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For the favor of asking: An analysis of the favor as a speech act

For the favor of asking: An analysis of the favor as a speech act¹

Myra Goldschmidt

This paper examines 'the favor' as a form of speech behavior within the set of speech acts called 'requests.' Data on favor-asking was collected ethnographically and analyzed according to the status, gender, age, and social relationship of the participants involved. The analysis indicates that favors can serve various functions and demonstrate the relationship between speech behavior, social values and social structure.

Utterances ... are strategies when they are formulated in a particular way because it is projected that that will have social utility. This social utility of utterances is contingent, first of all, on how they are interpreted... Being understood in the desired way minimizes the chances of getting an unintended response and maximizes the chances of serving the speaker's personal or social purposes (Sanders, 1987).

Speech act² analysis has repeatedly shown that people within a society formulate their utterances according to the "rules, conventions, and principles" of that society in order to be interpreted in the intended way (Sanders, 1987). Appropriate use of speech acts, then, has great effectiveness as one of the major welding agents among people in a given society. If, however, the conventions of speech act usage are not followed, communication breaks down and miscommunication often occurs. Therefore a speech act may be viewed as "a social act within a social context, and performed against the background of a social framework, involving cooperation and coordination among its members and participants" (Filho, 1984:75-78). It is against this backdrop of the social framework that I propose to analyze the "favor" as a speech act.

The favor functions as just one component of a much broader speech act - requests. Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gerson define requests as "pre-event acts; they express the speaker's expectation toward some prospective action, verbal or nonverbal, on the part of the hearer" (Blum-kulka, Danet, and Gerson, 1985:2). The request, unlike the favor,

encompasses the spectrum from requests for action (Could you shut the door?) to requests for information (Can you tell me what time it is?). Like the favor, requests require a choice of strategy "in which the speaker assesses the degree of threat involved; the greater the threat is judged to be, the more face work will be needed" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:5). Because the favor is a risk taking speech act for both interlocutors, i.e., one's vulnerability is at stake, the favor may be interpreted as the most face-threatening act along the continuum of requests.

Both social tradition and the etymological origins of the word "favor" support the idea of requesting favors to deal with acts of kindness as well as face or countenance. The asking of favors is "face threatening" (Brown and Levinson, 1978:66-70) because the speaker "impinges on the hearer's claim for freedom of action and freedom from imposition" and so must employ strategies in order to "minimize the imposition involved in the act itself" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:2). For the purposes of this paper, I shall define a "favor" as asking someone to go out of his/her way to help the speaker - to do something for which his/her role does not obligate him/her to do - and for which he/she is free to refuse.

This paper has a twofold purpose: first it seeks to determine what the variables are that delimit how people ask favors of each other. Among the variables that will be evaluated are (a) status of each individual in the dyad or power relations within a situation, (b) social distance between the two participants or familiarity between the interlocutors, (c) degree of imposition of the favor or the size of the burden on the respondent, (d) gender of participants or influence of sex of the individual and who he/she asks favors of, (e) the age of the individual, which conditions the type of favors people can ask, and (f) degree of elaboration or the length and phraseology of the favor. Each of the variables will be examined as it operates within the work/school setting school and the social setting.

Second, this paper seeks to ascertain if the asking of favors in our society is a strategy-dominated speech act which manifests the social structure of relationships in

what Wolfson (1988) has called the "Bulge Theory." This theory explores the "difference between the speech behavior which middle class Americans use to intimates, status unequals, and strangers on the one hand, and to non-intimates, status equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other" (Wolfson, 1988:32), with the latter group creating a characteristic "bulge" in terms of greater elaboration of speech forms used in complimenting, favor asking, or other types of verbal negotiation [Editors' note: for a further discussion of "The Bulge," see Wolfson's preceeding paper].

The strategies people use to ask favors are at the heart of this speech act. Strategies function as lubricants in the way people interact with one another. They serve to increase social and professional contacts between people. Native speaker intuition within a speech community often gives insight into social behavior, and the way people ask favors of others reveals how this speech act is highly constrained by variables (a) through (f) as mentioned above.

