

## Judgments of Politeness in Russian: How Non-Native Requests Are Perceived by Native Speakers

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**Abstract:** To successfully communicate in a foreign or a second language, language learners need to develop all components of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale 1983), including sociolinguistic competence. However, studies suggest that even advanced language learners often face difficulties selecting appropriate linguistic means in a given situation, which can result in their being judged as impolite or inappropriate by native speakers (Hendricks, 2002; House, 2006; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). The present study investigates how native speakers of Russian judge electronic requests produced by native and non-native speakers of Russian. The findings confirm that non-native speakers are evaluated as significantly less polite and suggest that the non-native participants may not have fully developed their ability to select appropriate utterances for a given setting and to use various registers, which may affect their rate of success in cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Interlanguage pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, politeness, requests, Russian

### 1. Introduction

Successful cross-cultural communication requires a thorough mutual understanding of the social and linguistic norms governing the cultures that interact with each other. On the linguistic end, foreign and second language learners are faced with the challenging task of developing communicative competence consisting of four sub-competencies: grammatical, strategic, discourse, and sociolinguistic (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). Grammatical competence consists of knowledge of the lexis, phonology, morphology, and semantics; strategic competence entails the ability to overcome difficulties that arise in communication; and discourse competence allows one to use cohesive devices and anaphora to create different kinds of texts. However, it is sociolinguistic competence that is responsible for selecting context- and register-appropriate language forms for effective communication. Thus, sociolinguistic competence allows language users to consider the language forms that are available to them (i.e., the ones that they have already acquired), the context of the linguistic interaction, and the relationship and social distance between them and their interlocutor.

Politeness norms, i.e., those behavioral standards and expectations that dictate linguistic and non-linguistic behavior differ across cultures, which can lead to misunderstandings in inter-cultural

exchanges (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Marti, 2006; Yu, 2011). House (2006) suggests that while polite behaviors normally go unnoticed because they are the default, both over-politeness and impoliteness tend to be sharply perceived because they are inappropriate. When individuals from different cultures interact, their different cultural norms and expectations can cause clashes, misunderstandings, and mutual accusations of impoliteness (p. 260).

Even though most language learners are entirely aware of the need to formulate polite messages, they are often unable to do so, either because they lack the linguistic means or because they are unaware of the target language's politeness and appropriateness norms. Language users who fail to select appropriate linguistic means to perform a speech act commit pragmalinguistic failure. Thomas (1983) defines pragmalinguistic failure as using inadequate linguistic means to perform a speech act such as a request or an apology (p. 91), for example, when a non-native speaker (NNS) of English provides a detailed account of all the misfortunes she encountered today in response to a phatic question, "How are you?" Pragmalinguistic failure results from mistaken beliefs about the pragmatic force of an utterance. It has been suggested that it can cause miscommunication and is judged more harshly by native speakers (NS) than grammar errors because when "language production tends to diverge from NS norms, [it] often results in negative assessment of [...] personalities" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 75).

In their universal politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) categorize requests as face-threatening speech acts (FTAs), i.e., acts that threaten a person's self-image and its maintenance in interaction with others (Goffman, 1967). Requests are made to obtain a resource, such as time or expertise, possessed by another person. Thus, the person making the request is infringing upon the hearer's freedom of action while at the same time risking a possible refusal. By carefully evaluating the context and the involved stakeholders, and by selecting appropriate linguistic means to perform the request, the speaker can minimize that threat. Brown and Levinson's theory has been criticized on the grounds that it does not account for cross-cultural differences in politeness norms. It has also been pointed out that by insisting on calculating the level of threat to face using the three variables of social distance, power, and the degree of imposition, the theory reduces human interaction to a mathematical formula (Watts, 2003). Other theories of politeness have been postulated by Lakoff (1973, 1977), Leech (1983), Ide (1989), Watts (1989), and Gu (1990), amongst others. However, as Eelen (2001) points out, the major shortcoming of all these theories is that they view politeness from a normative perspective, associating polite behavior with a positive evaluation and impolite behavior with a negative evaluation. Postmodern approaches to politeness attempt to move away from this narrow view and conduct a more multi-dimensional analysis of politeness, often from cross- and inter-cultural perspectives.

From a foreign language learner's viewpoint, it is important to keep in mind that linguistic forms are not intrinsically polite or impolite, and that politeness is "culturally relativized" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, p. 24). Whereas polite behaviors, as the expected norm, go unnoticed, over-politeness and impoliteness are noticed because they are inappropriate (House, 2006). House suggests that the differences between cultural norms and expectations can cause clashes, misunderstandings, and mutual accusations of impoliteness between speakers of different languages precisely because they are perceived as either overly polite or impolite (p. 260). Culturally appropriate performance poses challenges for NNSs because they not only have to select an adequate politeness strategy but also have

to be able to assess the social relationship between themselves and the interlocutor, which is interpreted differently in different cultures.

