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### Recommended Citation

Hyoun-A Joo (2024). Exploring the Speech Act of Requesting by German-English Bilinguals in Workplace Scenarios. *Global Business Languages*, 24, 1-22.  
Available at (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.4079/gbl.v24.2>

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## Exploring the Speech Act of Requesting by German-English Bilinguals in Workplace Scenarios

**Abstract:** Culturally different ways of requesting can raise the possibility of misunderstanding in a 21st century workplace. Following the goal of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) to engender communicative skills that foster intercultural understanding, the present study examines how German immigrants living in the United States make requests in the workplace. This query aims to shed light on bilingual pragmatic and intercultural competence. A total of 17 participants completed oral discourse completion tasks. The results showed that the German-English bilinguals tended to blend sociopragmatic norms of both languages into a unique bilingual pragmatic competence. Overall, they were more direct in German than in English when making requests, showing awareness of intercultural differences. In their German responses, the bilinguals appeared to be even more direct than Germans in previous studies. Furthermore, participants' higher use of hints attests to pragmatic competence at the workplace, as hints were almost exclusively used with superiors. The findings help to better equip employees who work in global workplaces to express and understand requests. The findings also inform LSP curriculum, which is ideally situated to educate future workers in effective intercultural communication.

*Keywords:* bilinguals, English, German, intercultural communication, pragmatic competence, requests, speech acts

### Introduction

When making requests, German speakers prefer directness more than English speakers, who strongly prefer indirect request-making strategies (e.g., House 1996, 2006). These distinct ways of making requests are often overlaid with distinct cultural interpretations of politeness and impoliteness (Blum-Kulka, 1987; House, 1996), reinforcing stereotypes. For instance, a German-speaking grocery store clerk may use the imperative *Gehen Sie dort drüben hin* ('Go over there') to help a customer find the right aisle, which may be perceived as rude by an Anglophone customer (House, 1996, p. 350). Indeed, Juliane House's (e.g., 1996; 2003) research on German-Anglophone interactions suggests that cross-cultural differences in communicative patterns may lead to misunderstanding and breakdown of communication, which can strain relationships.

The pragmatic competence needed to use distinct request-making strategies in order to avoid miscommunication is fundamental for Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) research and pedagogy. As evidenced by a Bloomberg Skills Gap and the Pearson Skills Outlook studies, employers deem communication to be one of the hardest to find, but most desired, skills (Andrews, 2015; Pearson, n.d.). Furthermore, according to an ACTFL study (2019), nine out of ten US employers rely on languages other than English, and one out of four report a business loss because of lack of language skills. The skills needed to avoid miscommunication while making requests include pragmatic and intercultural competence. Following Byram (2021), such a bilingual or multilingual communicator will have (a) communicative competence, which encompasses linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence; and (b) intercultural competence, evidenced by an open-minded attitude to renegotiate beliefs about other cultures

and one's own culture, knowledge of cultural norms and artifacts, and a set of skills to navigate intercultural situations (see Joo & Tuschling, 2022, for a detailed discussion of Byram's model). While Byram (2021) does not explicitly mention pragmatic competence as part of intercultural communicative competence, I concur with Taguchi and Roever (2017) that "pragmatic competence in intercultural settings can be viewed as a constituent of intercultural competence" (p. 261) as it is necessary for successful communication in the given (inter)cultural context. Accordingly, to avoid misinterpretation in interactions due to differing communicative norms, which could damage relationships, intercultural pragmatic competence as part of intercultural competence should be explicitly promoted in the LSP curriculum.

Given the 21st-century globalized workplace, bilingual employees who operate successfully in more than one language are in demand. However, there is a gap in the available research. It is unknown whether and to what degree bilingual speakers exhibit intercultural and pragmatic sensitivity to different request-making strategies. More research is needed on how German-English bilinguals use language-specific request strategies, how they employ the strategies from one language to another, or if they show a pattern unique to bilinguals. Shedding light on these questions is the goal of the present study. The results will inform LSP's attempt to engender the skills bilingual professionals need in a multicultural workplace.

## Theoretical Background

Theoretical conceptualizations of pragmatic competence and communicative realizations, such as requests, are rooted in philosophy and sociology. First, central to Austin's (1962) notion of speech acts, is the insight that language *does things*. However, according to Austin, a speech act, like a request, is not equivalent to a mere locutionary act (i.e., the uttered words). In addition, the request is also an illocutionary act (i.e., what is meant by the request) and a perlocutionary act (i.e., the effect of the request). Some of the additional layers of a request are clear when we consider how Grice (1975) thinks of communication: as a relational interaction in which interlocutors cooperate in the meaning-making process, or, how Goffman (1967) understands communication as a social interaction with the goal of relationship building.

To illustrate communication's relational context, Goffman (1967) introduces the notion of "face" as "an image of self that is delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (p. 5). The concept of "face" may be understood as the ways in which speakers present themselves to others and how others perceive the speakers. "Facework," then, is the ability to use language in such a way that it conforms with the communicative norms of the sociocultural context of the interlocutor. Facework happens when one appropriately navigates through the "traffic rules of social interaction" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). The notion of face has been further developed and applied to the linguistic domain, particularly Speech Act Theory, by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. According to them, face is key to understanding politeness strategies in communication. They propose two related aspects of face: negative face is the self-image that wishes to remain autonomous from the other's desire; positive face is the self-image that wants to be appreciated by others. A request is a face-threatening speech act because it can abridge both the requestee's autonomy and the public image of the requester. To avoid face-threatening situations and to protect the interlocutor's face (in Goffman's sense), speakers can choose various politeness strategies. Thereby, requesters can choose to request indirectly to mitigate the assertive force of the request and protect the interlocutor's negative face, or they can make compliments or express alliance to protect the requestee's positive face.

## Previous Research

### *German and English Communicative Strategies*

German and English speakers' distinct requesting strategies can result in miscommunication. House (1996) presents the following example of such miscommunication, reported from a native English speaker:

English is quite an indirect language and I first tried to transfer that into German coming up with very complicated constructions that went all around the houses to get to the point ... A recent example is: my (German) boyfriend and I were going out to some lake or other swimming and I'd noticed, halfway there that we'd forgotten to take anything to eat with us. And so I said to him: "Don't you think it would be a rather good idea to stop at the next baker's so we can at least buy something to eat." And of course he didn't regard this as being more or less an order, and a very heavy complaint, he regarded it as being a question as to whether he thought it was wise. So of course he said: "Well, no" and drove straight on. (p. 351)

This incident recounts an unsuccessful request because the German boyfriend did not decode the question as an illocutionary act of an order or complaint, and the native English speaker did not encode the intended locutionary act according to more direct and explicit communicative norms. Such decoding errors may be common in German-Anglophone social interactions, and they can have negative consequences for social relationships (e.g., House, 2003), including international business relationships (e.g., Fischer, 2000; Neumann, 1997; Sanden, 2016).

