

Mitigated Requests and Responses: Strategies for Computer Sharing and Community Building

How do we use words to access a limited resource? How do we respond when someone else seeks access to a limited resource that both of us need and deserve? How does the social context impact those strategy choices? How is conflict avoided? The natural requests and responses of a group of international housemates in negotiating time for the use of a shared computer were recorded throughout a three-month period. A total of 70 conversation units were recorded and coded in terms of strategies and modifications used in making and responding to requests. A simple survey also examined the housemates' perceptions of covert conflict and preferred request and response strategies.

Requests, as face-threatening speech acts, have received much attention by researchers interested in the social dynamics of language. Request and response patterns in this situation reveal a preference for indirect requests, both non-conventionally indirect and conventionally indirect requests. In addition, internal and external modifications to the requests frequently serve to mitigate or downgrade face threat. Response patterns show efforts at mitigation as well, playing mostly positive or neutral roles in the negotiation. Also revealing efforts at mitigation are returned request, explanations for responses, and offers perhaps motivated by non-verbal request. The mitigating work not only of compromise but also of conversational negotiation is an important factor in conflict reduction. The request and response patterns of a group of housemates illuminate issues of social distance and relationship building, as well as strategies used to minimize face threat.

Key Terms

Speech acts, Requests, Responses, Conversation analysis

Type of Presentation

Work in progress

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