

# **A Pragmatic Study on Requests: A Comparison between Japanese and British English**

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## **1. Introduction**

Many studies on requests and comparative studies between Japanese and British English have been conducted (e.g., Fukushima, 1996b; 1997 and 1999). In the studies by Fukushima, more direct requests were used in Japanese than British English. This finding contradicts such stereotype as "Japanese are indirect," which Rose (1996) raised a question on its validity. The finding by Kimura (2000), which investigated the use of requests in Japanese, however, showed that the most frequently used requesting strategies were conventionally indirect requests and direct requests were not often used.

Based on the results of the previous studies, this paper aims to investigate whether there are any differences in requesting strategies in Japanese and those in British English, and if so, how the requesting strategies differ.

## **2. Requests**

In this section, we will review some definitions and classifications of request types and request strategies used in previous studies, and then clarify what we mean by each request type and strategy which we will use in this study.

Brown and Levinson distinguish between going on record and off record. An actor has gone on record when there is just one unambiguously attributable intention with which witnesses would concur; whereas when there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention an actor has gone off record in doing A (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 68-69). There are two ways of going on record: (1) without redressive action, baldly; and (2) with redressive action. Doing an act baldly, without redress, involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible (for example, for a request, saying 'Do X!') (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69). Following Brown and Levinson, we will call this type direct requests.

Another category of on record strategies is with redress. By redressive action Brown and Levinson (1987: 69-70) mean action that “gives face” to the addressee, showing that face threat is not intended. Such redressive action takes one of two forms, negative politeness or positive politeness, depending on which aspect of face (negative or positive) is being attended to. In negative politeness, there is a tension between (a) the desire to go on record as a prerequisite to being seen to pay face, and (b) the desire to go off record to avoid imposing. A compromise is reached in conventionalised indirectness, because whatever the indirect mechanism used to do an FTA, once it is fully conventionalised as a way of doing that FTA, it is no longer off record. Following Brown and Levinson, we will call this type conventionally indirect requests.

Requests which are not on record we will call off-record requests, following Brown and Levinson (1987: 211), who explain that a communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the speaker. If a speaker wants to do an FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, s/he can do it off record and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret the utterance.

The above three types of requests, direct, conventionalised indirect and off-record requests have been used in previous studies, but there are some inconsistencies in what the researchers in previous studies mean by those requests and in the terminology.

Trosborg (1995) uses the terms, direct, conventionally indirect, and indirect requests, suggesting the following four categories and eight strategies of requests, using the situation, “Speaker requests to borrow Hearer’s car.” (1995: 205)

Cat. I	Indirect request	
	Str. 1 Hints (mild)	I have to be at the airport in half an hour.
	(strong)	My car has broken down.
		Will you be using your car tonight?
Cat. II	Conventionally indirect (hearer-oriented conditions)	
	Str. 2 Ability	Could you lend me your car?
	Willingness	Would you lend me your car?
	Permission	May I borrow your car?
	Str. 3 Suggestory formulae	How about lending me your car?
Cat. III	Conventionally indirect (speaker-based conditions)	
	Str. 4 Wishes	I would like to borrow your car.
	Str. 5 Desires/needs	I want/need to borrow your car.
Cat. IV	Direct requests	
	Str. 6 Obligation	You must/have to lend me your car.
	Str. 7 Performatives (hedged)	I would like to ask you to lend me your car.
	(unhedged)	I ask/require you to lend me your car.
	Str. 8 Imperatives	Lend me your car.
	Elliptical phrases	Your car (please).

**Table 1. Request Strategies by Trosborg** (Adapted from Trosborg, 1995: 205)

Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) use direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect requests and give the following examples, as shown in tables 2 and 3.

Direct	Show me the book. (less formal) Please show me the book. (more formal)
Conventionally indirect	'Ability' Could you show me the book? (less formal) I was wondering if you could show me the book. (more formal) 'Desire' I want you to show me the book. (less formal) I would like you to show me the book. (more formal) 'Willingness' Will you show me the book? (less formal) Would you mind showing me the book? (more formal)
Non-conventionally indirect	Are you through with the book? (less formal) Were you finished with the book yet? (more formal)

**Table 2. English requests by Rinnert and Kobayashi** (Adapted from Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999: 1177)