Research confirms the distinct requesting strategies amongst German speakers and Anglophones. The seminal Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) examines requests and apologies and provides coding schemes to analyze such speech acts. This present study adopts its coding scheme for requests. As part of CCSARP, Blum-Kulka and House (1989) investigated request strategies in German, Hebrew, Canadian French, Argentinian Spanish, and Australian English. They categorized the request strategies in their data in three levels of directness: most direct impositives (e.g., imperatives), conventionally indirect strategies (e.g., preparatory requests using expressions such as "could you"), and most indirect hints. They found that Australian English speakers were the least direct compared to all other languages, using less than 10% impositives, but used conventionally indirect strategies the most, at 82.4%. German speakers, while not the most direct among the studied languages, used more direct request strategies (20.5%) and slightly less conventionally indirect strategies than Anglophone speakers (76.7%). Regarding hints, Australian English speakers used them 7.8% of the time, while German speakers used only 2.8%. Despite the differences between Australian English and German speakers in Blum-Kulka and House's study, an overall finding is that both languages prefer conventionally indirect request strategies the most. Ackermann's (2021) variational-pragmatic study investigates requests in various regions in Germany and Switzerland and confirms that German speakers prefer conventionally indirect requests (64-81%) and that hints play a marginal role (11-15%).

However, a request consists of not only the main request strategy (i.e., the head act: impositive, conventionally indirect, or hint). A request can be modified through mitigating downgraders (e.g., when using the subjunctive) or through enforcing upgraders (e.g., when using

time intensifiers such as “right now”) among other things (see Section 5.4.). House and Kasper (1981) found that German speakers used 4.6 times more upgraders, while English speakers tended to use 1.5 times more downgraders that mitigate the force of the request. Similarly, Ackermann (2021) found regional differences with decreasing directness levels the more south the region. For instance, Swiss participants were least direct by using other mitigation strategies the most in addition to conventionally indirect requests. Warga (2008) compared German-German with Austrian-German speakers and found Austrians to be less direct than speakers from Germany. Grieve (2010) provides an excellent overview of the German conventional communication style, which is oriented toward the expression of content, goal, and truth, valuing honesty and directness over “the relational and social-bonding functions of language” (p. 193).

A model to capture differences between German and Anglophone communicative patterns has been proposed by House (1996, 2006), which is partly reminiscent of Hofstede’s dimensions, see Table 1 (adopted from House, 1996, p. 347).

**Table 1**

*Dimensions of Cross-Cultural Difference (German-English)*

1	Directness	-	Indirectness
2	Orientation towards Self	-	Orientation towards Other
3	Orientation towards Content	-	Orientation towards Addressees
4	Explicitness	-	Implicitness
5	Ad-Hoc Formulation	-	Verbal Routines

According to this model, German speakers tend to communicate more directly and explicitly, oriented toward themselves and the content rather than the interlocutor. House’s (2006) model further suggests that English speakers tend to use more conversational routines, whereas German speakers use more ad-hoc formulations. Formulaic phatic expressions and verbal routines, such as, “It would be nice to get together sometime” (House, 2006, p. 257), are more common with Anglophone speakers, which contradicts German preferences of truth-orientation (Grieve, 2010). English informants, however, at times interpret the German interlocutors’ lack of conversational routines as unfriendly (House, 1996). They often construe the direct imperative as rude and potentially aggressive. German informants, however, perceived Anglophone speakers as dishonest and impolite due to their increased indirectness. Therefore, a lack of knowledge of the other culture’s conversational norms can lead to negative attribution of personality traits as unfriendly or impolite and hardening of a stereotype. Furthermore, research has shown, contrary to Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory (1987), that indirectness is not directly linked to politeness as informants’ perception in House’s study (1996) may suggest. The most indirect hints were not perceived as the most polite (Blum-Kulka, 1987). English conventionally indirect requests combine well with impolite swear words. And, in a culture that values truth and explicitness, direct communication is perceived as polite (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989).

***Bilingual Pragmatic Competence in the Workplace***

Kecskes (2015) proposes that adult sequential bilinguals develop a bilingual pragmatic competence by accommodating the sociocultural communicative norms of the new language. Their native language’s pragmatic competence dynamically changes under the influence of the new language, and the will and the preference of the individual control the change. Kecskes claims that there is no separate pragmatic competence from the new language, but rather, a

bilingual one that blends the sociopragmatic norms of native and new languages. Drawing on Vivian Cook's notion of multicompetence of bilinguals, Su (2010) states that "people who know more than one language have a distinct compound state of mind" (p. 88). Su (2010) found that Chinese speakers of English as a foreign language (EFL) exhibited significantly less conventionally indirect request strategies than the English native controls (L1 transfer) but significantly more than in Chinese compared to Chinese controls (L2 transfer). A within-group comparison further revealed differentiated request strategies depending on the language the EFL learners used. Su (2010) argues that this differentiated use of request strategies reflects a communicative pattern unique to the bilingual's "state of mind," which exists in its own right and should not be compared to that of monolinguals (p. 99).

Investigating the speech act of apology by German and Australian English speakers at an Australian workplace, Grieve's (2010) findings support Kecskes's claim of dynamical changes toward a bilingual pragmatic competency. She found that German informants who lived five years or longer in Australia differentiated their strategies of apologizing depending on the language they used, while Germans who had recently come to Australia or lived in Germany did not. In German-German interactions, informants tended to be more content-oriented with less phatic expressions, such as, 'how are you?', more likely to enter face threatening confrontations to express disagreement, and showed more expression of disappointment and truthful apologies compared to Australian informants. While German-English bilinguals who lived in Australia for a shorter period transferred these strategies to their interactions in English, bilinguals living five or more years in Australia showed "acclimatization" when apologizing in English, being more "likely to 'twist the truth' in order to maintain social harmony" (Grieve, 2010, p. 215). This nuanced communication strategy indicates the bilinguals' pragmatic and intercultural sensitivity.

Another challenge related to intercultural pragmatic competence at the workplace concerns the power relations that emerge from the hierarchical workplace structure. Encoding social and power relations appropriately in the respective language is important for successful teamwork. Fischer (2000), for instance, conducted a series of cockpit studies investigating the tension between informative and socially appropriate communication. In a study involving captains and first officers from different cultures, Fischer (2000) identifies different communication styles when mitigating an error by the other crewmember. Captains, who are higher in power, tended to use direct requests (i.e., commands expressed by imperatives). First officers, who are lower in power, preferred hints. Conducting both a production and perception task, Fischer found that more direct commands or least direct hints are not the most effective request strategies. Instead, the most effective strategy were more direct request strategies accompanied by explanations. Considering that the social and power relations cause differing communicative strategies, the present study aims to investigate how bilinguals navigate such situational circumstances.

