

**A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF CONVENTIONAL INDIRECTNESS  
IN SPANISH: EVIDENCE FROM PENINSULAR AND  
URUGUAYAN SPANISH<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the results of a contrastive empirical study of conventional indirect requests in Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish. The results reveal pragmatic similarities at the level of the linguistic encoding of utterances with both, Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish speakers showing a negative correlation between (in)directness and social distance. The less familiar the interlocutors are with each other, the more likely it is for their requests to be realised indirectly. On the other hand, pragmatic differences were found in the tentativeness conveyed by the requests in these two language varieties. Uruguayan Spanish requests were more tentative than those in Peninsular Spanish. This tentativeness was achieved through a more frequent and more varied use of external modifications and a much higher incidence of internal modifying devices of the downgrading type.

**Keywords:** Indirectness, Conventional indirectness, Tentativeness, Internal modification, External modification.

**1. Introduction**

Several studies in Hispanic pragmatics have focused on speech act realisation. Within these studies some have explored the realisation of one or more speech acts in one variety of Spanish.<sup>2</sup> Others, have contrasted one or more speech acts in one variety of Spanish with a variety of a different language using English as the contrasting language *par excellence*.

<sup>3</sup> Very few, however, have investigated pragmatic variation in Spanish. Fant (1996) and Curcó (1998) compared the communicative style of Mexicans and Spaniards and their

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the 31<sup>st</sup> Linguistic Symposium of Romance Languages, University of Illinois, Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Price (1987) on Ecuadorian Spanish; García (1991) on Peruvian Spanish; Haverkate (1994), Krüger (1996) and Hernández (1999) on Peninsular Spanish.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Walters (1979) on Puerto Rican Spanish and American English; García (1989) on Venezuelan Spanish and American English; Placencia (1992, 1995) on Ecuadorian Spanish and British English; Mir (1992) on Peninsular Spanish and American English; Koike (1994) on Mexican Spanish and American English; Vázquez Orta (1995) on Peninsular Spanish and British English; Márquez Reiter (1997, 2000) on Uruguayan Spanish and British English and Ruzcicowka (1999) on Cuban Spanish and American English).

perceptions of politeness, respectively; while Bravo (1998) examined the role of laughter as a negotiating strategy between the two cultures. Placencia (1994, 1998) and Puga Larraín (1997) added an Andean dimension to studies of pragmatic variation; the former by analysing requests in Ecuadorian and Peninsular Spanish and the latter by observing the use mitigation in Chilean and Peninsular Spanish.

The results of the above mentioned studies as well as informal conversations with native speakers of different varieties of Spanish, point to possible misunderstandings between speakers of different linguistic varieties. Most of the (possible) communication problems reported seem to reside in different politeness systems by which speakers of Latin American varieties may regard Spaniards as quite direct and rather abrupt. Likewise, Spaniards may consider some Latin American speakers as rather formal, sometimes even to the point of being comical. There appears to be some kind of (implicit) understanding by which Latin American speakers of Spanish are seen as more indirect and in some cases more deferential than Spaniards. In the light of these comments it may apposite to mention firstly, that Latin America is culturally diverse and that remarks of the sort are rather generalised perceptions for which there is a lack of consistent empirical evidence, secondly and most importantly, one should distinguish between indirectness whose realm is the actual linguistic encoding of utterances and the tentativeness conveyed by those utterances.

Although some might disagree with the distinction hereby made between indirectness and tentativeness by claiming that indirectness is indeed a form of tentativeness, the following example, taken from naturally occurring data, depicts an untentative request despite its indirect realisation:

(1) In the middle of family discussion A wants to express his/her views and wants the other conversational participants to listen to her/him

*¿Me podés dejar hablar?*  
 ‘Can you<sup>V</sup> let me speak?’

Indirectness works at the structural level of the utterance and in the case of requests it affects the core request or head act, that is to say, the minimal units with which the request can be realised (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Tentativeness, on the other hand, is more flexible than indirectness in that it can occur in the head act and/or in the peripheral elements of the request; thus it can modify the request internally and/or externally making it sound less coercive or less forceful. Internally, tentativeness can be achieved either by the addition of mitigating devices, that is to say internal modifiers of the downgrading type or by the choice of linguistic form in the encoding of the request head act.