Direct	<i>Sono hon misete.</i> (informal) <i>Sono hon misete kudasai.</i> (formal)
Conventionally indirect	'Desire' <i>Sono hon misete hoshiin dakedo.</i> (informal) <i>Sono hon misete hoshiin desukedo.</i> (formal) <i>Sono hon misete itadakitaiin desukedo.</i> (very formal) 'Willingness' <i>Sono hon misete kureru?</i> (informal) <i>Sono hon misete kuremasen ka?</i> (formal) <i>Sono hon misete itadakemasen ka?</i> (very formal)
Non-conventionally indirect	<i>Sono hon mou sunda?</i> (informal) <i>Sono hon mou o-sumini narimashita ka?</i> (very formal)

**Table 3. Japanese requests by Rinnert and Kobayashi** (Adapted from Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999: 1179)

From the above review, it can be said that there are some inconsistencies in what they mean by direct and conventionally indirect requests. Trosborg (1995) includes hedged and unhedged performatives in direct requests, whereas Rinnert and Koba-

yashi (1999) include hedged performative in conventionally indirect requests, using the term 'Desire.' Those strategies are found in Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) who conducted a major research on requests and apologies in eight languages or varieties. They use nine request strategies which are ordered according to decreasing degree of directness (See table 4).

Request strategy	Examples
Mood derivable	Leave me alone. Clean up the kitchen. Please move your car.
Explicit performatives	I am asking you to move your car.
Hedged performative	I must/have to ask you to clean the kitchen right now. I'd like to/wanted to ask you to present your paper a week earlier.
Locution derivable	Madam, you'll have to /should/must/ought to move your car.
Want statement	I'd like to borrow your notes for a little while.
Suggestory formula	How about cleaning up the kitchen/Why don't you get lost.
Preparatory	Can I borrow your notes? Could you possibly get your assignment done in this week? I was wondering if you would give me a lift.
Strong hint	(Intent: getting a lift home) Will you be going home now?
Mild hint	(Intent: getting hearer to clean the kitchen) You've been busy here, haven't you?

**Table 4. Requesting strategies in CCSARP** (Adapted from Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 278-281)

Blum-Kulka and House (1989: 123-124), using CCSARP coding scheme, classify the first five strategies as the impositive, strategies 6 and 7 as the conventionally indirect strategy type and the last two as hints or nonconventionally indirect.

Considering some inconsistencies of the strategies of conventionally indirect requests as reviewed in the above, we would like to include strategies 1, 2, 3 and 4 in direct requests, following Trosborg (1995) and Blum-Kulka and House (1989), as these strategies are pretty direct on the scale. We would like to include strategies 5, 6 and 7 in conventionally indirect requests, following Trosborg (1995) and Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999). We will include strategies 8 and 9 in non-conventionally indirect requests. There were no inconsistencies of the strategies of non-conventionally indirect requests, i. e., hints, among the researchers (See table 5).

Request Types	Request Strategies	Examples
I. Direct request	1. Mood derivable 2. Explicit performative 3. Hedged performative 4. Locution derivable	Clean up the kitchen. I am asking you to move your car. I'd like to/wanted to ask you to present your paper a week earlier. Madam you'll have to move your car.
II. Conventionally indirect request	5. Want statement 6. Suggestory formula 7. Preparatory	I'd like to borrow your notes for a little while. How about cleaning up the kitchen? Can I borrow your notes? Could you possibly get your assignment done this week? I was wondering if you would give me a lift.
III. Non-conventionally indirect request	8. Strong hint 9. Mild hint	Will you be going home now? You've been busy here, haven't you?

**Table 5. Request Types and Strategies Used in This Study**

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data Elicitation

A closed role play was used in this study. In role plays, "the respondents are asked to take a particular role requiring the performance of a speech act. ... If the respondent is given very few or no opportunities to interact with the interlocutor, the task is called closed role play." (Sasaki, 1998: 459) A closed role play was chosen as the data elicitation technique in this study, because we wanted to elicit spoken data. As a method to elicit data, discourse completion tests have been frequently used, because it is easy to gather large amounts of data and it is possible to control the variables. However, the validity of discourse completion tests are questioned when the spoken data are elicited through written discourse completion tests. By the use of role plays, this kind of limitation can be avoided.

### **3. 2. Instruments**

Fifteen request situations (See Appendix) which were taken from the field notes by Fukushima were used. These situations occurred in students' life. Since the subjects in this study were all students, they did not have to play the roles which were so distant to them (e.g., the role of policeman in Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) in this study.

### **3. 3. Procedure**

The subjects were presented with each situation one by one in a randomised order, which was written on a sheet of paper in the mother tongue of the subjects. They were asked to read the situation and utter how they make requests in each situation in their mother tongue. Their utterances were recorded and transcribed.