## **Research Questions**

Building on findings about differences in communicative norms between German and Anglophone speakers and proposals that bilinguals may use communicative strategies unique to their bilingual pragmatic competence, this current study aims to examine the following questions. Eliciting requests produced in both languages, L1 German and L2 English, do German-English bilinguals (1) differentiate request strategies depending on the language they are using, (2) transfer their communicative strategies from one language to the other, or (3) show a

pattern different to the expected German and the English request strategies? Differentiated use of request strategies depending on the language used would indicate pragmatic and intercultural sensitivity in that it reveals knowledge, awareness, and the skill of application of the differing ways of requesting in each culture. Using more “German-like” or “English-like” request strategies across both languages would indicate pragmatic transfer. Using request strategies that do not fit either cultural norm may indicate a communicative request pattern unique to the bilingual.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A total of 17 participants (9 males, 8 females) completed the experiment. Their ages ranged from 20 to 60 years old, with the majority in their 40s and 50s ( $n=12$ ). Most participants have dual citizenship ( $n=12$ ), but four have German nationality, and one has US nationality. All but one, who was raised in the United States, grew up in Germany. The German immigrants resided for an average of 20.8 years (range 8-48 years) in the United States. Regarding languages used at work, six participants use only English, and eleven use both languages. The dominant language is German for four participants, English for seven, and both languages for six participants. The self-ratings of their L1 and L2 skills show very high levels overall, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Average of the Participants' Self-rating of Language Skills*

English				German			
speaking	writing	understanding	reading	speaking	writing	understanding	reading
9.5	9.2	9.5	9.5	9.8	9.5	9.8	9.9
(7-10)	(6-10)	(7-10)	(7-10)	(8-10)	(8-10)	(8-10)	(9-10)

Note: ( $n=17$ ) on a 10-point scale, with “10” being “very good.” Ranges in parentheses.

### *Experimental Task*

The discourse completion task (DCT) is widely used in speech act research (Taguchi & Roever, 2017, pp. 83-86). While most DCTs are written, the present study employed an oral DCT where participants verbally responded to written prompts. Despite the criticism against DCTs because they do not elicit naturalistic and real-life language use, the experimental setup usefully elicits target speech acts that rarely occur in naturalistic data. Furthermore, they elicit pragmatic preferences of the speakers, which was the goal of the present study. A total of 12 workplace scenarios (six each in German and English) were developed to elicit requests. The scenarios consider several parameters. First, all interlocutors in the prompts are male to avoid a gender effect. Second, the scenarios were differentiated by social distance ([D+/-]). In three scenarios, participants were told they were speaking to someone they know ([D-]). In the other three scenarios, participants directed their requests to people they were not familiar with ([D+]). Third, the three scenarios in the [D+/-] condition were further differentiated by power relation ([Pe/s/h]). Participants directed their request either to a colleague who had equal power ([Pe]), to a subordinate who was lower in power ([Ps]), or to someone higher in power than the participant ([Ph]). Six scenarios were first developed in English and then translated into German. The

English and German DCT scenarios were then piloted with three bilingual informants from the industry, and revisions have been made based on their feedback regarding plausibility and wording. An example scenario is given below in (1), and Table 3 provides an overview of the scenarios with a short synopsis and the different conditions.

(1) Example: Project Report

You are working on a project report with **Hans Olson**, with whom you have worked **for three years**. The report is due to your superior in one hour. As you open the document to look over it one more time, you notice the part he was supposed to fill out is missing. You have to meet this deadline and need **your colleague** to finish his section within the next hour. What would you say to him?

all male interlocutors  
no distance [D-]

equal power [Pe]

**Table 3**

*Overview of DCT Scenarios and Conditions*

[D-] [Pe]	<b>Project report:</b> Your colleague and you must submit a report within the next hour, and you discover that he didn't do his part.
[D-] [Ps]	<b>Flyer:</b> You notice an error on the to-be-printed flyer and the order must be stopped.
[D-] [Ph]	<b>Meeting:</b> Your manager has a meeting in 5 minutes, but you see him sitting in the cafeteria.
[D+] [Pe]	<b>PowerPoint:</b> You have to give a presentation in 5 minutes, but the IT worker has opened the wrong PowerPoint.
[D+] [Ps]	<b>Chemicals:</b> You notice that the distributor left the delivered chemicals out in the sun, but they must go into the walk-in fridge.
[D+] [Ph]	<b>Hard hat:</b> The CEO of your company is about to go on a tour of the work site with you, but you notice that he doesn't wear a hard hat.

Note. [D+] = distance, i.e., no familiarity between speaker (participant) and hearer; [D-] = no distance but familiarity between speaker and hearer; [Pe] = equal power between speaker (participant) and hearer; [Ps] = speaker has more power; [Ph] = hearer has more power.

**Procedure**

Data was collected through an oral DCT that was administered online. Qualtrics and Phonic.ai were used for the collection of oral data. As in the more common written DCTs, participants read and responded to prompts. The difference was that they read the prompts on a screen and responded by recording their response. The six English and six German scenarios were divided into two counterbalanced DCTs (DCT 1: English [D+] and German [D-], DCT 2: English [D-] and German [D+]) and participants were randomly assigned to one of the DCTs, see Table 4. DCT 1 generated a total of 54 responses (9 participants x 6 scenarios, 27 in each language), DCT 2 a total of 46 responses (8 participants x 6 scenarios, 24 in German, 22 in English, two English responses had to be excluded because they were produced in German).



In the online survey, participants answered demographic questions before completing the DCT in the second part. After two practice items, participants saw six scenarios in English (three requests and three refusals) in randomized order, followed by six scenarios in German in the same manner.<sup>1</sup> An experimental sequence was as follows: Participants saw a written prompt, the workplace scenario, and were asked to read the scenario carefully and respond to it orally by using the record button and clicking the submit button when done. They were told to speak in the respective language of the written scenario. The audio-recorded responses were transcribed for analysis.

**Table 4***Distribution of Participants by DCTs*

DCT 1 ( <i>n</i> =9, 6 male and 3 female)	DCT 2 ( <i>n</i> =8, 3 male and 5 female)
English [D+]	English [D-]
German [D-]	German [D+]

*Coding and Analysis*

All requests were transcribed and coded using a coding scheme adopted from Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), Warga (2008), and Fischer (2000). Responses were coded and analyzed according to four levels, as shown below, from (2) to (5). Examples are taken from participants.