In order to illustrate this distinction let us look at examples (2), (3) and (4) taken from the Uruguayan Spanish (US) corpus:

- (2) *¿Podés atender el teléfono mientras salgo a hacer un mandado?*[S2, US]  
 ‘Can you<sup>V</sup> answer the telephone while I pop out to run an errand?’
- (3) *¿Podés atender el teléfono por favor mientras salgo a hacer un mandadito?* [S2, US]  
 ‘Can you<sup>V</sup> please answer the telephone while I pop out to run an errand<sup>Diminutive?</sup>’
- (4) *¿Podrías atenderme el teléfono mientras salgo a hacer un mandado?*[S2, US]

‘Could you<sup>T/V4</sup> answer the phone for me while I pop out to run an errand?’

(2), (3) and (4) are equally indirect in that firstly, the speaker is not asking the addressee to answer the telephone directly and secondly, the request which is conventionally indirect is realised by means of a socially recognised convention, that of questioning the hearer’s ability to perform the act. However, the fact that (3) has been mitigated by means of a politeness marker (*por favor*) and a diminutive (*-ito*) makes it more tentative than (2). It should be noted that the addition of *por favor* is twofold; while it makes the utterance sound less coercive or forceful, it also marks the illocutionary point of the utterance as a directive despite the fact that the literal meaning of the utterance is not a directive (Searle 1975). In the same way as (3) is more tentative than (2) due to the addition of the internal modifiers described above, (2) is also less tentative than (4) since the indicative expresses certainty and commitment to the state of affairs while the conditional conveys the idea that event in question is dependent on some other factor. Thus in (3) tentativeness is conveyed by the addition of internal modifiers of the mitigating type, whereas in (4) tentativeness is achieved by the choice of linguistic form in the encoding of the actual request head act.

The fact that some of these indirect requests have been strategically mitigated by different linguistic means will (probably) affect the perlocutionary effect of the utterance.<sup>5</sup> All three requests express in fact, the same level of indirectness: Conventional indirectness.

Haverkate’s (1994) analysis of what constitutes a (in) direct request in Spanish is particularly relevant to the present discussion since out of all the scholars who have carried out research in this area, he has up to now been the only one who has attempted to distinguish between direct and indirect requests in Spanish. The author argues that the propositional structure criterion (cf. Searle 1975; Davison 1975) based on the typological distinction between sentence types - imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives - and illocutionary object is not sufficient enough to distinguish between direct and indirect requests and provides the following examples to support his point:

- (5a) *Aparte usted su coche*  
 ‘Move<sup>U</sup> your car’  
 (5b) *¿Quiere usted apartar su coche?*  
 ‘Do you<sup>U</sup> want<sup>U</sup> to move your car?’

According to the propositional structure criterion, (5a) is a direct request and (5b) an

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<sup>4</sup> The conjugation of the second person singular is represented in the translation glosses by the following: U which stands for *usted*, T which stands for *tú* and V which stands for *vos*. In Uruguayan Spanish and in particular in Montevidean Spanish there are three pronouns which represent the second person singular, namely *tú*, *usted* and *vos*. Montevideans tend to use *vos* in their informal interactions and when addressing the hearer as *tú* they employ the form of the verb which corresponds to *vos* instead of *tú* producing utterances such as *Tú tenés que entender lo que te estoy diciendo* instead of *Tú tienes que entender lo que te estoy diciendo* (‘You’ve got to understand what I’m talking about’).