### **3. 4. Subjects**

Nineteen Japanese undergraduates (Mean age: 21. 6; two males and seventeen females), who lived in Japan, and twenty British undergraduates (Mean age: 22. 9; eight males and twelve females), who lived in England, served as the subjects in this study.

### **3. 5. Data Analysis**

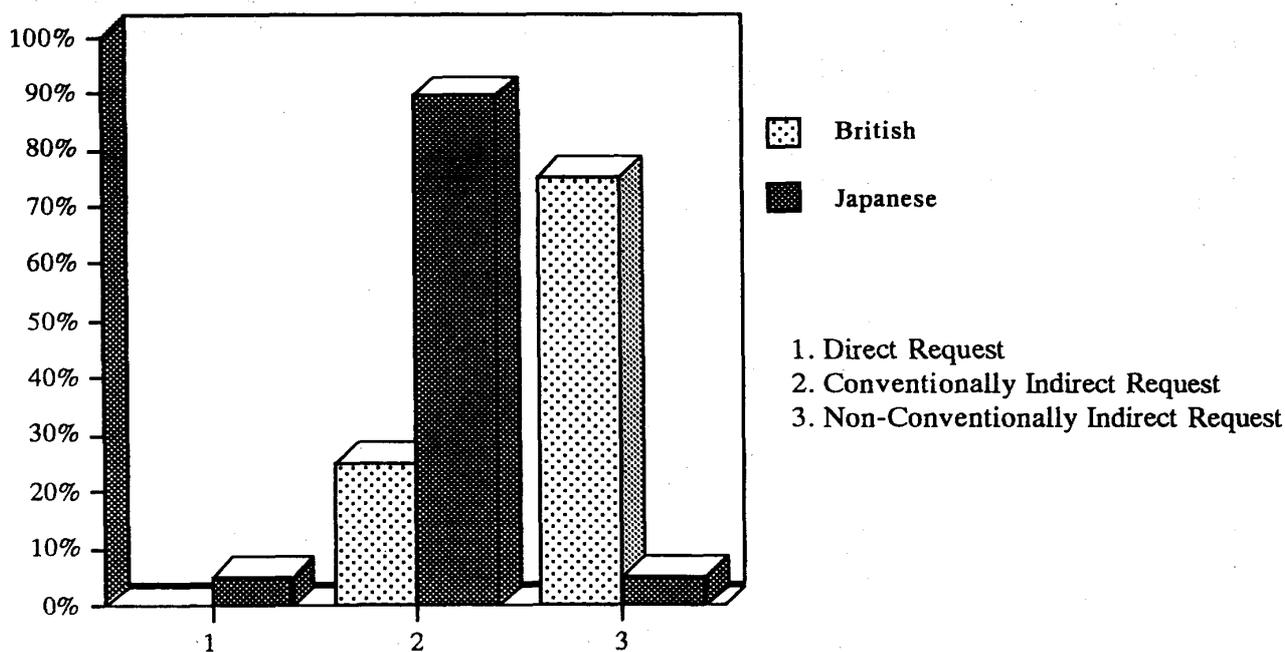
The transcribed utterances were analysed according to the categorisation of request types and strategies (See table 5) which were noted in Section 2. In analysing requests, there are many elements (e.g., structures of the Head Act and Supportive Move(s); Strategy Types of the Head Act; Forms of the Head Act; Types of Supportive Move(s); Directness Levels of the Head Act), but in this short paper, the main focus was on the Strategy Types of the Head Act, which is "the minimal unit which can realize a request; it is the core of the request sentence." (Blum-Kulka, et al., 1989: 275) In order to investigate whether there are any differences in the choice of request types between Japanese and British English, statistical analyses (Mann-Whitney U tests) (See Hatch and Lazaraton, 1991: 274) were conducted.

#### 4. Results

The results of Mann-Whitney U tests showed there was a significant difference\* in the choice of request types between Japanese and British subjects in situation 7 (See table 6, graph 1). British subjects selected more higher-numbered strategies than Japanese subjects. Since the request types were arranged from (1) direct requests, (2) conventionally indirect requests and (3) non-conventionally indirect requests, this result means that British subjects chose more indirect request types than Japanese subjects. British subjects chose non-conventionally indirect requests most (75%), followed by conventionally indirect requests (25%). British subjects did not choose direct requests at all, whereas Japanese subjects chose direct requests.

