

**POLITENESS STRATEGIES AMONG NATIVE AND ROMANIAN  
SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH**

**By**

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Does politeness exist in every language? Conventional wisdom makes us expect it to, and research seems to confirm this assumption. However, even the most casual observer of language will notice that politeness strategies differ markedly from one language to another, from one dialect or social grouping to another. Whenever people carry over strategies from one group inappropriately to another group, misunderstanding may occur, and the politeness message is often lost.

If we assume that politeness strategies in the Romanian language differ from those normally used in the English language, then we must ask ourselves, are Romanians learning the strategies of English or are they simply carrying over their own autochthonous strategies? We may go even further and ask whether Romanian teachers of English are aware of these strategies and whether they have devised methods to convey this awareness to students. During the past year I have begun to study these questions and my presentation at the 1994 TETA Conference was an opportunity to show some preliminary findings and to invite exploration of some areas that need further examination.

I decided to compare Romanian English politeness strategies with those of American and British native speakers. I knew this would not be as easy as asking people what strategies they use, because people are often quite unable to explain politeness. They also tend to claim to be more "polite" than they actually are. As W. Labov writes in *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972), "people's overt claims about language are inaccurate and often contradict their own actual usage." Therefore, I knew I would have to rely on some kind of discourse analysis study that could take this bias into account. I designed a questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to record what they would say in a variety of situations. It was not an perfect solution, but it did promise to give results that could be measured and rated in comparison to each other.

I limited myself to investigating the speech of English teachers, both native speakers and Romanians. I was thus assured of comparable levels in education, social status and age. I was not able to include equal numbers of males and females, but I can estimate that both native speaker and non-native speaker groups included a majority of women. On the questionnaire they were asked to supply one utterance for each of twenty different situations. There were forty

four respondents, twenty two of them Romanians, eleven “European” native speakers (England, Scotland and Ireland) and eleven “North American” native speakers (USA and Canada).

At the same time, I was reading up on the available literature concerning pragmalinguistics and discourse studies. I came upon an interesting article, “Saying Please,” by Ron White in the *ELT Journal*, July 1993, in which he discusses a study showing a heavy reliance on the word “please” in offers by Japanese speakers of English. The word “please” marks a request in English, so the use of it in an offer confuses the hearer, making him feel pressured to accept the offer. Thus, the inappropriate use of please had actually caused the users to sound rude to native speakers.

Another article, “Teaching Speech Act Behavior to Non-native Speakers”, Elite Olshtain and Andrew Cohen (*in Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, Marianne Celce-Murcia, editor) begins with a vignette about a European flight attendant walking down the airplane aisle saying, “Coffee, please!” Olshtain and Cohen claim that this was function interference from another language.

Would I find inappropriate use and/or overuse of “please” among the Romanian speakers of English? I decided to make this my first focus of investigation.

17 out of 20 situations on the questionnaires could be classified as either requests or offers, both formal and informal. I found the use of please with the following frequency:

**Table 1:** Frequency of the word “please” in polite utterances among Romanian Non-Native English Speakers (Ro.NNs), European Native Speakers of English (EUNNs) and North American Native Speakers of English (No.ANSs)

	<u>Ro. NNs</u>	<u>Eu. NSs</u>	<u>No.ANSs</u>
Formal requests	63.6%	54.5%	65.9%
Informal requests	40.15%	07.5%	13.6%
Formal offers	75%	22.7%	36.3%
Informal offers	15.4%	0%	0.2%

Interestingly, there was little difference between native and non-native speakers in the use of please in formal requests, but there was significant difference in informal ones. Considering the small sample of native speakers, I don’t think

that we can consider the differences between North Americans and European native speakers to be of real significance, as they probably fall within a margin of error.

It may seem surprising that the native speakers had any use of please in formal offers, since we have already been led to believe that please is inappropriate in offers. However, Ron White does explain that please is sometimes used in offers to express sincerity. In fact, all of the instances of please by native speakers in formal offers cited above, were in a situation offering a seat to an elderly lady on a bus: a situation in which sincerity might be a concern. The use of please in informal offers showed a significant difference, there was only one native speaker use of please out of a total of 110 opportunities. In contrast 17 uses of please out of 110 opportunities were recorded for Romanian speakers of English.