## (2) Request perspective

- a. Hearer-oriented: ‘Can you please use this version?’ [UW5]
- b. Non-hearer-oriented:
  - i. Speaker-oriented: ‘Soll ich sie Ihnen noch einmal schicken?’ ,Should I send it to you again?’ [YDA]
  - ii. Both-oriented: ‘Können wir die schnell hochladen?’ ,Can we upload it quickly?’ [xw3]
  - iii. Impersonal: ‘this hard hat is meant to wear in this section’ [Okw]

## (3) Head act

- a. Impositives (most direct):
  - i. Imperative: ‘Call the printing shop and cancel the order’ [8Q9]
  - ii. Locution derivable: ‘You need to cancel that print job and redo the order’ [tO5]
- b. Conventionally indirect:
  - i. Preparatory: ‘Can you get that done for me?’ [aCR]
  - ii. Suggestion: ‘let’s pick out a hard hat for you’ [dSw]
- c. Hints (most indirect): ‘Do you have the updated version?’ [3ZC]

## (4) Head act internal modification

- a. Downgrader (mitigating effect), examples:
  - Subjunctive mood: ‘Could you please finish...?’ [tO5]
  - Conditional: ‘if you could get in touch with...’ [nSi]
  - Past tense: ‘I just wanted to remind you ...’ [YDA]

<sup>1</sup> The present study was part of a larger project including the speech acts of requesting and refusing. However, here, only requests are analyzed and reported on.

- Requestive marker: ‘Could you please finish...?’ [tO5]
  - Subjectivizer: ‘I was worried ...’ [8Q9]
  - Downtoner: ‘I just wanted to remind you ...’ [YDA]
- b. Upgrader (enforcing effect), example:
- Time intensifier: ‘make sure that is cancelled immediately’ [wx3]
- (5) Head act external supportive moves
- a. Mitigating moves, examples:
- Grounder (reason, explanation, justification for request): ‘Could you please finish your section? I need to submit the report within the next hour.’ [tO5]
  - Gratitude: ‘Thanks a lot.’ [aCR]
  - Alerters: ‘Hey Tim, this is ...’ [OIS]
  - Help-offer ‘Let me know if there is something you still need.’ [nSi]
- b. Enforcing moves, examples:
- Moralizing: ‘they shouldn’t have been in the sun and you should have known that’ [bEI]
  - Mention of error: ‘I noticed your part is still missing.’ [78I]
  - Request repetition (paraphrased or exact)<sup>2</sup>

The example below in (6) demonstrates how responses were analyzed.

- (6) {Hey} could you {please} finish your section? {I need to submit the report within the next hour.} {Thank you so much.} [tO5]
- Request perspective: Hearer-oriented (‘you’)
- Head act: (Query) Preparatory (‘Could you finish your section?’)
- Internal modification: Subjunctive (‘could’), politeness marker (‘please’)
- Supportive move: Alerter (‘hey’), grounder (‘I need...’), gratitude (‘thanks’)

Two judges independently coded the head acts. Comparing the judgment of the head acts according to the three major strategies mentioned in (3), the judges reached 90% agreement. When the judges came to different assignments of request categories, they reached a consensus by discussing the individual cases.

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<sup>2</sup> Request repetitions occurred most often in [Ps] conditions when the participant was higher in power. Where a participant repeated the request head act, either the first one (see (6) below) or the most direct one was analyzed as head act. All additional requests were counted as supportive, request enforcing moves to avoid an artificial emphasis on those request strategies used by participants that tend to be wordier overall.

(6) "Hi Patrick. It's good to meet you. But yes, I still see that you came and brought your delivery today. There's one container, it seems, left on the parking lot and it is getting kind of hot out there. The chemicals need to be moved to the cool storage area immediately. So could you please take care of that right away [head act] and then come back and see me, and then we will work on the paperwork that needs to be completed for the acceptance of your delivery. And it would be really important to get this done right away. [request repetition] As you know, the chemicals need to be stored in cool conditions, and if they sit out in the sun too long, they will likely be no good to us after all. So please let's get this done first and then let's work on the paperwork. [request repetition] Thank you." [dSw]

## Results

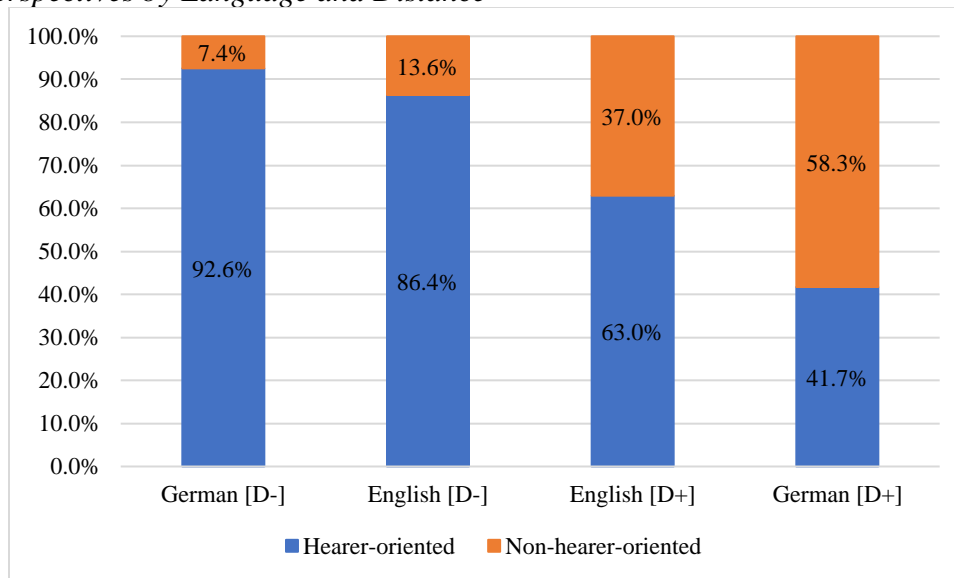
The results will be discussed along the parameters of language, distance, and power. Caution is required when interpreting the results as they may be driven by group (see Table 4). Furthermore, due to small participant numbers, results will only be presented descriptively.

### *Request Perspectives*

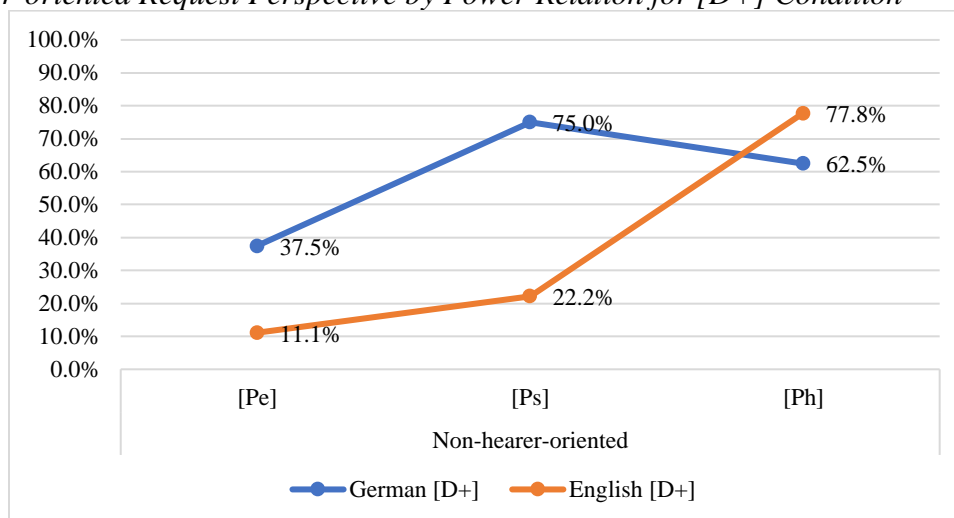
Responses were divided into hearer-oriented and non-hearer-oriented request perspectives (see (2)). Figure 1 shows that distance ([D+/-]) determined the choice of the request perspective. In both languages, participants used more hearer-oriented requests when familiar with the interlocutor ([D-]). In the [D+] condition, hearer-orientation decreased, producing more indirect request perspectives when interlocutors had no familiarity. In German [D+] responses, non-hearer-oriented perspectives were even preferred.