Request Types <sup>(1)</sup>	Request Strategies <sup>(2)</sup>	E <sup>(3)</sup> (%)	J <sup>(4)</sup> (%)	Examples (English)	Examples (Japanese)
I. DR	1	0	5.3		<i>chotto kashiteyo</i> (Lend me small amount of money.)
II. CI	2	0	0	Could I borrow some change please?	<i>juen kashite kure nai?</i> (Couldn't you lend me ten yen?)
	3	0	0		
	4	0	0		
	5	0	0		
	6	0	0		
	7	25	89.5		
III. Non-CI	8	75	5.3	Have you got any change for a five pound note?	<i>juen motte nai?</i> (Don't you have ten yen?)
	9	0	0		

**Table 6. Results in Situation 7**



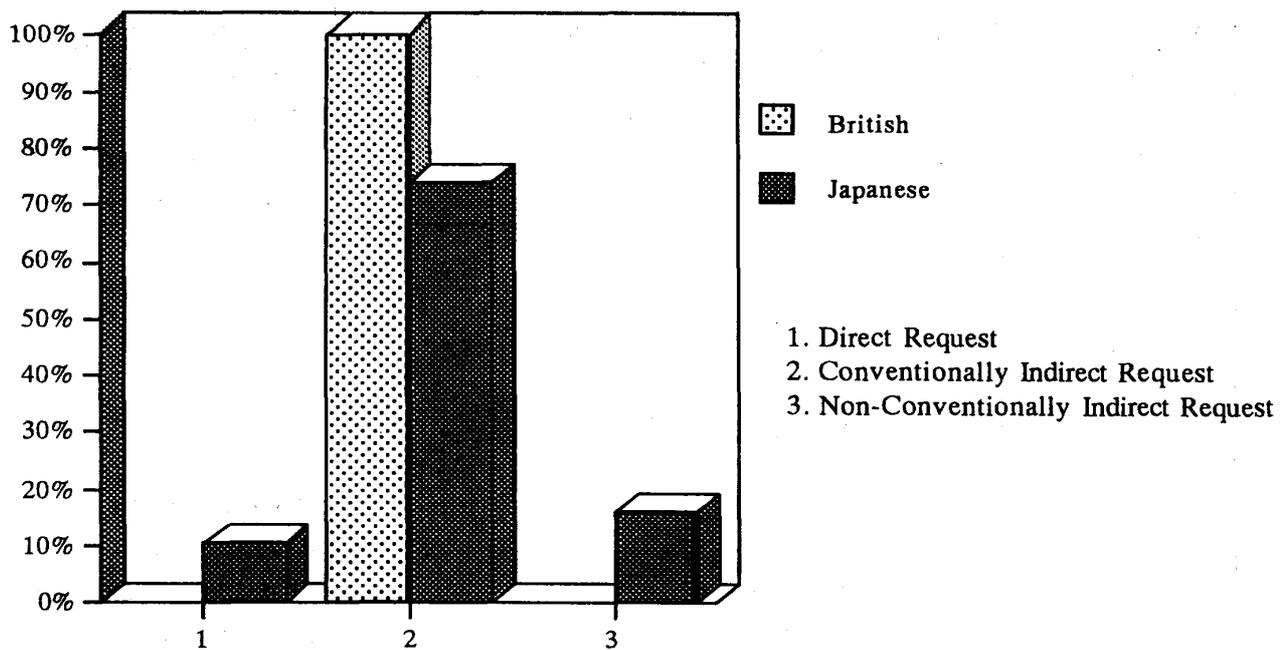
Graph 1. Situation 7

Although there were no statistically significant differences in the choice of request types between British and Japanese subjects in situations 2, 4, 9 and 11, there seem to be some important findings in these situations. Thus the results which were analysed according to table 5 will be presented here (tables 7, 8, 9 & 10).

In situation 2, the major difference between the results of Japanese subjects and those of the British was that Japanese subjects used direct requests (10.5%), whereas British subjects did not employ direct requests at all. The most frequently used request type was conventionally indirect both by British and Japanese subjects (100% and 73.7%, respectively). However, the percentage of the use of conventionally indirect requests by Japanese subjects was smaller than that by English subjects (See table 7, graph 2).

Request Types <sup>(1)</sup>	Request Strategies <sup>(2)</sup>	E <sup>(3)</sup> (%)	J <sup>(4)</sup> (%)	Examples (English)	Examples (Japanese)
I. DR	1	0	10.5		<i>shio kashi te</i> (Lend me some salt. )
II. CI	2	0	0		
	3	0	0		
	4	0	0		
	5	0	0		
	6	0	0		
	7	100	73.7	Could I borrow some salt please? I couldn't borrow some salt could I?	<i>shio kashite kure ru?</i> (Could you lend me some salt?) <i>shio kashi te kure nai kana?</i> (Couldn't you lend me some salt?)
	III. Non-CI	8	0	15.8	
9		0	0		<i>shioga nai</i> (I've run out of salt.)