## 2. Literature Review

Research suggests that the notion of politeness is “culturally relativized” (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989, p. 24) and performance of requests therefore differs cross-culturally and cross-linguistically. The request proper, or the head act, can be performed using different strategies, ranging from direct requests and obligation statements to suggestions and hints<sup>1</sup>. As well, supportive moves used to either mitigate (i.e., reduce the impact of) or aggregate (i.e., increase the impact of) a request include reasons and explanations, a promise of a reward, an elicitation of pre-commitment, or a threat. A request can also contain internal modifications that serve to either soften or increase the impact of the request. Members of a particular culture share mutual expectations about what linguistic behavior is considered appropriate and polite in various situations.

Several studies have examined NNS production of requests and found differences in comparison with NS norms. Brunak and Scarcella (1979), whose subjects were Arabic speakers of English and NNSs of English, concluded that the NNS group used less in-group language such as slang and terms of endearment, as well as inappropriate hedges, statements of personal desire, and direct strategies instead of hints. House and Kasper (1986) compared NS of English, German, and Danish requests with NNS German and Danish requests and found that NNS requests tended to be longer and more verbose, as they contained more supportive moves and overall longer utterances than the NS ones. Similar results were reported by Blum-Kulka and Olshtein (1986). Kasanga (2006), who focused on requestive strategies of Afrikaans speakers learning English, also concluded that their strategy repertoire differed from NSs, as they showed a strong preference for direct requests, which are often perceived as rude in English. Al-Ali and Alawneh (2010), who examined mitigation strategies in English requests produced by Jordanian users of English and American native speakers, found differences in the structure of requests, frequency of employment of mitigation, and types of mitigating devices employed by the two groups. González-Cruz (2014) concluded that her subjects, NS of Canarian Spanish, were aware of some differences between requestive strategies in Spanish and English but lacked in their ability to use mitigation strategies and the speaker-oriented perspective commonly used in English. Overall, these studies suggest that foreign and second language learners face a challenge approximating native-speaker norms in the production of requests.

It is important to note a few studies that focus specifically on requests in Russian. Mills (1993) examined Russian requests produced by native speakers of English and Russian, and discovered a

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<sup>1</sup> Even though it has been argued that the direct/non-direct speech act distinction should be abandoned (e.g., Wierzbicka, 2003), the present paper refers to the more traditional taxonomy of request strategies (direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect) commonly used in the literature on interlanguage requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

preference for negative interrogatives in the native group, while the non-native speakers in the study formed their requests using the literal Russian equivalent of “could you,” which is not conventionally used to formulate requests in Russian, and the lexical politeness marker “please.” Ogiermann (2009) found that English and Russian display differences in the employment of direct and indirect strategies, for instance, in the use of imperatives and interrogatives. Finally, Dong (2009) found differences in the use of forms of address and internal modifications of requests and concluded that, narrowly speaking, cultures display differences in terms of the preferred request strategy and, broadly speaking, in their application of “culture-specific sociolinguistic rules” (p. 369).

In all, the findings from cross-linguistic studies of requests suggest that foreign language learners face a much more complex task than simply mastering a language’s grammar and lexicon. Even though there may be an overlap in the grammatical and lexical means of performing a request, the impact of contextual factors and the conventional use of structures vary across languages and cultures. Thus, in order to participate in cross-cultural exchanges with NNSs, language learners need to develop a sociolinguistic awareness that will allow them to select appropriate linguistic means and politeness strategies.

As Hendricks (2010) notes, however, very few studies so far have investigated NS perceptions of NNS performance of requests. Among those who addressed this question, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) examined how NS and NNS email requests in English sent by graduate students affect faculty and found that NNS messages were viewed as having higher levels of imposition and had a negative effect on how the recipients perceived the sender. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), who also studied the differences between NS and NNS English request strategies, reached a similar conclusion. She studied the effect of electronic requests on the recipient and noted that NNSs’ “language production tends to diverge from native-speaker norms, which often results in negative assessment of their personalities” (p. 75). Hacking (2008) investigated social appropriateness of NNS requests, apologies, and refusals in Russian and found that those responses that did not contain an element considered crucial by NSs (e.g., an explicit apology) were deemed the least appropriate by the raters. Similar findings were reported by Hendricks (2010), who studied how email requests produced by Dutch speakers of English were evaluated by NSs. The raters were asked to judge both the comprehensibility of the message and the personality of the sender. The study concluded that requests lacking elaborate modifications tend to be evaluated negatively and that “speech act modification can be a potential area for pragmatic failure” (p. 238).

