Russian

- **Možno** – impersonal modal with dual meaning:
  - possibility (usually with imperfective infinitive)
  - permission (with perfective infinitive)

- Requests usually refer to a one-time completed action ➔ PFV
  SO: **možno** suggests a request for permission.

  - **Možno vzjat’ vašu knigu?**
    Psbl.imp to.take.PFV your.PL.ACC book.ACC
    “May I take your book?”

- Lexical politeness marker is rarely used in these requests:
  - **Možno požalujsta vzjat’ vašu knigu?**
    Psbl.imp please to.take.PFV your.PL.ACC book.ACC
Lexical politeness in Russian

• RNC:
  2899 occurrences of *možno* up to 12 words before “?”

Analysis of a sample of 100 of these indicates that
• 50% are non-requestive (How possible.IMP to.term this?)
• 25% are requests for permission
• 2% embed performatives (Possible.IMP to.invite you?)
• 23% are indirect requests
  • 11% IRs are verb-less (Possible.IMP tea? = Can I get tea?)

• 3 of these 2899 sentences with *možno* also have *požalujsta* (“please”)
Lexical politeness markers

Informal Situation 1 \( p = .045 \)  
Formal Situation 2 \( p = .12 \)
Politeness marking: results

- HS compensate for their improverished repertoir of morpho-syntactic markers in indirect requests by

1. Relying almost exclusively on lexical politeness markers, producing combinations which sound “strange” to NS (*možno požalujsta*).

2. Over-using modal *možno*.

3. Relying on unusual morpho-syntactic politeness strategies, e.g. embedded interrogative under performative...
Discussion: transfer from English

- Corpus studies show that
  - English uses “please” in both direct and indirect requests,
  - while Russian disprefers “please” in IRs.
- The overusage of požalujsta in HS seems to be a transfer from the dominant language.

- The lack of NEG in HS indirect requests may also be due to transfer from English:
  - *Would you open the window?*
  - *Would you not open the window?*
Discussion: HS-internal development

- HS also overuse the impersonal modal *možno*
  - using it either by itself or in combination with “please” (65% total)
  - The latter doesn’t happen in NS speech in this data set
  - and is exceedingly rare in corpus data (3 total instances in spoken sub-corpus of RNC)

- HS may be re-analyzing the “rule” for using *možno* (expanding its domain)
HS request “formula”

- HS may have their own form of conventionalized indirect request—**možno (+ požalujsta)** regardless of the social context.

- Since this form is allowable in the baseline (albeit very rarely or in the context of permission), HS communicative intent is generally understood quite clearly by NS.
  - **NB:** especially because all other components of a request are present.
Discussion:
emergent norm in a contact language

- Možno (especially when it’s followed by a verb) is more often a marker of permission request, it may be more frequent in child-adult interactions.

- HS don’t get enough socialization in different contexts (asking for favor rather than permission)
  - where NS use inflected modals rather than impersonal možno
- HS speakers notoriously do not notice subtle morphology.

- As a result, HS don’t understand the difference between the inflected and impersonal modals.
Next steps

• Analysis of remaining speakers: confirm findings
• Expanded analysis of corpus data

• Comprehension study completed

• CHILDES study underway: requests in child speech and child-directed speech

• Comprehension of requestive utterance without NEG
• Correlation between proficiency and preferred requestive strategy
Heritage Russian as a contact language

- HS seem to have re-analyzed the impersonal modal *možno* under the influence of impoverished input,
  - of the dominant language, and
  - of the need to express requestive intent

- *Možno* – a request marker (communicative norm)
- Similar to other language-internal contact-driven change (e.g. Prince 2001 for Yiddish)