**Table 7. Results in Situation 2**

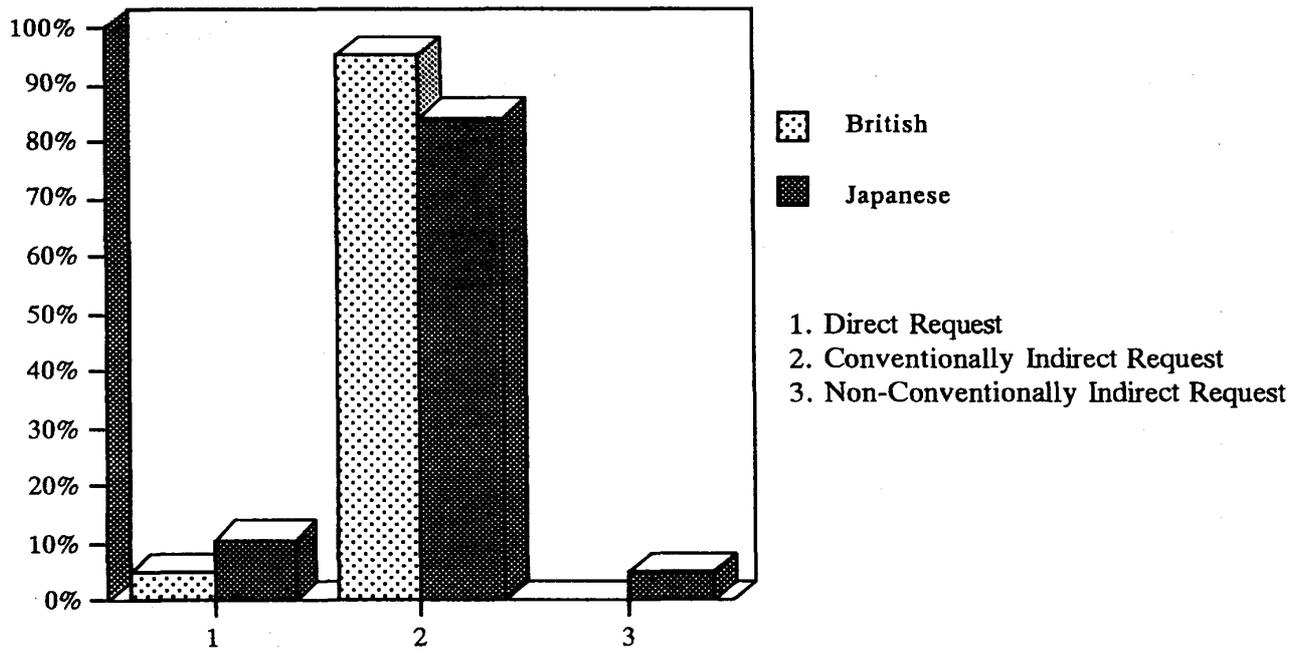


Graph 2. Situation 2

In situation 4, Japanese subjects used direct requests more frequently than British subjects. The most frequently used request type was conventionally indirect both by British and Japanese subjects (95% and 73.7%, respectively). However, British subjects chose more conventionally indirect requests than Japanese subjects, while Japanese subjects having used more direct requests than British subjects (See table 8, graph 3).

Request Types <sup>(1)</sup>	Request Strategies <sup>(2)</sup>	E <sup>(3)</sup> (%)	J <sup>(4)</sup> (%)	Examples (English)	Examples (Japanese)
I. DR	1	5	10.5	Give us a hand with the suitcases.	<i>nimotsu hakobu no tetsudatte</i> (Give me a hand with my luggage.)
II. CI	2	0	0		
	3	0	0		
	4	0	0		
	5	0	10.5		<i>chotto tetsudatte hoshiin dakedo</i> (I'd like you to give me a hand.)
	6	0	0		
	7	95	73.7	Could you give me a hand with my suitcase please? You couldn't give me a hand with this could you?	<i>chotto tetsudatte kurenai kana?</i> (Couldn't you give me a hand?) <i>isshoni motte kurenai?</i> (Couldn't you carry this with me?)
III. Non-CI	8	0	5.3		<i>kono nimotsu omokute hitoride motenai kara</i> (This luggage is so heavy that I can't carry it by myself.)
	9	0	0		