In brief, most researchers agree that NNS requestive performance often varies from native-like performance because of wordiness or the inability to select appropriate requestive strategies. However, as Kasper and Schmidt (1996) note, “simply identifying differences does not inform us which of those differences may matter in interaction. Some differences between native speaker norms and L2 performance may result in negative stereotyping by native speaker message recipients, whereas others may be heard as somewhat different but perfectly appropriate alternatives” (p. 156). Whilst some studies suggest that certain differences in NNS performance leads to a negative evaluation and perception of a foreign language user, the majority of the studies on the ability to produce context-appropriate speech acts so far have examined the performance of speech acts by speakers of English

as a foreign or second language. As communication across languages and cultures is on the increase, it is important to examine the sociolinguistic competence of speakers of foreign languages other than English. The present study broadens current research by focusing on requests in Russian, as well as by acknowledging the increasing role of email as a mode of communication between students and professors. To date, few studies have examined the effect of pragmatically accented email messages on how NNS writers of such messages are perceived by NSs (but see Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hendricks, 2010). The present study aims to determine how NS and NNS email requests in Russian are perceived by native speakers, i.e., if messages constructed by NS and NNS speakers come across as equally polite/appropriate or whether non-native speakers are judged differently. Specifically, the study focuses on sociolinguistic knowledge, i.e., that component of language knowledge which allows language users to select appropriate utterances for a given setting, and to understand various registers, figurative language, and cultural allusions (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). As such, the study attempts to answer the following research question:

How do native speakers of Russian evaluate NS and NNS email requests in terms of the messages' clarity, politeness, and appropriateness?

Politeness, defined as linguistic behavior that is evaluated as polite by the hearer (Eelen, 2001, p. 109), is the main focus of the study. However, two other measures, namely clarity and appropriateness, are introduced in order to tease apart grammatical competence (clarity/comprehensibility of the message) and the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic abilities (Thomas, 1983) that enable language users to make linguistic choices that are expected in a given situation (appropriateness). The term *appropriateness* also refers to the social, culture-specific norms which dictate expected behavior in a given situation (Eelen, 2001, p. 128). While certain behaviors or utterances are perceived as culturally inappropriate, a NNS language user may still be given the benefit of the doubt for trying to be polite. It is in this lay sense that the two terms are used in the evaluation form given to the raters in the present study. It is hypothesized that the requests written by NNS speakers will be perceived as less clear, less polite, and less appropriate than those produced by NS. Because, however, as Eelen (2001) points out, "acting politely [...] equals acting appropriately equals acting according to the hearer's expectations," (p. 128) both measures (politeness and appropriateness) are taken to denote the perceived difference in the evaluation of politeness of NS versus NNS messages.

### 3. Methods and Participants

#### 3.1. Participants

There were 41 participants in this study. Twenty of the participants were native speakers of Russian—seven males and 13 females, ages 18–35—and 21 were English-speaking non-native speakers of Russian—13 males and eight females, ages 18–40. All non-native speakers were third- and fourth-year students of Russian at the University of Utah or alumni who had majored or minored in Russian and completed at least three years of Russian. Eighteen of the non-native participants were former missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) who had served their church

mission in Russia or a country of the former USSR in which Russian is commonly spoken (e.g., Ukraine). A typical mission lasts between 1.5–2 years, and all missionaries are required to complete a two-month long intensive language course (seven to nine hours per day) at the Missionary Training Center. The remaining three NNS participants had spent an extensive time in Russia prior to participation in the study, using Russian for five to nine hours per day, for example, on a study abroad trip. Of the NNS participants, 10% reported that they felt comfortable interacting in Russian in all environments, and 90% stated that they felt comfortable using it in most environments.

Both NS and NNS participants had completed at least three years of college education and used email on a daily basis for both personal and professional reasons. Before being enrolled in the study, the participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire, which provided information about their demographics and languages spoken, and in case of the NNS participants, their experience learning Russian.

The participants were also asked to take a pre-test developed specifically for the purpose of the present study in order to ensure that they had developed the grammatical competence necessary to formulate requests in Russian. The test focused on grammatical structures such as imperatives, personal pronouns in the dative case, conditionals, and polite forms of address, which are commonly used in Russian requests.

The raters were three native speakers of Russian residing in the United States, one male and two females, age 26–50. All raters held college degrees from an institution where Russian is used as the language of instruction (two from Russia and one from Kazakhstan) and had experience using email for professional purposes.

The NNS participants in this study constituted a unique group, one that is somewhat a researcher's ideal yet is not representative of typical foreign language learners. The majority of the NNS subjects were former LDS missionaries, which means that they received extensive instruction in Russian and spent about two years living and interacting in a Russian-speaking country. Prior studies suggest that longer periods of time spent in a target-language community are likely to increase language learners' sociolinguistic competence (e.g., Barron, 2002; Han, 2005; Owen, 2002; Schauer, 2004). It is also reasonable to assume that the participants' motivation to learn to employ socially appropriate politeness strategies in Russian was high because the Russian language was their main means of spreading the LDS faith while in the target community. Indeed, former research (e.g., Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995) indicates that the amount of effort learners invest in learning is likely to be affected by their personal values, which in turn impacts the extent to which they desire to reach native-like proficiency. Thus, the majority of the study population was characterized by an above-average motivation to learn Russian as well as an increased sensitivity to politeness. Therefore, the scores their messages receive for clarity, politeness, and appropriateness can be expected to be higher than those a typical foreign language learner would receive.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