These variables condition the verbal strategies that Brown and Levinson (1978) base on Goffman's (1967) notion of "face," which Goody calls "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Goody, 1978:66). Blum-Kulka et al. sum up the rationale behind these strategies:

When people interact they are concerned to present an image which has two aspects. The positive aspect of the speaker's face is his want to be approved of, to be seen as a supportive, contributing member of society. At the same time, though, a person wants to preseve some private space within which he has the right not to be imposed upon. This aspect of face is negative face (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:5).

People continually perform mental gymnastics in the asking of favors to minimize the threat to the interactant's face. Thus, the choice of strategy is a decision the speaker makes based on the degree of threat involved. Within the repertoire of strategies, "the very choice of variety conveys meaning and affects the meanings that can be conveyed" (Hymes, 1986:52).

Method

Data was collected by observing spontaneous speech in natural settings where none of the participants was aware of being observed. Data collection took place in the work/school settings of The University of Pennsylvania, Villanova University, Penn State University, Delaware County Campus and in various social settings in the Philadelphia area. In every case, only adults over the age of eighteen were documented.

In evaluating those favors which occurred in the work/school setting, the interlocutors were each ranked between one and ten depending on their *perceived* status:

- 1 - student clerical staff
- 2 - secretary
- 3 - undergraduate student
- 4 - graduate student
- 5 - resident/graduate assistant
- 6 - lecturer
- 7 - assistant professor
- 8 - associate professor
- 9 - full professor
- 10 - department chairman/dean

[see APPENDIX 1 for the use of this ranking]

In the social setting, perceived status of the interlocutors within the "specific social situation" was documented, with 5 being equal status.

An attempt was made to distinguish rank within the continuum of social distance of the interlocutors, +1 being an intimate relationship to +3 being a distant relationship.

Similarly, the degree of imposition was graded as +1 for little imposition to +3 for extreme imposition. However, it should be noted that this grading scale is highly subjective, in that what one individual might consider to have a +1 ranking, could very easily be ranked as +2 or +3 by other observers.

Gender was determined to be a factor only on the basis of similarity or difference between the sexes of the interlocutors.

Age was difficult to determine and the only time that age was noted as a positive (+) factor was when considerable difference in the ages of the interlocutors was found. i.e., one generation (20 years) or more.

Degree of elaboration of the favor was ranked on a scale from one to ten. The more elaborate the phraseology and wording, the higher the score was determined to be. However, once again, this grading scale is subject to personal subjectivity.

Results

Work/school setting

An analysis of the findings (see Appendix 1) shows the following trends in the asking of favors in the work/school setting :

1. When the person asking the favor was a female, the degree of elaboration was greater than when a male asked the favor:

female to male, mean score - 5.6
female to female, mean score - 4.5
male to female, mean score - 3.6

2. When the higher ranking male asked a favor of a lower ranking female, the degree of elaboration was low:

Example 1: Could you cover my class for me next Thursday? I have a meeting at state College.

Example 2: I've set up a meeting with Father Romano for next Friday at 2:30. Will you come?

3. When the status of the male speaker was less than that of the female respondent, the degree of elaboration was much higher compared with males asking favors of lower ranking females:

Example 3: Can you do me a favor? Can you check for any spelling mistakes on my paper because I might have one or two. You know I'm not a good speller, so if you have a few minutes...

4. There are a few instances in which a higher status male, when asking a favor of a lower status female in order for a task to be fulfilled, will use substantial elaboration:

Example 4: Could you please, please, please transcribe this summary onto an 8 1/2 X 11 piece of paper? It has to be postmarked today to get accepted for the meeting. It's very important. I know it's above and beyond the call of duty, but won't you do it?

5. When females asked favors of males the degree of imposition determined the degree of elaboration that was found:

Example 5: I know you're not going to like what I'm going to ask you, but would it be possible for you to search for and give me the tissue blocks on the case of the Doberman?