Table 8. Results in Situation 4

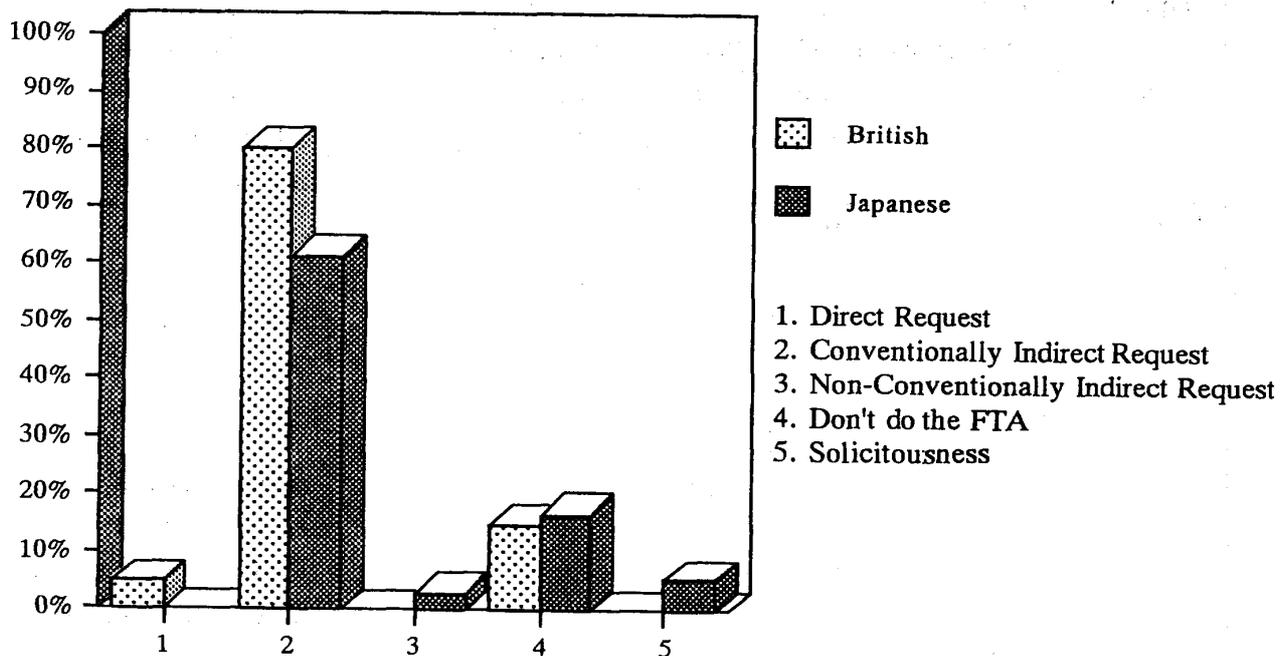


Graph 3. Situation 4

In this study, we analysed the data based on request types and strategies presented in table 5. However, in situation 9, there were some strategies which did not fall into any of the category as shown in table 5. They were: (1) Don't do the FTA (See Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69) and (2) Solicitousness (See Discussion). There were some subjects (both British and Japanese) who said they would not say/do anything. Those were categorised in "Don't do the FTA". There were some Japanese subjects (5.6%) who demonstrated solicitousness (See table 9, graph 4).

Request Types <sup>(1)</sup>	Request Strategies <sup>(2)</sup>	E <sup>(3)</sup> (%)	J <sup>(4)</sup> (%)	Examples (English)	Examples (Japanese)
I. DR	1	5	0	Come on get them out, get them out.	
II. CI	2	0	0		
	3	0	0		
	4	0	0		
	5	0	0		
	6	0	0		
	7	80	61.1	Do you think you could wash up your dishes? Would you mind if I moved your dishes?	<i>shokkio aratte morae masuka?</i> (Could you wash up your dishes?)
III. Non-CI	8	0	16.7		<i>(kono shokki) dousureba iikana?</i> (What should I do with your dishes?)
	9	0	0		
IV. Don't do the FTA		15	16.7		
Solicitousness		0	5.6		<i>isshoni aratte okouka?</i> (Shall I wash up your dishes, too?)