The data for the study were collected using a discourse completion task (DCT). There are several



reasons why this particular method of data collection was selected. The first two reasons are consistent with Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's justification for the use of DCT in the CCSARP (1989). As they point out, contrary to Labov's (1984) argument that linguistic data should reflect natural language use, this stipulation is not feasible due to the fact that the presence of the interviewer affects the data (observer's paradox), hence the appeal of the DCT. Also, using naturalistic observation rather than DCT makes the data collection process time consuming and inefficient, because in naturalistic data, certain structures may be underrepresented. Using DCT, on the other hand, allows for elicitation of "an extensive range of potentially natural, unmonitored learner performance appropriate to a given genre of speech behavior or style" (Chaudron, 2003, p. 773). It has been suggested that DCT is the most optimal available data collection method used to study politeness norms across languages and cultures (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 195). Using a written DCT task also prevents raters from stereotyping because they do not see the interlocutor and are not told whether the messages they are evaluating were written by NSs or NNSs. DCT has been used in several studies that investigate the production of speech acts by both NSs and NNSs, and it was selected for the present study in an attempt to situate it in the rich tradition of speech act research.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that while DCT is a commonly used elicitation method due to the relative ease of obtaining homogenous data in a time-efficient manner, the resulting data do not originate in natural language use settings. Elicited data have several limitations, in comparison with naturally occurring requests (Pulaczewska, 2013). In real life situations, communication is much more complex because of what interlocutors know about each other, their respective social statuses, and the context of the interchange, and because of the complex relationship that usually exists between them (ranging from complete strangers to friends or enemies). The nature of that relationship and the personal characteristics of the people involved in communication affects the choice of linguistic means to construct messages.

Despite certain weaknesses of DCT, this method of data collection was chosen because of its relative time efficiency, and because it has been recommended as the most optimal data collection method in the study of cross-linguistic speech acts (Ogierman, 2009, p. 95). The DCT in this study consisted of four scenarios that elicit electronic requests:

Scenario 1: A student asks a professor at St. Petersburg University about the graduate program in Russian literature and his/her chances of getting accepted to the program

Scenario 2: A student asks a professor at Moscow State University for a letter of recommendation

Scenario 3: An exchange student at Novosibirsk State University requests an appointment with a professor to discuss the results of a recent test

Scenario 4: A student studying at Tomsk State University requests an appointment to discuss a term paper

The scenarios were carefully constructed to ensure that the artificiality of the task was minimized, i.e., all fictitious addressees were professors at actual Russian universities, and the participants were provided with an amount of detail that would allow them to imagine

themselves as real participants in each of the situations. The social distance in all four scenarios (student – professor) was stable, and the level of imposition in all four situations was relatively high, as the student is demanding time and expertise from the professor (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 77), but the addressee did not have a high obligation to comply. The requester, on the other hand, had a “personal stake” in each of the situations (Sadock, 1974, p. 121). It is hypothesized that these factors affected the linguistic means selected by the writer to construct a message that justifies the request and to make the message as polite as required by the situation.

To ensure that the participants focused on the request itself rather than on trying to recall specific vocabulary needed to construct the messages, the scenarios were presented to them in Russian. All participants were instructed to respond to the scenarios by writing emails to the fictitious addressees specified in each situation and sending the messages to a password-secured email account created solely for the purpose of this study.

All messages were coded and submitted for evaluation to three NS raters who were instructed to judge their comprehensibility/clarity, appropriateness, and politeness using a 5-point Likert scale (see Appendix). The messages were presented in a random order, and the raters were not told that they are rating NS and NNS messages. The comprehensibility measure was introduced to ensure that the messages were rated based on the employment of politeness strategies rather than a lack of grammatical competence. The raters were asked to read each message imagining that they were the intended addressee and respond to the Likert-scale items following immediate intuitions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Quantitative Analysis

A total of 164 messages, 80 NS and 84 NNS, were collected and submitted for rating using a five-point Likert scale, with one being the lowest possible score (entirely unclear, entirely impolite, entirely inappropriate) and five being the highest (entirely clear, entirely polite, entirely appropriate). NS scores ranged from two to five (higher is better), whereas NNS scores ranged from one to five. Table 1 contains the frequency distribution of the scores for both groups. The majority of NS messages (526) received the highest possible score on all three measures as compared to only about one-fourth of the NNS messages. The most frequent score for NNS messages was four. About 25% of NNS messages were scored at three, compared with only 5.8% of NS messages. None of the NS requests were scored at one, and very few were scored at two, but a relatively large number of NNS requests received those scores.