<sup>5</sup> Bearing in mind the reported negative correlation between social distance and indirectness (Márquez Reiter 2000), it could be counter argued that in certain cases, indirectness could be interpreted/perceived as a form of tentativeness when used in favour of direct requests especially amongst people who know each other well.

indirect one since the former shows a direct relationship between its structure (an imperative) and its function (a request), whereas the latter shows an indirect relationship between its structure (an interrogative) and its function (a request). Haverkate, however, argues that from a pragmatic perspective both utterances are ‘direct’ since they are interpreted as such by the hearer due to their conventionality. He claims (p.155) that they are instances of ‘impositives’<sup>6</sup> in that in both cases the speaker makes an explicit reference to both the interlocutor and the object of the request. He further explains that ‘impositives’ or ‘direct’ requests, according to his terminology, are characterised by the fact that: a) the subject of the utterance should refer to the interlocutor, b) the tense employed cannot refer to the future or the past, and c) the predicate should denote action.

With reference to condition b), it is interesting to note that both in Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish as in many other Spanish vernaculars, it is possible to request something from the hearer by employing the future and the imperfect as in *Podrá prestarme X* (‘Would you<sup>U</sup> lend me X’) and *Podía prestarme X* (‘Could you<sup>U</sup> lend me X’), respectively.

Whilst we agree with Haverkate in that the propositional structure criterion should not be the only perspective employed in order to analyse requests, the categories employed in the field should be tightly defined and put to the test in order to ensure comparability and measurement between different language varieties. In our view, examples (5a) and (5b) represent a direct request and an indirect request, respectively due to their linguistic encoding. Moreover, while it seems to be the case that in certain Spanish vernaculars, more specifically, in Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish, (5a) and (5b) have a similar impact, this impact may not necessarily be the same in other Hispanophone cultures.

Requests (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5b) express in fact, the same level of indirectness though not necessarily the same amount of tentativeness. The type of indirectness conveyed is known as conventional or structural indirectness and will be used in this article to compare Uruguayan and Peninsular Spanish pragmatically.

Conventional indirectness has proved to be the most preferred requesting strategy in a number of (contrastive) speech act studies including related and unrelated languages - such as English, German, French, Hebrew, Spanish (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), Tamil, Tzetal (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), English and Greek (Sifianou 1992), Indonesian (Hassall 1999) and English and Spanish (García 1991; Márquez Reiter 1997, 2000; Márquez Reiter et al. in press; Placencia 1994, 1998; Vázquez Orta 1995). The explanation for the preference can be found in politeness theory since the strategy amalgamates the speaker’s need to convey the requesting force of the utterance without appearing coercive, while ensuring his/her utterance will have the right interpretation and impact (Brown and Levinson 1987; Márquez Reiter et al. in press). The lack of coercion is achieved through questioning the addressee’s ability to perform the act as in examples (1) to (4), and the addressee’s wish, desire and/or willingness as in *¿Te gustaría atender el teléfono?* (‘Would you<sup>T/V</sup> like to answer the telephone?’), *¿Quieres atender el teléfono?* (‘Would you<sup>T</sup> like to answer the telephone?’), *¿Te importaría atender el teléfono?*,<sup>7</sup> (‘Would you<sup>T</sup> mind

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘impositives’ has been used in the literature (cf. Green 1975; Leech 1983) in order to avoid confusion in using the term ‘directive’ in relation to direct and indirect illocutions.

<sup>7</sup> These examples were not taken from the corpus but were constructed for explanatory purposes.

answering the telephone?’), etc. Thus in employing this strategy the speaker softens the force of the request by means of its indirectness and is certain that the addressee will interpret the utterance as a request and not as a yes/no question due to its conventionality.

Having established the difference between indirectness and tentativeness, we will now proceed to describe the methodology employed to generate comparable requests in both language varieties. Upon analysing the data we will consider whether the evidence gathered here can be used to support or reject lay claims of Peninsular Spanish ‘directness’ and ‘abruptness’ relative to other varieties of Spanish, namely Uruguayan Spanish.

## **2. The study**

This study examines the similarities and differences in the realisation of conventionally indirect requests in Peninsular Spanish (hereafter PS) and Uruguayan Spanish (hereafter US). The US corpus was collected in Uruguay in 1997<sup>8</sup> and the PS one in England in 2000.