**Table 9. Results in Situation 9**

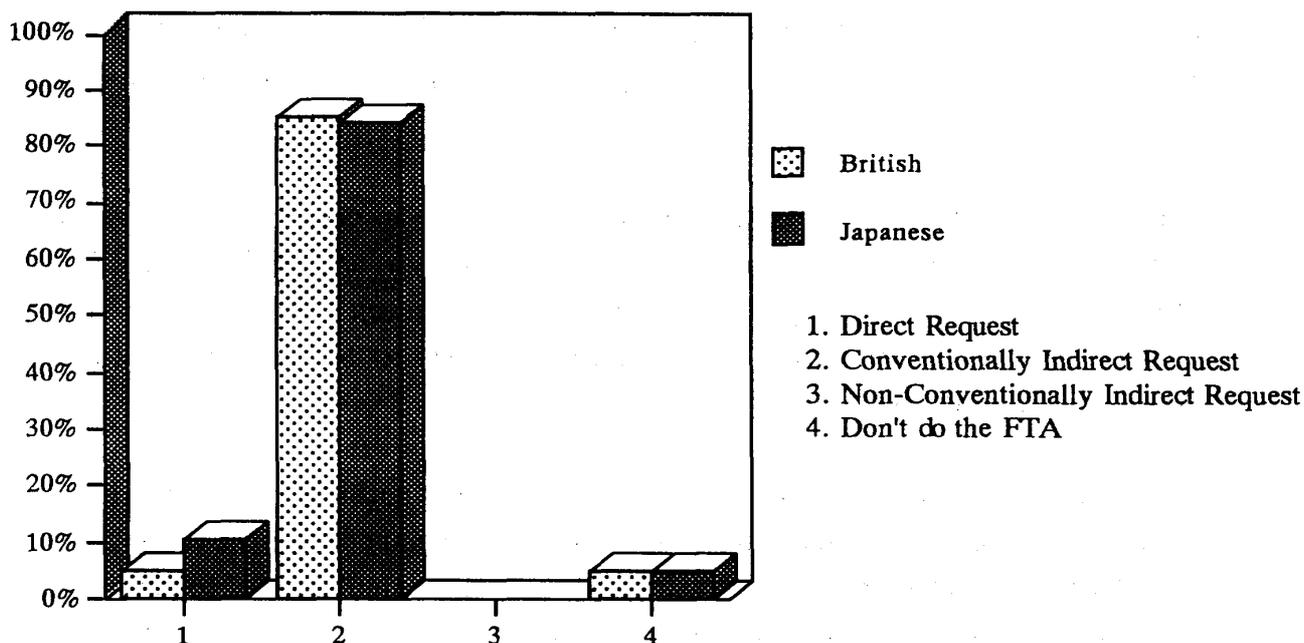


Graph 4. Situation 9

In situation 11, Japanese subjects used more direct requests than British subjects, although the most frequently used types by both British and Japanese subjects were conventionally indirect requests. There were some subjects who chose not to do say/do anything (Don't do the FTA) as was found in situation 9 (See table 10, graph 5).

Request Types <sup>(1)</sup>	Request Strategies <sup>(2)</sup>	E <sup>(3)</sup> (%)	J <sup>(4)</sup> (%)	Examples (English)	Examples (Japanese)
I. DR	1	5.3	10.5	Put that music off or I'll be very nasty to you.	<i>oto sagete</i> (Turn down your music.)
II. CI	2	0	0	Do you think you could turn the music down? Would you mind turning your music down please?	<i>onryouo sagete hoshiin dakedo</i> (I'd like you to turn down your music.) <i>oto chiisaku shite moratte ii?</i> (Would you mind turning down your music?) <i>oto chiisaku shite kureru?</i> (Would you turn down your music?)
	3	0	0		
	4	0	0		
	5	0	15.8		
	6	0	0		
	7	89.5	68.4		
III. Non-CI	8	0	0		
IV. Don't do the FTA		5.3	5.3		

**Table 10. Results in Situation 11**



Graph 5. Situation 11

## 5. Discussion

Although there was a statistically significant difference in the choice of request types between British and Japanese subjects in only one situation, there was a tendency that Japanese subjects chose more direct request types than British subjects. In situation 7 in which there was a statistically significant difference, 5.3% of Japanese subjects chose direct requests whereas no British subjects chose direct requests. Most of British subjects chose non-conventionally indirect requests. In situations 2, 4 and 11 (see tables 7, 8 and 9, graphs 2, 3 and 4) Japanese subjects chose more direct requests than British subjects. This result contradicts Kimura's (2000) findings. In Kimura (2000) Japanese subjects did not employ direct requests. The degree of imposition in those situations was relatively high. For example, in a situation that S asks a close friend to get a concert ticket, the subjects evaluated the degree of imposition as 3.3 on a five-point scale. This can be considered to be the high degree of imposition. This may be why the subjects in Kimura (2000) did not use direct requests, having used conventionally indirect requests frequently (95%).