Table 1. Score Frequencies

Score	1	2	3	4	5	Total
<b>Native speaker messages</b>	–	4	42	148	526	720
<b>Non-native speaker messages</b>	4	33	181	350	188	756



As expected, the messages written by NSs received higher mean scores than their NNS counterparts. Table 2 summarizes the mean scores received by both groups on the three aforementioned measures: comprehensibility, appropriateness, and politeness. As can be seen, the descriptive statistics indicate that the NNS requests were, on average, perceived to be less clear, less socially appropriate, and less polite in comparison with native speakers' requests. It is interesting to note that in the NNS ratings, the standard deviation for comprehensibility is slightly smaller than that for appropriateness and politeness, which suggests a smaller amount of variation in comprehensibility ratings for this group.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations

Measure	Native speaker messages	Non-native speaker messages
Comprehensibility	$M=4.9, SD=0.2$	$M=4.2, SD=0.6$
Appropriateness	$M=4.5, SD=0.5$	$M=3.6, SD=0.5$
Politeness	$M=4.5, SD=0.5$	$M=3.9, SD=0.6$

The scores from each of the ratings (clarity/comprehensibility, appropriateness, and politeness) were analyzed using three one-way ANOVAs. The analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between ratings given to NS and NNS messages in regard to clarity,  $F(1,162)=128.923, p \leq .001$ , partial eta squared=.443; the social appropriateness of the message,  $F(1,162)=124.254, p \leq .001$ , partial eta squared=.434; and politeness,  $F(1,162)=62.959, p \leq .001$ , partial eta squared=.288. These results are presented visually in Figure 1.

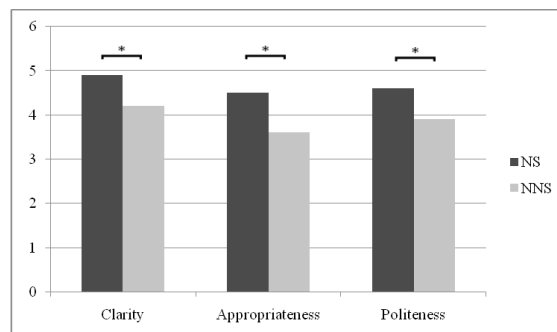


Figure 1. Ratings of NS and NNS Messages

The findings support the hypothesis that NS and NNS are perceived differently by native-speaker raters. NNS messages were rated as less clear, less appropriate, and less polite. They received lower scores on all three measures, and the differences between the groups were statistically significant.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Samples

A closer look at selected examples from both NS and NNS data sheds some light on the quantitative

results discussed above. It has been noted, for instance, that the two groups differed in their use of openings (address forms) and closings, the amount and type of justification provided for the request, as well as syntactic and lexical choices. In the data below, each example is first given in transliteration, then in a literal gloss translation (in italics), then in English idiomatic translation. The following four messages illustrate NS data (all names are fictitious):

***NS response to scenario 1:***

Uvažamaja Ljudmila Petrovna, Ja zakončila školu v ètom godu i očen'xotela by postupit'v vaš Universitet. Ja slišala, što Universitet Sankt-Peterburga javljaetsja odnim iz lučšix i samym drevnim v Rossii. Ne mogli by Vy napisat' mne o moix šansax na postuplenie i napisat' informaciju ob učebnoj programme po russkoj literature. Zaranee blagodarna, S uvaženiem, Tat'jana

*Respected Ljudmila Petrovna, I finished school this year and very would like to enter in your university. I heard that University Saint-Petersburg is one of the best and oldest in Russia. Couldn't you write me about my chances to get admitted and write information about the study program in Russian literature. In advance grateful. With respect. Tatyana.*  
Dear Lyudmila Petrovna, I graduated from high school this year and would very much like to go to your university. I heard that the University of St. Petersburg is one of the best and oldest in Russia. Could you write to me about my chances for admission and give me information about the study program in Russian literature? Thank you in advance, Kind regards, Tatyana

***NS response to scenario 2:***

Zdravstvujte, Andrej Sergeevič, Pišet Vam studentka Tat'jana Ivanovna. Mne očen' nužna Vaša pomošč. U menja pojavilas' vozmožnost' polučit' stipendiju, no dlja ètogo mne nužno rekomendatel'noe pis'mo ot odnovo iz moix prepodavatelej. Ne mogli by Vy ego napisat'? S uvaženiem, Tat'jana Ivanovna

*Greetings, Andrew Sergeevič, Writing to you (is) student Tatyana Ivanovna. To me (is) really needed your help. By me appeared an opportunity to get a scholarship, but for this me needed (is) a letter of recommendation from one of my teachers. Couldn't you write it? With respect, Tatiana*

Hello, Andrew Sergeevič, My name is Tatyana Ivanovna and I am your student. I really need your help. I have an opportunity to get a scholarship, but in order to get it, I need a letter of recommendation from one of my teachers. Could you write it for me? With regards, Tatiana