The requests were collected via a non-prescriptive open role-play taken from Márquez Reiter (2000). The population of the study consisted of 64 (31 females and 33 males) Uruguayan and 23 (18 females and 5 males) Spanish undergraduate university students. The US data were collected in Uruguay and the PS data in England immediately after the arrival of a contingent of Spanish undergraduate university students on a Socrates study exchange programme.

Prior to the realisation of the role-play, the situations therein described were discussed with a different group of native speakers of US and PS. Furthermore, a multiple-choice questionnaire assessing the context-internal and context-external factors of the situations was administered to 30 university undergraduates in Uruguay and 20 Spanish undergraduate university students on a Socrates exchange programme in 1999. The purpose of this exercise was to ensure comparability and ‘sameness’ of meaning in both cultures. A pilot test of the instructions and execution of the role-play was deemed unnecessary since the instrument had been successfully employed in previous studies (Márquez Reiter et al, in press).

The six situations of the role-play vary according to the relative social power between the participants, the ranking of the imposition and the social distance between the interlocutors. It should be noted that the social distance or familiarity between the participants was kept constant since this variable has been shown to correlate negatively with indirectness; that is to say, the less familiar the participants are the more likely it is for them to request indirectly (Márquez Reiter 2000). The other two variables, namely, the relative social power and the total ranking of the imposition<sup>9</sup> were alternated in such a way

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<sup>8</sup> The original US corpus consisted of 12 requesting situations out of which those where the interlocutors were not familiar with each other were chosen for this study since familiarity has been shown to correlate negatively with indirectness (Márquez Reiter 2000). While 64 Uruguayan university undergraduate students participated in the open role-play generating 16 requests per situation, only those which elicited conventionally indirect requests were selected for the purposes of the present study.

<sup>9</sup> The three explanatory variables employed are based on Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The values given to the variables reflect the responses to the multiple-choice questionnaire and the results of discussions with native speakers. In the case of binary values, namely +SD, -SD, high and low imposition,

to generate conventionally indirect requests in all possible combinations of the two variables as shown in Table 1, below.

Table 1 Combination of social variables

SITUATION	SOCIAL DISTANCE	SOCIAL POWER	RANKING OF IMPOSITION
1 – borrow book [A university student asks a lecturer to lend him/her a book for an assignment]	+SD	S<H	Low
2 – cover telephone calls [A work colleague with seniority asks a another colleague to mind the phone while s/he pops out of the office]	+SD	S>H	Low
3 – help with moving [A neighbour asks another neighbour for help moving flats]	+SD	S=H	High
4 – swap bus seats [A bus passenger asks another passenger to swap seats]	+SD	S=H	Low
5 – ask for pay advance [An employee asks his/her line manager for a pay advance]	+SD	S<H	High
6 – borrow laptop [A work colleague with seniority asks an apprentice to borrow his/her laptop]	+SD	S>H	High

SD= social distance; S= speaker; H= hearer

Whilst the Uruguayan data were audio-recorded, the Spanish data were video-recorded. In both cases, prior consent was gained from both groups of informants. Although the Uruguayans knew they were being recorded they could not see either the tape recorder or the microphone which was hidden. With respect to the Spaniards, their interaction was recorded in a two-way mirror observation and recording suite with close circuit TV from three hidden remote control cameras. Hence it could be argued that the ‘imposing’ presence of a recording device was thus minimised for both groups of subjects.

The role-play comprised six scenarios (see Table 1) which represent everyday social situations of the type expected to be familiar to both groups of subjects. Four informants were recruited per set of role-plays (a total of 6 situations). The first couple of informants role-played the first three situations alternating the roles of requester and requestee and the second couple followed the same pattern for the other three situations. The object was to

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it could be argued that there could be more than two values. It is worth noting, however, that the informants were not given the values, this is something they interpreted themselves and responded accordingly by varying their requesting strategies.

avoid possible cumulative effects of the situations and to prevent the informants from getting too comfortable in their roles and start developing a natural personal relationship. No considerations of gender were taken into account due to the disparity in Uruguayan and Spanish numbers. For an example of the tasks given to the informants as well as for the language elicited see the appendix.