But how important is this? Is this the only difference in the utterances? Were the non-native speakers simply using vocabulary to express politeness where natives speakers were using paralinguistic elements like intonation and gestures to express it? I decided to pick two situations, one request and one offer, where there was a wide difference between native speakers and non-native speakers to see what other linguistic variations existed.

In discussing various types of requests, Olshtain and Cohen say that these can be categorized as either impositives (imperatives and similar utterances), conventionalized routines and indirect hints. These are often adorned with softeners such as "please", or aggravators, such as "right away".

I chose one informal request, "Ask a friend to show you a map they are reading," and I categorized the utterances I found in order to get a list of speech act sets, listing Impositives and formulaic speech, so-called "Conventionalized routines," separately.

**Table 2. Informal Request:**

"Ask a friend to show you a map they are reading."

**A. European Native Speakers:**

<b>Impositives:</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Softener:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Let's see	III		
2. Give it here!	I		
3. Let's have a look.	I		

**Conventionalized routines:**

1. Can I have a look?	IV	I	I
2. Could you give me a look?	I	I	
3. Could I see that?	I		

**B. North American Native Speakers:**

<b>Impositives:</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Softener:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Let's see	II		

**Conventionalized routines:**

1. Could I see that map?	V	IV	I
2. Can I see the map?	II	I	
3. May I see the map?	I	I	
4. Could I take a look?	I		

**C. List of Softeners for both EuNS and No.ANS:**

1. for a moment/second/minute	VI
2. a wee look	I
3. when you're finished	I

I was not surprised to find that I had no indirect hints. These hints are quite dependent on context for their meanings, and considering that the respondents were working with questionnaires completely out of context, they did not come up with any indirect hints. Native speakers used impositives 31.7% of the time, and non-natives used them 22.7% of the time. For natives, the remaining utterances could be grouped into three basic routines: Can/could/may I see that/the map?; Can/could/may I take/have a look?; Can/could you give me a look? There were hardly any "pleases" attached to these, but there were a number of other softeners, mostly the pattern, "for a moment/minute/second."

**Table 2 (cont'd)****D. Romanian Speakers of English:**

<b>Impositives:</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Softener:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
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- |                                     |    |  |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|--|----|
| 1. Show me the map (you're reading) | IV |  | IV |
| 2. Let me have a look.              | I  |  |    |

**Conventionalized routines:**

- |   |     |    |   |
|---|-----|----|---|
| 1. Will you be so kind as to show me the map?   | III |    |   |
| 2. May I see it?/have a look?                   | III |    | I |
| 3. Can you show me the map?                     | II  | II |   |
| 4. Could you show me the map?                   | II  |    | I |
| 5. Will you show me the map?                    | II  |    | I |
| 6. Would you like to show me the map?           | I   |    | I |
| 7. May I have it?                               | I   | II |   |
| 8. Do you mind if I ask you to show me the map? | I   |    | I |
| 9. Could you let us have a look?                | I   | I  |   |
| 10. Can I see that?                             | I   |    |   |

**E. Softeners: Romanian Speakers of English:**

- |  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. I'm interested in maps/the map                | II |
| 2. I would like to have a look at that map, too. | I  |
| 3. for a moment/several minutes                  | II |
| 4. Thank you!                                    | I  |

The Romanian routines were far more varied, so that "conventionalized" hardly seemed to be the right description at all. "Will you be so kind as to show me the map?"; "May I have it for several minutes?"; "Could you let us have a look?"; "Do you mind if I ask you to show me the map you are reading?" Moreover, these were richly adorned with pleases but with few other softeners, the only ones being, "I'm interested in maps," and the pre-emptive "Thank you!"

Thus we begin to understand that the heavy use of please by the non-native speakers might be a function of their weak command of other softener options. The richness of routines does mark their utterances as non-native, but is that necessarily bad? The native speakers seemed downright inarticulate and dull in comparison.