***NS response to scenario 3:***

Zdravstvujte, Il'ja Alekseevič, Menja zovut Andrej. Ja javljajus' studentom Novosibirskogo gosudarsvennogo universiteta. U menja vzniklo očen' mnogo voprosov po kursu ruskoj literatury. Ne mogli by Vy vydelit' nemnogo vremeni, i naznačit' den' i vremja dlja sobesedovanija, čtoby obsudit' èti voprosy? S uvaženiem, Andrej Sergeevič

*Greetings, Ilya Alekseevič, I am called Andrew. I am a student at the Novosibirsk State University. By me appeared many questions regarding the course on Russian literature. Couldn't you set aside some time, and set a date and time for a meeting to discuss these questions? With respect, Andrew Sergeevič.*

Hello, Ilya Alekseevič, My name is Andrew. I am a student at the Novosibirsk State University. I have some questions regarding the course on Russian literature. Would you be able to find some time for me to meet and discuss these questions? With regards, Andrew Sergeevic.

***NS response to scenario 4:***

Dobryj den', Oleg Aleksandrovič, Menja zovut Boris. Ja Vaš student po predmetu russkaja literatura iz gruppy X. V dannyj moment, ja pytajus' razobrat'sja s napisaniem semestrovoy raboty po vašemu predmetu. Ne mogli by Vy naznačit' mne sobesedovanie, čtoby obsudit' voprosy? Zaranee bol'soe spasibo! S uvaženiem, Boris.

*Good day, Oleg Aleksandrovič, I am called Boris. I am your student on the subject Russian literature from the group X. At the moment, I'm trying to deal with the writing of semester work on your subject. Couldn't you set me a meeting to discuss questions? In advance a big thank you! With respect, Boris.*

Hello Oleg Aleksandrovič. My name is Boris. I am a student in your Russian literature class, in section X. At the moment, I am trying to write the term paper for your course. Could you meet with me to discuss my questions? Many thanks in advance. With regards, Boris.

These messages have several characteristics in common. First of all, they all use the first name and the patronymic to address the respondent, which is a typical formal mode of address in Russian. They also contain fairly extensive information about the background of the request, including the student's name and affiliation, as well as the reasons for posing the request. All messages close with an expression of gratitude and respect (e.g., *S uvaženiem, Zaranee blagodarna*). Among noticeable syntactic features is the use of the negative request constructed using the negative particle *ne* (not) and a modal *mogli* by (could). The writers of all four messages also selected the formal third person singular pronoun *vy* (you) and capitalized it, which is a sign of respect for the recipient. These features help account for the higher ratings of politeness and appropriateness given to the NS messages in the study. In contrast, the following examples illustrate NNS messages:

***NNS response to scenario 1:***

Profesor Petrovna, Vy menja ne znaete no menja zavut Džejk i ja interesujus' russkoj literaturoj i vašim universitetom. Ja bylo by očen' rad esli vy mogli by delat' dlja menija odnu prosbu: predostavite mne informaciju ob učebnoj programme po russkoj literature požalujsta. Ja takže by xotel znat' kakie u menja šansy byt' prinjatym v universitet esli ja by postupil? Spasibo bol'soe za vaše vremja, Džejk

*Professor Petrovna, You do not know me but I am called Jake and I am interested in*

*Russian literature and your university. I would be very happy if you could make for me one request: present me information about the study program in Russian literature, please. I also would like to know what my chances of being accepted to the university if I would enter? Thank you big for your time, Jake.*

Professor Petrovna, You do not know me but my name is Jake and I am interested in Russian literature and your university. I would be very happy if you could grant me one request: send me information about the study program in Russian literature, please. I also would like to know my chances of being accepted to the university if I applied. Many thanks for your time, Jake.

***NNS response to scenario 2:***

Zdrastvujte Andrej Sergeevič, Ja xotela uznat' možno, li budet vy pišite rekomendatelnoe pis'mo dlja polučeniya stipendii. Ja mogu poslat' vam moju informaciju i rezjume na sledujuščej nedele. Esli budet možno požalujsta skažite mne. Spasibo. Nina

*Greetings Andrej Sergeevič, I wanted to know, can, if (it) is possible you write a recommendation letter to get a scholarship. I can send you my information and resume next week. If it will be possible please tell me. Thank you. Nina.*

Hello Andrew Sergeevič. I want to find out if it is possible for you to write a letter of recommendation for a scholarship (for me). I can send you my information and resume next week. If it is possible, please let me know. Thank you. Nina.