However, there is not sufficient data to draw any conclusions from these observations, as only three requests for favors were observed, and in no instance did a higher ranking female ask a favor of a lower ranking male.

6. When females asked favors of females, the higher the status of the female asking the favor, the lower the degree of elaboration. Conversely, the lower the ranking of females asking the favors, the greater was the degree of elaboration:

Example 6: Lori, when the quarter grades come in, do me a favor and record them on the master grade sheet.

Example 7: Thank you for calling back. I only have six courses left to complete my course requirements, and I was wondering if you could see me next week so we can discuss the courses I'll need to take. I know you're booked up this week, but I'd appreciate an appointment next week since I don't have to register until the following week. I'm only in on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

7. In no instance was there any observation of a male asking another male for a favor. Does this mean that the incidence of males asking other males for favors is much lower, or could this result be due to sample bias?

Social setting

An analysis of the findings (see APPENDIX 2) shows the following trends in the asking of favors in the social setting:

1. In male to female encounters, because the status of the speaker and respondent is almost the same in all instances, there is no discernible correlation with the variables of age and degree of imposition. However, the degree of elaboration is very low (mean score - 1.6). It should also be noted that in all but two of the male to female encounters, the social distance was *outside* "the bulge" in the normal distribution curve, that is, involved either intimates or strangers. This tends to correlate with low elaboration:

Example 8: Could you stop by the cleaners on your way home and pick up my suit?

Example 9: If you have some time today, do me a favor and shovel the driveway.

2. When females ask favors of males, no trend is discernible as far as status, age, and degree of imposition are concerned, but the degree of elaboration is greater than in male to female encounters (mean score = 4.5). Both instances of female to male encounters occurred *within* the bulge of the normal distribution curve, involving friends and acquaintances, which correlates with a higher degree of elaboration:

Example 10: Can I ask a huge favor of you? Could you please watch my children tomorrow for a few hours? I have to go into work, and they'd rather be with your kids than a babysitter.

3. In female to female encounters, elaboration increases with the degree of imposition, i.e., when the degree of imposition is 1, the degree of elaboration is 3; when the degree of imposition is 2, the degree of elaboration is 4.5; when the degree of imposition is 3, the degree of elaboration is 6. All but one of the encounters fell *within* the bulge, which again accounts for the higher degree of elaboration:

Example 11: Hi, Thery. Could you possibly take me to the airport on March 8th? I'm going to a conference in Chicago, and I'll need a ride.

These trends in the degree of elaboration of the favor in the social setting mirror those in the work setting: when women ask favors of men or other women, they tend to elaborate more on the reasons for asking the favors than do men when they ask favors of women. Again, no observation of male to male encounters was made in this investigation.

This section reveals some of the sociolinguistic norms in the asking of favors; the next section primarily deals with the strategies people employ which serve to carry out this speech act.

Strategies

The data collected for this study indicate that strategies are used in favor-asking to (a) be minimally offensive in fulfilling a need, (b) show the importance of the need of the favor being asked, (c) hint at reciprocation on the speaker's part for favors previously rendered, or for favors to be rendered in the future, or (d) build solidarity.

One or more of these factors are in play in the following three types of favors found within the realm of this request form: (a) the veiled obligation, (b) the veiled favor, and (c) the true favor.

The veiled obligation

Some formulas of the favor serve as a euphemistically veiled directive. "Could you do me a favor and...." "Do me a favor...." "Can you please..." etc. are examples of how a person will soften a directive by preceding it with one of these 'favor-like' forms. In the work setting, the mere difference in status between two interlocutors (especially from upper status to lower status) suggests that the "favor" being asked is, in reality, an obligation on the part of the respondent:

Example 12: We need to chase down Tom Smith. Do me a favor and see what you can do about getting hold of him. I think he's been cutting classes.

The speaker phrases the favor in such a way as to minimize imposition by using a strategy to maintain civility. However, the underlying message reads as an expectation from the speaker's perspective and an obligation from the respondent's perspective to carry out this task. "Most status differences are occupational differences found in the work place (or school setting). Within the hierarchy of an organization, one encounters these differences which are not generally found within relationships in the social setting" (Robinson, 1972:134).