**Figure 1**

*Request Perspectives by Language and Distance*



A closer look at the [D+] condition by power relation in Figure 2 shows that the preference for non-hearer-oriented request perspectives in German [D+] responses is caused by indirect perspective in both conditions [Ps] and [Ph]. In contrast, English [D+] responses clearly favor non-hearer-oriented request perspectives only when speaking to an unknown superior [Ph].

**Figure 2***Non-hearer-oriented Request Perspective by Power Relation for [D+] Condition*

While hearer-oriented request perspectives may be more direct as the requestee is addressed directly, non-hearer-oriented speech could be a politeness strategy to protect the requestee's negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by reducing assertive force through indirectness. However, as Blum-Kulka (1987) noted, indirectness does not necessarily equal politeness. Applying House's dimensions of cross-cultural difference between German and English (see Table 1), for instance, the use of impersonal passive voice in German might be an indirect request perspective. Still, it allows for more explicit content-orientation at the same time and does not necessarily serve as a linguistic tool to express concern for the other. A comparison between non-hearer-oriented, impersonal passive voice, example (7), and hearer-oriented 'you'-construction, example (8), illustrates the difference in politeness.

(7) Die Ware muss bitte schnellstmöglich kühl gestellt werden ...  
The goods must be cooled asap please ... [78I]

(8) Dear Dr. Plack. Um, I see you were [not given a hard hat]. Would you be so kind to please put it on? It's mandatory to wear the hat at our side. Thank you very much. [Wc6]

Example (8) demonstrates how assertive force can be reduced despite a hearer-oriented perspective through honorific alerters ('dear'), hesitation markers ('um'), hedging ('would you be so kind'), politeness marker ('please'), grounder ('it's mandatory'), and gratitude ('thank you very much').

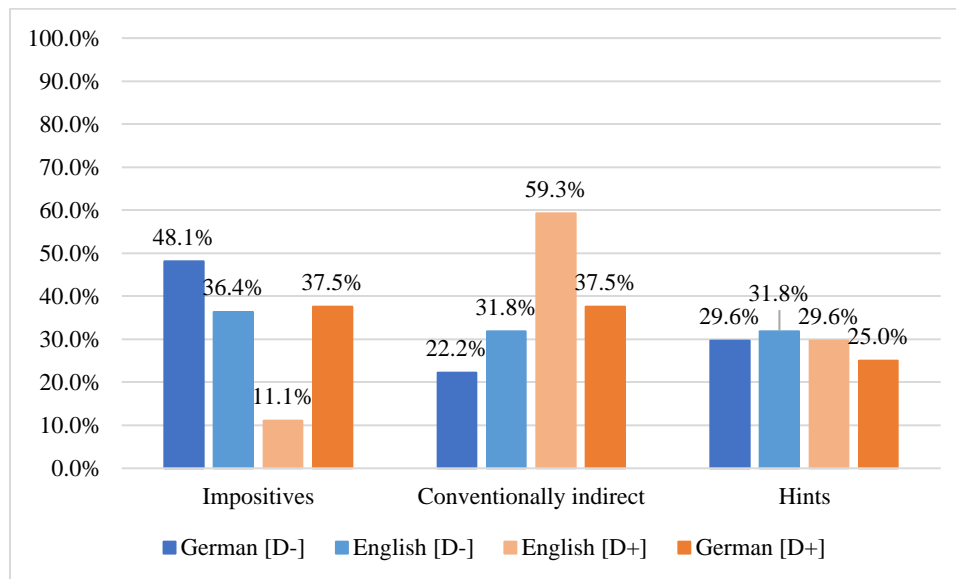
### ***Request Head Acts***

Regarding head act strategies as listed in (3), the results show a language difference between English [D+] and German [D-] responses. Note that these responses come from the same group, DCT 1. In English [D+], conventionally indirect requests were clearly preferred at 59.3%, hints occurred 29.6%, and impositives only 11.1%. On the contrary, the German [D-]

responses contained 48.1% impositives and only 22.2% of conventionally indirect requests. Hints were used also 29.6% of the time. The pattern for English aligns with previous studies that found English speakers to be more indirect than German speakers (e.g., Blum-Kulka & House, 1989; Grieve, 2010; House, 1996). However, the preference for impositives in German such as *Ruf da bitte sofort an*. ‘Please call them immediately.’ [Vs5] contradicts studies like Ackermann (2021), who found mainland German-speaking informants using conventionally indirect requests such as *Kannst du die bitte anrufen?* ‘Can you call them please?’ [Okw] between 61% to 81% of the time.

**Figure 3**

*Head Act Strategies by Language and Distance*



Participants in group DCT2, English [D–] and German [D+], show a more homogeneous pattern, producing all three levels of directness at a similar rate rather than displaying a language-specific pattern. In English [D–] responses, impositives are the most frequent strategies with 36.4%, while the indirect strategies (conventionally indirect and hints) make up 31.8% each. German [D+] produces impositives and conventionally indirect requests at the same rate (37.5%) and hints the least (25%). Interestingly, although hints are not the preferred strategy in any condition, they are produced at a relatively higher frequency compared to 11% to 15% in Ackermann (2021), who looked at request strategies among interlocutors of equal power in Germany and parts of Switzerland. Including power relations may shed light on the higher occurrence of hints in the present data. Hints can function as a strategy of negative face work (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to reduce the assertive force on the requestee who is higher in power; see example (9) and Figure 4.

- (9) Das Meeting beginnt in fünf Minuten.  
 ‘The meeting begins in five minutes.’