***NNS response to scenario 3:***

Profesor Grekov, Ja xoču naznačit' sobosedovanie s vami, čtoby obsudit' nekotorye voprosy o vašem kurse, kotorye u menja est'. Ja ponimaju i znaju, čto vy zanjaty i u vas est' mnogo del, no esli vremja est' ja xotel by vstretit'sja i pogovorit' o moix voprosax. Napišite mne kogda vy možete i my možem naznačit' sovodedovanie. Spasibo za vaše ponimanie. s uvaženiem, Maša

*Professor Grekov, I want to set a meeting with you, in order to discuss some questions about your course which by me are. I understand and know, that you are busy and by you are a lot of things, but if there is time I would like to meet and talk about my questions. Write me when you can and we can set a meeting. Thank you for your understanding. with respect, Masha.*

Professor Grekon, I want to set a meeting with you to discuss some questions I have about your course. I understand and know that you are busy and have a lot of things (to do), but if you have time, I would like to meet and talk about my questions. Let me know when you are available and we can set a meeting. Thank you for your understanding. With regards, Masha.

***NNS response to scenario 4:***

Dorogoj Oleg Aleksandrovič, Pišet vam Katja iz vašego kursa ruskoj literatury. Ja xotela

naznačit' sobesedovanie po povodu moej semestrovoj raboty. Kakoe vremja dlja vas lučše? Spasibo vam, Katja

*Dear Oleg Aleksandrovič, Writing to you is Katja from your course of Russian literature. I wanted to schedule a meeting for reason of my semester work. What time for you is best?*

*Thank you, Katya*

Dear Oleg Aleksandrovič, This is Katja from your course on Russian literature. I wanted to schedule a meeting regarding my term paper. What time is best for you? Thank you, Katya

There are several noticeable differences between these messages and the ones written by NSs. Interestingly, NNS messages contain a wider variety of openings, including forms of address such as *profesor* (professor) and *dorogoj* (dear), which are absent from NS data. Many NNS messages also do not contain detailed justifications of the request, and some are repetitive in that they restate the main request several times. Some syntactic differences can be noted, too. For example, the use of want statements is more common, whereas the negative conditional construction typically present in NS requests is found less frequently. Instead, the formula "could you," which is a conventional way to form requests in English, is used. Also, while most NNS informants correctly employed the formal third person singular pronoun *vy* (you), in most of the NNS messages, the pronoun is not capitalized. Finally, NNS often used *spasibo* (thank you) instead of *s uvaženiem* (with respect) to end the message. These differences correspond to those of Dong (2010), who concluded that non-native speakers used different forms of address than native speakers, and Mills (1993), who described NNS messages as more verbose and who found a preference for negative requests among the native speakers of Russian.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

### 5.1. Summary of Findings

Rooted in the tradition of interlanguage pragmatics studies, this study attempted to gain insights into foreign language learners' sociolinguistic competence and NS judgments of NNS performance of requests. Following Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman and Palmer (2010), it was assumed that sociolinguistic competence or knowledge is reflected in the perception and production of utterances that are appropriate in a given context. The participants in this study were asked to compose electronic messages in response to four scenarios that required them to consider the status differences between themselves and the addressees, the context of the exchange, and the level of the imposition of the request in order to select appropriate linguistic means to compose the message. The elicited requests were then submitted to three NS raters to examine how they perceive NS and NNS email requests in terms of clarity, appropriateness, and politeness. The results show that NS messages were judged as clearer, more socially appropriate, and more polite than NNS messages, which is consistent with the findings of Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) and Hacking (2008). The differences between the judgments of NS and NNS requests were statistically significant.

A closer look at examples of NS and NNS data revealed some interesting patterns that help

explain the differences in ratings. Differences were noted in the use of forms of address, closings, justifications of the requests, the employment of negation and conditionals, and the capitalization of the formal third person singular pronoun *vy* (you). Very likely, the NNS messages were judged as less polite because of these differences.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that despite being fairly advanced users of Russian, the NNS participants in this study have not fully acquired the sociolinguistic knowledge and skills that would allow them to construct socially appropriate and polite requests. Canale and Swain (1980) posit that because conditions for appropriateness are to a certain degree universal, second and foreign language learners who have already developed appropriateness conditions in their first language should be able to apply them to the consecutive languages they are learning. The results of this study suggest that the issue is rather more complex and that even several years of instruction and an extended stay in the target language community do not warrant an approximation of NS models. As Kasper and Rose (2002) argue, “what counts as sociopragmatically appropriate is guided by social, cultural and personal preferences and the dynamics of the ongoing interaction” (p. 262). Because NS performance displays a high degree of variation, establishing NS pragmatic norms is more complex than stating grammatical rules. Factors such as the social context, gender, age, and social roles of the interlocutors affect the linguistic means they select to communicate. Considering the complexity of pragmalinguistic rules, the politeness and appropriateness scores received by NNS participants in this study are rather impressive.

## **5.2. Directions for Future Research**

This paper focused on the evaluation of politeness in email messages written by native and non-native speakers of Russian. It concluded that requests constructed by native speakers were judged as more polite than those written by non-native speakers. A brief overview of data samples revealed some differences in NS and NNS messages. As such, the paper contributes to our understanding of how incompletely developed sociolinguistic competence in a foreign language impacts the perceived levels of politeness in interactions with native speakers.