In the social setting, "directness tends to increase with familiarity" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:18). Using Wolfson's description of the bulge, it can be said that what is *inside* the bulge is a favor and what falls *outside* the bulge is an obligation. The data fully supports this contention. Between intimates the strategy is usually more solicitous because of the very nature of the relationship. Intimates do not need to negotiate their position with one another; therefore, though the form includes mention of a favor, the opposite signal may be received by the hearer - that of an obligation:

Example 13: Do me a favor and go out an get me a newspaper.

The veiled favor

With veiled favors strategies are in play to negotiate the speaker's position within a relationship as a means of getting closer to someone. Based on the data collected, the veiled favor is found primarily among status equals within a social setting (within the bulge) and constitutes *all* of the favors that were asked between status equals in this study. A person may decide, at some point within a relationship, to promote solidarity with the other person, by obligating him or herself to that person, by becoming vulnerable to that person, and by opening the way for a change in the relationship with that person. On the surface level, people ask other people for favors because there is a need, but beneath the surface, people are networking to build and create "their world," or to establish their place within a social structure. Therefore, favors are used not only to accomplish a task but also to cultivate a relationship. Generally speaking, the size of a favor grows within status-equal, non-intimate relationships as mutual dependence grows. In addition, the number of strategies in play to accomplish the goal also increases:

Example 14: Hi, how are you? I was wondering if you could possibly do me a huge favor and take David and me to school tomorrow. Urs is spending the night at the hospital, and I won't have a car tomorrow. I'd really appreciate it if you could.

It is interesting to note that the veiled favor is rarely a simple request. It often has an opening, the request itself, a justification, and an expression of gratitude in advance. All of these elements may become a part of the strategy process in nurturing a friendship. Also, though the person asking the favor often feels as though he/she may be imposing on the other person, the recipient of the request often feels flattered to have been asked. The veiled favor then, becomes a means of gaining a closer relationship between two people.

The true favor

Whereas the veiled favor, which is normally found among status equals, is multifunctional in purpose, the true favor has a simplicity of purpose: achieving an end result that is requested by an interlocutor. This type of favor occurs most frequently between status unequals both in the work setting and in the social setting. The data

indicates that this type of favor occurs infrequently, accounting for less than 10% of all favors observed in this study. Only one true favor was collected between status unequals in the work/school setting:

Example 15: Could you do me a favor? I have a student who should be in ESL, but he's in my 1006 class instead. Would you look at his paper and explain his errors to me?

In the social setting, only two examples of true favors were observed between status unequals (other than between intimates), and solidarity building does not appear to be a factor in this type of request:

Example 16: Can you please do me a favor and call this number and tell Colleen what has happened - and that we won't be there tonight?

Interestingly enough, both instances of this request form in the social setting had a positive age factor, whereas in all other instances this was not found, indicating that there may be a bonding between people of similar age.

Discussion

"The interpretation of speech act function depends both on the *situation*, which includes 'all relevant factors in the environment, social conventions, and the shared experience of the participants,' and *tactics*, which 'handle the syntagmatic patterns of discourse'" (Stenstrom, 1984:73, quoting Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975:28-29). By analyzing the speech behavior of a particular socio-cultural group, we can better understand how people establish relationships. The importance of the favor as a speech act "lies on the interpersonal level of rapport" (Coulmas, 1981:70). Through a "high degree of routinization" (Coulmas, 1981:70) patterns emerge in the way people ask favors of others. Generally speaking, elaboration of the favor tends to increase with the degree of imposition. Furthermore, as condescension between status unequals increases, elaboration of the favor increases. This correlation can be likened to bowing in Japanese culture where two people greeting observe unobtrusively the depth of bow of the other to ensure that the person of lesser status bows more deeply than his or her superior. In other words,

members of a speech community share an understanding of the situationally correct way to ask favors of one another.