[Vs5]

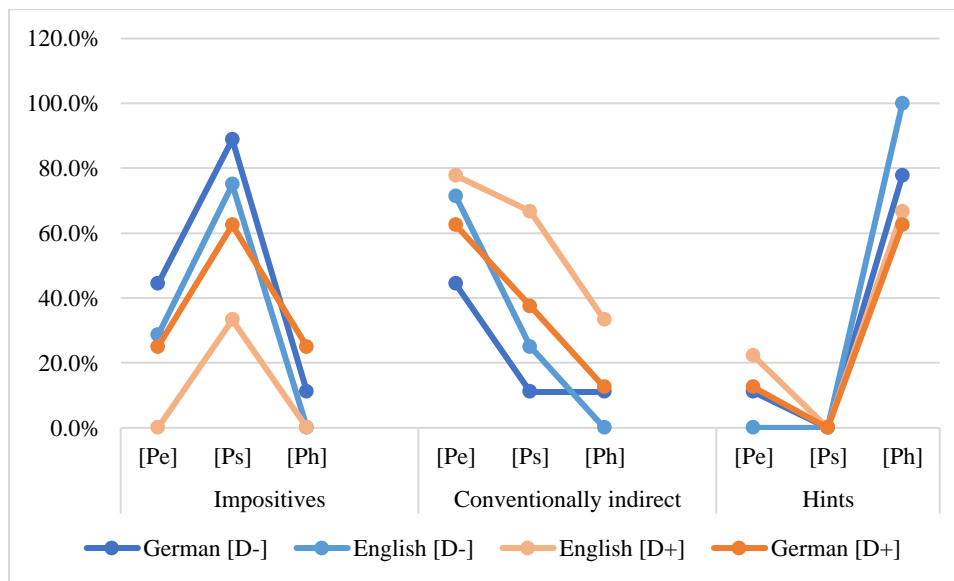
**Figure 4***Head Act Strategies by Language, Distance, and Power Relation*

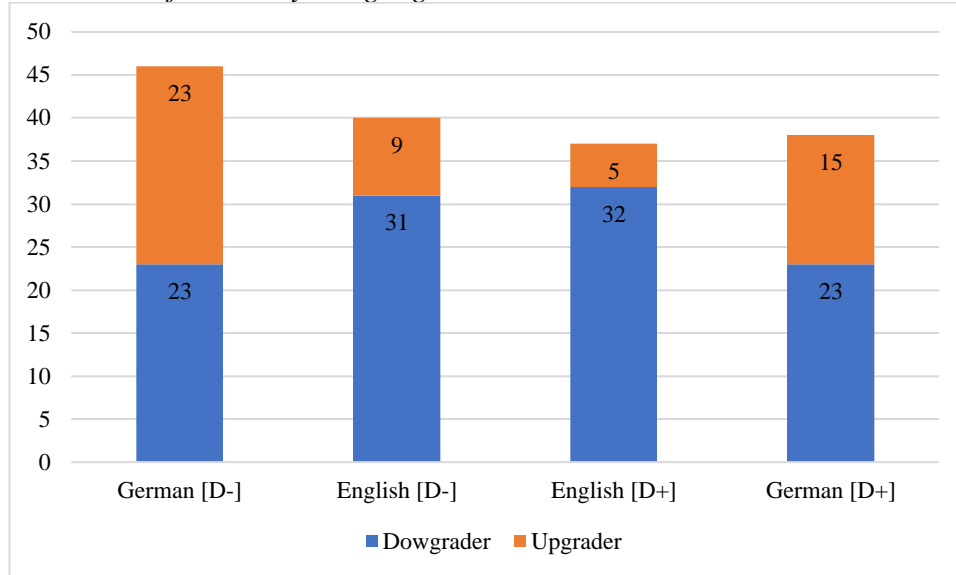
Figure 4 shows that all participants follow the same pattern in choosing the request strategy. Though to different degrees, impositives are most frequently used when the participant was superior in power ([Ps], e.g., *Ruf da bitte sofort an*. ‘Please call them immediately.’ [Vs5]. Conventionally indirect requests were used most frequently when talking to someone with equal power, a colleague ([Pe]), such as *Könnten Sie bitte die öffnen, die ich Ihnen nochmal geschickt habe?* ‘Could you please open the one that I just sent you?’ [78I]. Hints were highly preferred when speaking to someone superior ([Ps]) (see example (9)). This pattern suggests pragmatic competence applied to the different workplace scenarios, although the increased use of German impositives when requesting from someone familiar, [D–], remains a question.

### ***Head Act Internal Modification***

Figure 5 shows the production of mitigating downgraders and enforcing upgraders in absolute numbers. Independent of distance, participants tended to produce more downgraders when speaking English relative to German. In German, on the other hand, there is a tendency to use upgraders more frequently. This finding aligns with previous studies examining German monolinguals (e.g., House & Kasper, 1981).

**Figure 5**

*Head Act Internal Modification by Language and Distance in Absolute Numbers*



A closer look at the types of downgraders shows differences by language, see Table 5. The most frequently produced downgrader in German was the requestive marker *bitte* ‘please’ with 73.9% in the [D–] and 26.1% in the [D+] condition.

**Table 5**

*Downgraders by Language and Distance in Absolute Numbers and Percentages*

	German		English	
	[D–] (n=23)	[D+] (n=23)	[D+] (n=32)	[D–] (n=31)
Requestive marker	17   73.9%	6   26.1%	13   40.6%	6   19.4%
Subjunctive	2   8.7%	4   17.4%	7   21.9%	5   16.1%
Downtoner	1   4.3%	1   4.3%	1   3.1%	5   16.1%
Subjectivizer	0   0.0%	3   13.0%	4   12.5%	6   19.4%
Conditional clause	0   0.0%	4   17.4%	1   3.1%	3   9.7%
Past tense	1   4.3%	0   0.0%	0   0.0%	4   12.9%
Other (consultative device, understater, interrogative)	2   8.7%	5   21.6%	5   18.8%	2   6.4%

Considering that the most frequent head act strategies in German [D–] were impositives (see Figure 3), the dominance of the requestive marker *bitte* reflects a communicative pattern where impositives such as imperatives combine with *bitte* (see House, 1989). See (10) as an illustration.

- (10) Bitte öffnen Sie die neue Version, die ich Ihnen heute Morgen geschickt habe.  
Please open the new version that I sent you this morning. [tO5]

Example (11), however, illustrates that using *bitte* is not a guarantee for downgrading a request and expressing politeness. Instead, it can express the opposite. Capitalization is added to reflect the participant's intonation.

- (11) Also BITTE mach DEINEN Teil fertig. [pause] Das KANN doch nicht sein.  
So PLEASE, complete YOUR part. [pause] This CANnot be. [Okw]

English responses show a greater variation of downgraders. The requestive marker 'please' was the most frequently used downgrader, especially in English [D+], and the higher proportion of subjunctive use may correlate with the clear preference for conventionally indirect request strategies in English [D+] (Figure 3). Example (13) below, a request toward someone unfamiliar and of equal power ([D+] [Pe]), provides a notable difference to (12), a response to someone familiar and of equal power ([D-] [Pe]), both produced by the same participant. Among other head act external strategies, the internal modifications 'please' and subjunctive mood are used here to express politeness.