Future research that focuses on a broader range of speech acts is needed. Whereas sociolinguistic competence is responsible for the ability to formulate requests, it cannot be adequately measured by observing this ability alone. Thus, the participants in this study cannot be deemed sociolinguistically competent or incompetent based solely on the evaluation of requests they have written. In addition, analysis of authentic as opposed to elicited data is needed to verify the results presented here.

## **5.3. Pedagogical Implications**

Similar to its predecessors (e.g., Mills, 1993; Ogiermann, 2009), this study has important implications for second and foreign language instruction. If the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is a challenging task, language learners should benefit from explicit instruction that focuses on the development of sociolinguistic competence and thus increases students’ awareness of the target population’s politeness norms as well as the means to construct polite messages. Cohen (2005) proposes a taxonomy of

strategies that can be used to help language learners develop sociolinguistic competence, focusing specifically on speech act performance. Hacking (2008) suggests several different activities to be used, for example, creating a mini-corpus of NS and NNS examples of speech acts, comparing speech acts in the first language and the target language, analyzing NNS speech acts and comparing them with NS norms, as well as production activities, such as role plays. Such focus-on-pragmatics activities can no doubt enhance students' sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatics-focused activities can very easily be integrated into the general language curriculum (Ishihara, 2010), grammar instruction (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012), and content-based frameworks (Krulatz, 2014).

In conclusion, approximating NS levels of sociolinguistic competence in a second or a foreign language is a complex task. The findings of this study suggest that even advanced language learners may fail to produce messages that are entirely appropriate/polite, as evidenced in the evaluations by NS raters. Because such lack of appropriateness and politeness can be judged more harshly than grammatical mistakes, it is important to include attainment of sociolinguistic competence in foreign and second language curricula. In a world in which people are involved in cross-cultural communication on a daily basis, it is important for language learners, teachers, and curriculum developers to devote more attention to this issue

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### Appendix

Instructions for raters

Please read each prompt situation and the participant's response, and answer the following questions. Check the number that corresponds best with your assessment of the person's performance.

Participant ID # \_\_\_\_\_ Situation # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Did the respondent make a comprehensible response?

1	2	3	4	5
response made no sense			response was entirely intelligible	

2. Was the response socially appropriate?

1	2	3	4	5
response was entirely inappropriate			response was entirely appropriate	

3. Was the response polite?

1	2	3	4	5
response was polite			response was impolite	

Discourse completion task given to American participants

Instructions: Carefully read the four scenarios below. To respond to each scenario, create an email message in Russian. Send your message to yourprof2012@yahoo.com. Please use the same email that you provided in the questionnaire.

**Ситуация №1:** Напишите электронное письмо профессору Гавриловой Людмиле Петровне в Университет Санкт-Петербурга, самого древнего университета в России, с просьбой предоставить вам информацию об учебной программе по русской литературе, а также узнать каковы ваши шансы быть принятым в университет.

**Ситуация №2:** Вы завершили учебную программу по истории в Московском государственном университете. Напишите электронное письмо профессору Андрею Сергеевичу Дворниченко, который преподавал вам историю, в котором вы попросите его написать вам рекомендательное письмо для получения стипендии.

**Ситуация №3:** Вы обучаетесь в Новосибирском государственном университете, одном из лучших университетов России. Напишите электронное письмо профессору Илье Алексеевичу Грекову, который преподает вам усиленный курс русской литературы, с просьбой назначить собеседование чтобы обсудить некоторые вопросы о курсе.

**Ситуация №4:** Вы – студент Томского государственного университета, изучаете русскую литературу. Напишите электронное письмо профессору Олегу Александровичу Королеву, преподавателю русской литературы, с просьбой назначить собеседование по поводу вашей семестровой работы.

Discourse completion task – English translation

Instructions: Carefully read the four scenarios below. To respond to each scenario, create an email message in Russian. Send your message to yourprof2012@yahoo.com. Please use the same email that you provided in the questionnaire.

#### **Situation 1**

Write an email to Professor Ludmila Petrovna Gavrilova at St. Petersburg University, the oldest university in Russia, in which you request information about the graduate program in Russian Literature and ask for her opinion of what your chances are to be accepted.

#### **Situation 2**

You completed your undergraduate degree in history at Moscow State University. Write an email to Professor Andrey Sergeevich Dvornichenko, with whom you took a Russian history class, in which you ask him to write you a letter of recommendation for a scholarship.

**Situation 3**

You are studying at Novosibirsk State University, one of the top universities in Russia. Write an email to Professor Ilya Alekseevich Grekov, with whom you are taking an advanced Russian literature class, in which you request an appointment to discuss some questions you have about the class.

**Situation 4**

You are a student at Tomsk State University, and you are taking a Russian literature class. Write an email to Professor Oleg Aleksandrovich Korolev, who is teaching the class, and request an appointment to discuss your final paper.