There appears to be a high regard for face-saving behavior in the asking of favors. "Face-conscious behavior is characterized by two correlative attitudes: not embarrassing others and protecting one's own face" (Coulmas, 1981:83). In asking favors, people often choose a strategy to minimize the imposition of the task itself. This is usually done in the context of Lakoff's (1973) politeness phenomena where she looked at the "links between requesting variation and politeness" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:3). Not surprisingly, too, women in my study were usually less assertive and more elaborate (Lakoff, 1973) in the expression of their favors. Words like "big" and "huge" were only found in favors asked by women. Women, especially, appeared to be conscious of the relationships of the people with whom they interacted, carefully choosing strategies in the dynamics of this speech act.

In view of these observations it must be noted that this study has two major drawbacks. First, the number of observed favors is very small. Second, this study was confined to limited places of observation with limited numbers of people recorded. To make this a more meaningful study, larger numbers across a broader spectrum of society must be observed.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that the asking of favors is, indeed, a highly selective and manipulative process, conditioned by several variables. Favor asking, like most speech acts, can function as a tool in the negotiation of relationships. Therefore, exploring the underlying reasons for favor asking is so crucial in a study of this type. *How* and *why* people ask favors of others, as well as *who* people ask favors of, gives us insight into the social structure of our society. The strategies people use to ask favors are the means of attaining their ends: "gaining cooperation, forming friendships, and keeping their world running smoothly" (Wolfson, 1988:31). The asking of favors, thus, reflects the social values

of a speech community which enmesh individuals in a pattern of speech behavior.

¹This paper was written for a class on "Cross-Cultural Variation in Language Use" taught by Dr. Nessa Wolfson in the fall of 1987.

²I use the term 'speech act' as defined by Dell H. Hymes (1986).

APPENDIX 1:
Analysis of data collected in the work/school setting*

Status of speaker	Status of respondent	Age factor	Social distance	Degree of imposition	Degree of elaboration
<u>male (M) to female (F)</u>					
M3	F6 [-3]**	+	+3	+1	4
M3	F6 [-3]	+	+3	+1	5
M3	F6 [-3]	+	+3	+2	5
M7	F6 [+1]	0	+2	+3	2
M7	F6 [+1]	0	+3	+2	2
M8	F2 [+6]	+	+2	+3	9
<u>female to male</u>					
F4	M8 [-4]	+	+3	+2	7
F3	M8 [-3]	0	+3	+1	4
F4	M8 [-4]	0	+3	+2	6
<u>female to female</u>					
F6	F6 [0]	0	+3	+2	6
F6	F1 [+5]	+	+3	+2	2
F6	F1 [+5]	+	+3	+1	1
F2	F6 [-4]	0	+3	+3	8
F4	F7 [-3]	0	+3	+2	7
F4	F1 [+3]	0	+3	+2	3

Total * of favors - 15

*For a full description of the codification here, see 'Method' section above

**The bracketed number represents status difference (status of speaker minus status of respondent).

APPENDIX 2:
Analysis of data collected in the Social Setting*

Status of speaker	Status of respondent	Age factor	Social distance	Degree of imposition	Degree of elaboration
<u>male(M) to female (F)</u>					
M6	F4 [+2] **	0	+1	+1	2
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+2	2
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+2	2
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+2	1
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+3	2
M5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+1	1
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+2	1
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+3	2
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+1	+2	1
M6	F4 [+2]	0	+2	+3	2
<u>female to male</u>					
F5	M5 [0]	0	+2	+2	6
F5	M5 [0]	0	+2	+2	3
<u>female to female</u>					
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+2	6
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+3	7
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+2	6
F6	F4 [+2]	+1	+3	+1	3
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+1	3
F6	F4 [+2]	+1	+2	+2	5
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+1	3
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+3	5
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+2	4
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+2	3
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+2	4
F5	F5 [0]	0	+2	+1	3
F4	F6 [-2]	+1	+1	+2	6

Total * of favors - 25

*For a full description of the codification here, see 'Method' section above

**The bracketed number represents status difference (status of speaker minus status of respondent).

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