- (12) Mr. Treck, that is the wrong power point. Could you please open up the power point I sent you this morning? Thank you. [Okw]

Concerning upgrading head act internal modifications, participants almost exclusively used time intensifiers in English and German (see Table 6).

**Table 6**

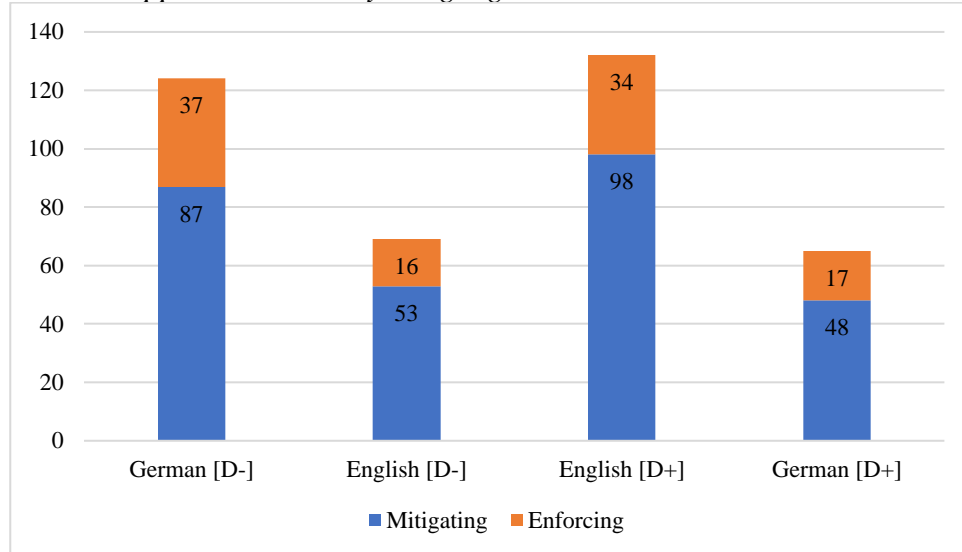
*Upgraders by Language and Distance in Absolute Numbers and Percentages*

	German		English	
	[D-] (n=22)	[D+] (n=15)	[D+] (n=5)	[D-] (n=9)
Time intensifier	22   95.7%	12   88.9%	5   100.0%	8   88.9%
Other	1   4.3%	3   11.1%	0   0.0%	1   11.1%

### *Head Act External Supportive Moves*

Participants used head act external supportive moves [see (5)] predominantly as a mitigating function (see Figure 6), and the same pattern is seen in both groups. Participants in group DCT 1 (German [D-], English [D+]), however, appear to be wordier, producing overall more external moves beyond the bare request head act.



**Figure 6***Head Act External Supportive Moves by Language and Distance in Absolute Numbers*

Providing more mitigating moves is a negative politeness strategy as the requester tries to reduce the force of the request by various softening strategies. The most frequent mitigating external moves were grounders, alerters, and expressions of gratitude as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7***Head Act External Mitigating Supportive Moves in Absolute Numbers and Percentages*

	German		English	
	[D-] (n=87)	[D+] (n=48)	[D-] (n=53)	[D+] (n=98)
Mitigating				
● Grounder	26   29.89%	17   35.42%	18   33.96%	34   34.69%
● Alerters	27   31.03%	17   35.42%	15   28.30%	26   26.53%
● Gratitude	18   20.69%	5   10.42%	8   15.09%	18   18.37%
● Other	16   18.39%	9   18.75%	12   22.64%	20   20.41%

The use of these mitigating moves appears to differ by language. Comparing the production of grounders with alerters, participants produce grounders at a higher rate than alerters when requesting in English. This may suggest a need to add more explanation and justification for their request as a mitigating move when speaking English. Compare examples (13) and (14) for illustration.

- (13) Herr Relis [supportive move: alerter], könnten Sie bitte die Chemikalien in Kühlraum A bringen? [head act: query preparatoty] Vielen Dank. [supportive move: gratitude].  
,Mr. Relis, can you please bring the chemicals to fridge A? Thank you.' [t05]

- (14) Mr. Ellis [supportive move: alerter], the chemicals cannot be left out in the sun. [supportive move: grounder] Could you please move it to fridge A asap? [head act: query preparatory] As they are chemicals that cannot be stored outdoors, they need to be stored in cool conditions. [supportive move: grounder] Thank you. [supportive move: gratitude] [Okw]

The most frequently used enforcing strategy was pointing out errors (see Table 8). This fits Grieve's (2010) finding that Germans were not shy of face-threatening confrontative expressions and tend to be more explicit and direct (House, 1996, 2006).

**Table 8**

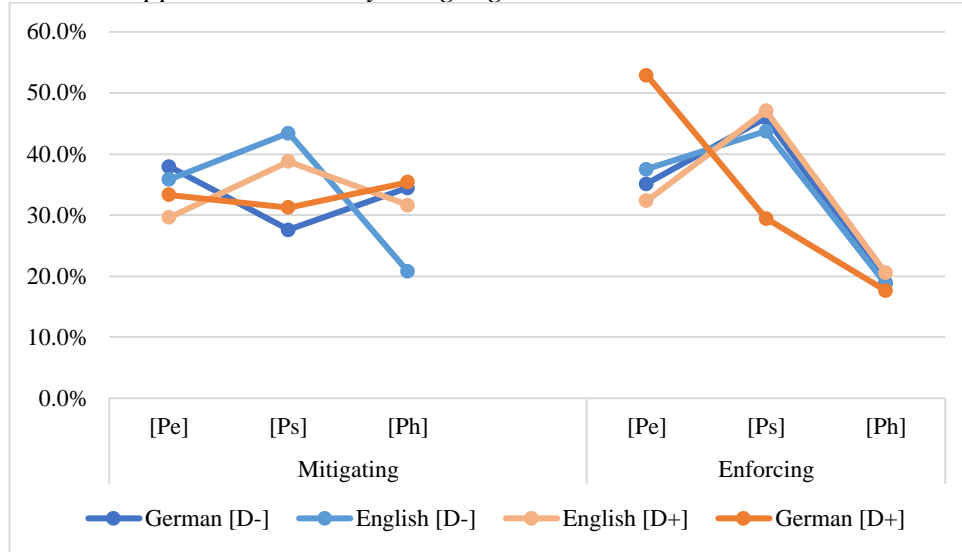
*Head Act External Enforcing Supportive Moves in Absolute Numbers and Percentages*

	German		English	
	[D-] (n=37)	[D+] (n=17)	[D-] (n=16)	[D+] (n=34)
Enforcing				
• Pointing out error	18   48.65%	13   76.47%	11   68.75%	17   50.00%
• Threat, moralizing, instruction	11   29.73%	3   17.65%	1   6.25%	13   38.24%
• Request repetition	8   21.62%	1   5.88%	4   25.00%	4   11.76%

The fact that the bilinguals show a high rate of pointing out errors when producing requests in English, see example (15), may suggest a possible transfer of communicative norms from a style typical in the German context to the English-speaking context.