### **3. Results and discussion**

As expected, the data collection instrument generated conventionally indirect requests in both varieties of Spanish. Although not within the scope of this article, this result provides further support for the negative correlation between social distance and indirectness found in British English and US (Márquez Reiter 2000). Therefore both PS and US speakers are more likely to be indirect when interacting with people they are not (too) familiar with than when interacting with those whom they know (very) well.

For analytical purposes the requests generated by the instrument will be divided into their core components, namely external modifications, head act and internal modifications. Example (6) below has its head act underlined. They are generally preceded and/or followed by peripheral elements which do not change the propositional content of the request but modify it either by aggravating or mitigating its force.

- (6) *Oye, ¿eres nueva aquí, verdad? ¿te importaría prestarme el ordenador por un minuto?, así puedo continuar con este trabajo* [S6, PS]  
'Listen<sup>T</sup>, you're<sup>T</sup> new here, right? Would you<sup>T</sup> mind lending me your computer for a minute so that I can continue with this job?'

*Oye, ¿eres nueva aquí, verdad?* ('Listen<sup>T</sup>, you're<sup>T</sup> new here, right?') and *así puedo continuar con este trabajo* ('so that I can continue with this job') work as external modifications, the former as a precursor of the attention-getting type and the latter as a grounder to justify the request; whereas the inclusion of *por un minuto* ('for a minute') in the core request works as an internal modifier downgrading the force of the request.

#### **3.1. External modifications**

This type of modification is achieved by optional clauses which either downgrade or upgrade the force of the utterance. The vast majority of external modifiers found in the literature are of the downgrading or softening type. The most frequently found in this study were precursors, grounders and disarmers.

##### *3.1.1. Precursors*

Precursors or alerters as they are sometimes called (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) draw the addressee's attention to the ensuing act, in this case a conventionally indirect request. Although precursors can be realised in a number of ways, the ones found in the data were:

Discourse markers of the attention-getting type such as *Oye*, *Oiga* ('listen<sup>T</sup>', 'listen<sup>U</sup>') in PS and *Mire* and *Mirá* ('Look<sup>U</sup>', 'Look<sup>V</sup>') in US; apologetic formulae such as *Disculpe*, *Disculpá*, *Perdón* ('Excuse me<sup>U</sup>', 'Excuse me<sup>V</sup>', 'Excuse me<sup>U/T/V</sup>'); first names, nick names, or titles such as *Profesor* ('Professor'), *Sra.* ('Mrs'), *Srta.* ('Miss') and *Sr.* ('Mr') to draw the addressee's attention. Greetings of the *¡Hola! Buen(os) día(s)* type ('Hello! Good morning') were also commonly used in both varieties as well as combinations of the aforementioned precursors.

Both Uruguayans and Spaniards employed precursors in all their requests. The main differences found in both varieties reside in the frequency with which some precursors were used and in the range employed by both cultures. While Spaniards tended to employ mainly greetings and discourse markers of the attention-getting type showing a very low incidence of apologetic formulae, Uruguayans not only employed a wider range of precursors but combined them producing longer preambles to their requests.

Let us now describe the most notable pragmatic differences between these language varieties.

### 3.1.1.1. Oye, oiga, mire y mirá

*Oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') are attention-getting devices which focus mainly on the addressee. In this study they were found in more than half of the situations of the role-play in both PS and US, respectively. They were found either preceding other external modifiers or head acts to which they co-referred. It should be noted that *Oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') can be considered independent utterances. As minimal units as they are, they can stand on their own and convey a series of contextual meanings.

Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999: 4184) explain that *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') to a lesser extent than *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') has lost its full literal semantic meaning of 'to perceive from the ear' and/or 'to pay attention to whoever is talking to us' in PS. *Mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') still retains its literal meaning of 'to look at' in US although, like its PS counterpart, it is also used with the purpose of drawing the addressee's attention to the speaker. The markers can be conjugated to show the distinction between *tú* and *usted* in PS (*oye*, *oiga*) and between *tú*, *vos* and *usted* in US (*mira*, *mirá* and *mire*).