In the situations in which Japanese subjects chose more direct request types than British subjects in this study, the degree of imposition was fairly low. The results of Fukushima (1999) showed that Japanese subjects selected more direct requests than British subjects when the requester was higher in status than the requestee; the requester and the requestee were equal in status; and the degree of imposition was considered to be low. All the situations used in this study were among equals. The degree

of imposition was the only factor which may have influenced the choice of request types. For example, the degree of imposition in situation 7 is considered to be low (asking for some salt). Therefore, it can be said that the degree of imposition is closely related to the request types.

There were some subjects (both British and Japanese) who chose not to say/do anything (e.g. situations 9 and 11) and we classified this type as "Don't do the FTA," Brown and Levinson's fifth strategy. Brown and Levinson (1987) did not discuss this strategy very much, however, this strategy needs to be further investigated, taking the following into consideration.

... Tanaka (1993) discusses two sorts of 'saying nothing' ... There are times when the speaker decides to say nothing and genuinely wishes to let the matter drop; there are other occasions when an individual decides to say nothing ... but still wishes to achieve the effect which the speech act would have achieved had it been uttered. (Thomas, 1995: 174-175)

In situation 9, Japanese subjects offered to do something themselves (e.g., washing the dishes) by saying "issho ni arratte okouka? (lit. "Shall I wash your dishes, too?") ); instead of making a request (e.g. asking the other party to wash the dishes). This can be categorised as "solicitousness" which is defined as "inferring the other party's wishes and trying to do something to improve the circumstance for others" (See Fukushima, 1995; 1996a). Solicitousness was not included in our request categorisation, but this may be an important factor which can differentiate request types in different cultures such as British and Japanese.

In all the fifteen situations, both British and Japanese subjects chose Preparatory (e.g. Could you possibly get your assignment done this week?) (See table 5) most frequently among the strategies in conventionally indirect requests. This result may imply that Preparatory can represent conventionally indirect requests both in English and Japanese. As was discussed in Section 2, there were some inconsistencies in what the researchers mean by conventionally indirect requests. What conventionally indirect requests mean and what kind of request strategies are included in conventionally indirect requests need to be further investigated.

In analysing data, we felt that there were more levels in Japanese than in English. This may be the same with formality level which Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999: 1182) confirmed that "Japanese perceptions of linguistic politeness depend heavily upon the formality level of the utterance, particularly in terms of morphologically encoded honorifics and verb endings." For example, the request form "... shite kureru kana"

which were frequently used by Japanese subjects (e.g. “shio kashite kureru kana” in situation 2) was categorised in conventionally indirect requests (strategy 7 in CCSARP categorisation) seems to have a connotation to show familiarity between S and H. There seems to be a difference in formality level between this kind of requests with “shio kashite kureru kana” and such a request as “shokki o aratte morae masuka?” (lit. “Could you wash the dishes? ”), which sounds more formal in Japanese.

## 6. Conclusion

This short paper attempted to clarify what each request type (i.e., direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect requests) means and what kind of requesting strategies are included in these three request types, and investigated the requesting types and strategies in Japanese and British English based on our categorisation of request types and strategies.

From this study, it can be said that in future studies the following need further investigation.

- A correlation between the use of direct requests and the degree of imposition of the requested act;
- A categorisation of request types and strategies especially for the comparison among different languages; and
- A thorough investigation on formality level in Japanese

\* $z=3.871$ ,  $p<.001$

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### (1) Request Types

I. DR: Direct Request

II. CI: Conventionally Indirect Request

III. Non-CI: Non-conventionally Indirect Request

### (2) Request Strategies

1. Mood derivable

6. Suggestory formula

2. Explicit performative

7. Preparatory

3. Hedged performative

8. Strong hint

4. Locution derivable

9. Mild hint

5. Want statement

(3) E: English

(4) J: Japanese

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## Appendix

### Situations used in this study

- Fifteen request situations were used in this study, but only the situations which were discussed in Section 5 are listed here.
- An alphabetical letter "B" was used to name a person (a requestee) in the situations, in order to avoid the influence of gender.
- The following are the situations used in the English version. The situations were translated into Japanese when they were presented to Japanese subjects.

#### Situation 2

You are cooking in the kitchen. You realise you have run out of salt. B is also cooking in the kitchen.

#### Situation 4

You live on the second floor of a students' hall. You spent your vacation abroad and have just come back with a heavy suitcase. You cannot bring it upstairs by yourself.

B passes by.

**Situation 7**

You are in a phone booth. You check your pockets and find only a five-pound note. B passes by.

**Situation 9**

B invited his/her friends for dinner the night before. B left the dishes in the sink. This is not the first time B left the dishes in the sink. You want to wash your dishes.

**Situation 11**

B is playing music quite loud late at night. You are trying to get some sleep.

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