- (15) You did miss to fill out the part in the middle. [supportive move: error] We really need to get this done within the next hour. [supportive move: grounder] Would you please work on this right now? [head act: query preparatory]

The analysis by power relation, Figure 7, revealed that in German mitigation was used least with [Ps], whereas in English, it was used most in [Ps]. Regarding enforcing supportive moves, we see that pointing out errors occurs the most when the participant was higher in power, [Ps] (except in German [D+]), supporting the view that they intended to provide explanations (Fischer, 2000) rather than increasing the force of the request. Enforcing moves were used least toward superiors, [Ph].

**Figure 7***Head Act External Supportive Moves by Language, Distance, and Power*

### Summary of Results

This study's DCT task aimed to reveal German-English bilinguals' request-making strategies in various conditions typical of workplace contexts. The first central result shows that the German-English bilinguals clearly preferred hearer-oriented 'you' constructions in both languages when participants requested from someone they were familiar with, [D-] condition. However, in situations where a speaker was unfamiliar with the interlocutor, [D+], indirect request perspectives increased. Interestingly, in German [D+], non-hearer-oriented, indirect request perspectives were dominant, whereas in English [D+] hearer-orientation was still preferred. Passive voice constructions likely account for the higher rate of indirect request perspectives in German. It is commonly used in German, and the absence of the addressee allows explicit focus on the content of the request. Thus, rather than a politeness strategy through indirectness, passive voice reflects a 'German-like' communicative pattern (see House's (1996, 2006) model in Table 1).

Head act strategies produced by participants in DCT 1 differed depending on language. In their German responses, [D-], participants preferred impositives over all other request strategies, while they clearly preferred conventionally indirect strategies when responding in English, [D+], as seen in Figure 3. The preference for German impositives by DCT 1 participants contradicts previous research that found, though to a lesser degree than Anglophone speakers, conventionally indirect request forms were the most common among German speakers (Ackermann, 2021; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). All participants, however, showed the same pragmatic assessment in their choice of request strategies depending on their interlocutor in the workplace scenarios (Figure 4). Participants preferred impositives when they were superior in power, conventionally indirect requests when talking to colleagues of equal power, and hints when communicating with superiors.

Head act internal modifications and external supportive moves, for the most part, confirm previous findings. In German, participants produced overall more upgraders, but they tended to produce more downgraders in English (see House & Kasper, 1981). In English responses,

participants used comparatively more grounders, suggesting an effort to lessen the assertive force of the request by providing explanations. However, in both languages, the most frequently used enforcing supportive move was pointing out errors, which is characteristic of the German communicative style and is atypical for English (Grieve, 2010; House, 1996, 2006).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Given the importance of foreign language communication and the ubiquity of requests in business relationships, this study investigated the request-making strategies of German-English bilinguals within workplace scenarios. Germans typically request more directly, Anglophones more indirectly, and without cultural knowledge of these pragmatic differences, the result may be miscommunications and charges of impoliteness. Accordingly, this study investigated if the bilinguals would 1) use language-specific request strategies, suggesting intercultural sensitivity; or 2) show the same “German-like” or “English-like” request strategies such as more across both languages, suggesting pragmatic transfer; or 3) display a request pattern that cannot be associated with a particular cultural norm but appears to be unique to the bilinguals.

Before turning to the interpretations of results, two methodological limitations need to be mentioned. First, while DCT tasks afford easy collection of targeted speech acts, establish a controlled setting, and are practical for researchers, they do not elicit dynamic interactive communicative events. An *in situ* study would be necessary for more in-depth insights into language use in the investigated settings. Second, while the production data can be used to analyze a speaker’s request strategies and help better understand the speaker, it cannot inform about the request strategies’ effectiveness and appropriateness. Therefore, readers should interpret results cautiously. To arrive at certain conclusions about the pragmatic and intercultural competence of the bilinguals, research with naturalistic data and studies employing perceptions ratings regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the requests would be needed.

Nonetheless, results suggest that German-English bilinguals blend the languages’ sociopragmatic norms for making requests. Aligning with previous findings on German and Anglophone monolinguals, the bilinguals examined, especially those in DCT 1, appear to be aware that requests in English are less direct, less explicit, and more other-oriented than in German. In English, they produce more indirect head acts (conventionally indirect and hints) and more grounders as a mitigating supportive move. On the other hand, participants showed ease with pointing out another’s errors (i.e., high rate of error mentioning) in English, which is a ‘German-like’ communicative norm (Grieve, 2010; House, 1996, 2006) and may indicate transfer from German. However, Fischer (2000) found that more direct requests accompanied by explanations were deemed the most effective request strategies. If the explicit mention of error is interpreted as giving an explanation in Fischer’s sense, this strategy might indicate pragmatic competence in making effective requests. Interestingly, the high rate of impositives in German, particularly used by participants in the DCT 1 group does not align with previous research. The bilinguals appear more ‘German-like’ than German informants in previous studies. Moreover, the relatively high rate of hints differs from previous findings (e.g., Ackermann, 2021). Given that they were used almost exclusively with superiors, this result suggests pragmatic competence concerning the workplace. Thus, the overall picture suggests that the bilingual participants are aware of intercultural differences in making requests but display a unique pattern (see also Su, 2010). This complex picture fits Kecskes’s (2015) proposal that a bilingual pragmatic competence dynamically evolves under the influence of the new language and is controlled by the will of the bilingual.

In conclusion, this study's central suggestion—that German-English bilinguals tend to blend each language's sociopragmatic norms into a unique bilingual pragmatic competence—is important to the field of LSP. Miscommunications when making requests in the workplace and the potential damage they can cause to work relationships can be anticipated and prevented or redressed through LSP pedagogy aiming to engender pragmatic and intercultural competence. With Byram (2021), such an interactional competence involves bilingual skills, cultural knowledge of the various communicative norms for request-making, and an attitude and openness to critically observe one's own bias and belief. This study suggests that a bilingual communicator's intercultural competence lies in adapting the pragmatic rules of a communicative interaction. While the findings of this study help prepare future bilingual professionals for making requests in intercultural situations, they also direct future global leaders to not dismiss non-target-like communicative strategies but recognize request-making strategies unique to the bilingual speaker.

*Acknowledgements:* This study was supported by the Office of the Vice Provost COVID Faculty Relief Fund and the Ivan Allen College Special Opportunity for Faculty Development Activities (SODA) of Georgia Tech for which I am very grateful. Special thanks also to Christopher Ballenger and Jason Sodikin for their help on this project. The study would not have been possible without the informants. Many thanks for their participation in the survey.

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