Whereas both particles can be employed in PS to gain the hearer's attention, in US only *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') is used with that function since *oir* ('to hear') has retained its full literal meaning. Martín Zorraquino and Portolés Lázaro (1999) claim that one of the main differences between *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') and *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') in PS is that the latter appears to provide some kind of support for the speaker's point of view or speaker's preferences. It is thus, they claim, more often employed with declaratives than with interrogatives. The authors observe that when *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') precedes interrogatives in PS it has a mitigating function, that of downgrading the force of the utterance. They add that in PS it also works as a way of getting closer to the interlocutor and provide the following example amongst others to illustrate their point: *Mira, ¿qué te gustaría ver?* (p. 4182) with the meaning of 'Look<sup>T</sup>, what would you<sup>T</sup> like to see?' Due to the fact that there were not sufficient instances of *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') in the US corpus, we are unable to attest whether this attention-getting device has a similar function to its PS counterpart. Interestingly enough, however, it was only employed with declaratives as evidenced in examples (7) and (8) below.

Interesting also, both *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>'), *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') in PS and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') in US can be used to signal that something conflictive is to come as in: *Oye, no digas tonterías* ('Listen<sup>T</sup>, don't talk<sup>T</sup> nonsense') and *Mira/mirá, X, no me parece que tengas razón*<sup>10</sup> ('Look<sup>T/V</sup>, X, I don't think you're<sup>T/V</sup> right').

Although both *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') and *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') are possible in PS, the data only had incidences of the former as shown in example (6) above. As previously explained, only *mire* ('look<sup>U</sup>'), *mira* ('look<sup>T</sup>') and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') are used in US. The data showed instances of addressing the hearer as *usted* and as *vos*, in other words, there are only cases of *mire* ('look<sup>U</sup>') and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') as in examples (7) and (8) below:

- (7) *Mire profesor, disculpe pero necesito un libro para terminar un trabajo y la biblioteca está cerrada y, no sé, quería saber si me lo podría prestar* [S1, US]  
 'Listen<sup>U</sup> Professor but I need a book to finish this assignment and the library is closed and I don't know, I wanted to know if you<sup>U</sup> could lend it to me'
- (8) *Mirá, disculpá que te moleste, ¿te podría pedir un favor?* [S1, US]  
 'Look<sup>V</sup>, sorry to bother you<sup>V</sup>, could I ask you a favour?'

It would thus seem that *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') have got a similar pragmatic meaning in PS and US, respectively. The only difference between them could derive from their semantic meaning where *oye* ('listen<sup>T</sup>') is hearer-orientated and *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') speaker-orientated in that in employing the former, the speaker wishes to enter the hearer's realm and in utilising the latter, the speaker wishes the hearer to enter his/her realm. As previously mentioned, the data showed instances of *mirá* ('look<sup>V</sup>') with declaratives and prefacing some kind of problem/issue by the speaker. In this sense, it could be argued that its function is that of inviting the addressee to express his/her opinion on a particular problem/issue; in other words, asking the addressee to put him/herself in the speaker's shoes.<sup>11</sup> However, more data is needed in order to consider such claim.

### 3.1.1.2. Perdón and Disculpá

Spanish has a range of formulaic remedies such as *lo siento, lo lamento, permiso, con permiso, perdón, perdoná, disculpe, disculpá*. Due to the scope of this paper only those which occurred in the corpus will be discussed. Both *perdonar* and *disculpar* are transitive verbs which can be employed before or after an infraction has taken place. They are generally used pre-event with the same meaning as 'excuse me' in British English. The main difference between these two formulae verbs in US is a question of frequency and formality; Uruguayans perceive *perdonar* as more formal than *disculpar* and thus tend to use the latter in their interactions. What is interesting about their use is that although both apologetic verbs can be used as attention-getters in PS, their incidence is very low

<sup>10</sup> These two examples were not taken from the corpus. I am grateful to Professor Hickey for having provided them.