Next, I chose a formal offer for in-depth study. In this situation respondents would offer a guest some cake at a formal dinner party. I found that here again there were impositives and conventionalized routines. Of the 22 native speakers, only one used an impositive: "Have some cake, please". All of the others used routines, with 14 of them (63.6%) using, "Would you like some cake?" There were only two instances of "please" (09%) and no additional adornments.

**Table 3. Formal Offer:**

"You have formal dinner guests. Offer some cake to a guest."

**A. European Native Speakers of English:**

<b>Conventionalized routines:</b>	<b>Freq.:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Would you like some cake?	VI	
2. Would you care for some cake?	I	
3. Will you have a piece of cake?	I	
4. Can I offer you some cake?	I	I
5. Can I tempt you to some cake?	I	
6. Cake?	I	

**B. North American Native Speakers of English:**

<b>Impositives:</b>	<b>Freq:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Have some cake.	I	I

<b>Conventionalized routines:</b>	<b>Freq:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Would you like some cake?	VIII	
2. May I serve you some cake?	I	
3. Could I interest you in some cake?	I	

The Romanian respondents also used, "Would you like some cake?" but only 27.2% of the time, and with a significant difference: they usually attached "please" to it. There were other conventionalized routines, but the real story was in the impositives. Whereas there was only one impositive among the 22 native speakers, there were 10 among the 22 non-native speakers: "Have/take/try some cake", "Help yourself to some cake", etc. Furthermore, these 10 responses were

embellished with "please" in 8 cases and with other adornments which apparently functioned as encouragers an additional 8 times. Here the Romanian speakers had no trouble finding words for these "encouragers". "It's home-made"; "They're delicious/very good/lovely"; "Here you are!"

**Table 3. (cont'd)**

**C. Romanian Speakers of English:**

<b>Impositives:</b>	<b>Freq:</b>	<b>Encouragers:</b>	<b>Please:</b>
1. Have some/one of these	V	III	IV
2. Take some/a piece of cake	II	II	II
3. Help yourself to a piece of cake	II	I	I
4. Try some of this cake	I	II	I

**Conventionalized routines:**

1. Would you like some cake?	VI		IV
2. Will you have some cake?	II		I
3. Would you have some cake?	I		I
4. Would you care for some cake?	I		
5. Might I offer a cake	I	I	
6. Any more cake?	I		
7. Do you like cake?	I	I	

**D. Encouragers. Romanian Speakers of English:**

1. Here it is! / Here you are!	II
2. Will you?	II
3. It's very good, homemade	I
4. Homemade	I
5. Delicious	I
6. Really! They are lovely	I
7. I assure you they are delicious	I
8. There are some nice cakes there	I

Thus, the Romanian speakers had not only largely rejected the native's penchant for simple, unadorned yes/no offers using modal verbs, they chose to embellish



their impositives with a whole array of encouragers. Only one of these, "Here you are!" seemed to be a case of linguistic transfer (Romanian, "Poftiti!"). The rest of them all seem to be meant to encourage a positive response. In this case, I feel that there is a clear example of communication breakdown, given that these encouragers are meant by the Romanians to be a mark of politeness, but for the native speaker of English they have the opposite effect. It was similar to the Japanese case: by using the strategies associated with request speech acts, the Romanians here seemed to have turned an offer into a request, so that native speakers would feel that they were being asked to consume the cake not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the host.

The Romanian respondents might challenge this analysis, saying, "But this is Romanian culture, this is how one acts at the dinner table in Romania." In fact, this is a perfectly valid argument. We must ask ourselves, which cultural norms take precedent, those belonging to the speaker's native culture or those associated with the language he or she is speaking? That is a question with no clear answer, for from one situation to the next, we might have different priorities. However, what we should all remember, both native speakers of a language and non-native speakers of that language, is that politeness is not usually analyzed so explicitly; normally it is something we feel instinctively and cannot and do not explain. If we want to communicate and comprehend politeness effectively, we have to be very much aware of cultural norms, and be ready to accept and read behavior that may be quite different from our own. Simply speaking the words of a language is not nearly enough.

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