<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Dr Placencia for her valuable comments.

compared to US. It should be noted that in those cases where apologetic formulae were employed as precursors (in less than a 1/5 of the total number of requests), Spaniards preferred *perdonar* to *disculpar*. The data also showed that when apologetic formulae were employed as precursors in US, Uruguayans preferred a combination of them, especially with greetings or titles as shown in examples (9) and (10) below:

- (9) *Disculpe señor, ¿no me cambia de asiento?*[S4, US]  
 ‘Excuse me<sup>U</sup>, sir. Can you<sup>U</sup> swap seats with me?’
- (10) *Buen día, disculpeme, ¿me podría cambiar de asiento?* [S4, US]  
 ‘Good morning, excuse me<sup>U</sup>, could you<sup>U</sup> swap seats with me?’

This observed difference in the use of a combination of precursors is supported by the results of a paired t-test showing a borderline significant difference at  $p > 0.06$  in favour of US with  $df=5$  and at 95% confidence interval. The use of more precursors and in particular, the use of apologetic formulae as attention-getting devices by the Uruguayans could be taken as an indication that they seem to be relatively more conscious about their space and that of the addressee’s. Likewise, the linguistic behaviour of the Spaniards could be taken as a sign that they appear to be relatively more ‘space-tolerant’ than their Uruguayan counterparts.

### 3.1.1.3. Titles and combinations

This type of precursor had a similar incidence in both languages. The main difference in the use of address terms between both groups of informants was found in situations 4, 1 and 5. In situation 4 the speaker asks a complete stranger - another bus passenger - to swap seats with him/her. Nearly half of the US precursors explicitly mentioned the addressee’s title at some point as shown in example (9) above. The Spaniards, on the other hand, did not once mention the addressee’s title. They did, however, accompany their precursors with apologetic formulae. In fact, almost half of the PS precursors in situation 4 have an apologetic formula, as shown in example (11).

- (11) *Perdone, ¿le importaría sentarse en otro lado?*[S4, PS]  
 ‘Excuse me<sup>U</sup>, would you<sup>U</sup> mind seating somewhere else?’

Whilst the Uruguayans felt the need to display a combination of apologetic formulae and titles in this situation, the Spaniards only saw it necessary to employ apologetic formulae with some of their precursors thus sounding less formal. Situations 1 and 5 depict asymmetrical scenarios where the addressee had been vested with institutional power over the speaker; namely, in situation 1 where a student addresses a university lecturer and in situation 5 where an employee addresses his/her manager. More than half of the precursors employed by the Uruguayans in situation 1 and over a third of those employed in situation 5 included the addressee’s (working) title as shown in examples (12) – (14) against none by the Spaniards:

- (12) *Mire profesor, disculpe, estoy buscando un libro sobre....*[S1, US]

- ‘Look<sup>U</sup>, professor, excuse me<sup>U</sup>, I’m looking for a book on...’
- (13) *Disculpe jefe, le venía a plantear un problema...*[S5, US]  
 ‘Excuse me<sup>U</sup>, chief, I wanted to talk to you<sup>U</sup> about a problem...’
- (14) *Hola Sr. Gerente, necesito hablar con Ud....*[S5, US]  
 ‘Hello Mr Manager, I need to talk to you<sup>U</sup>..’

Despite the fact that in situations 1 and 5 both groups of informants felt the need to address their hearers as *usted*, only the Uruguayans saw it appropriate to explicitly acknowledge the hearer’s authority over them. The slightly more formal, deferential and ‘authority-conscious’ linguistic behaviour of the Uruguayans in relation to that of the Spaniards could be explained by the score gained by both cultures in Hofstede’s (1983) power distance and uncertainty avoidance dimensions. Power distance is the extent to which members of a society accept that power is distributed unequally (p. 295). Uncertainty avoidance, on the other hand, is the level of anxiety that members of a society feel in the face of unstructured and/or ambiguous situations (p. 295). In Hofstede’s seminal study, Uruguayans scored higher than the Spaniards on power distance (28 against 23) and on uncertainty avoidance (47 against 36-41) thus expressing more social inequality and more of a need for structure and formalisation, respectively.

### 3.1.2. *Grounders and disarmers*

Grounders or reasons can precede or follow the request head act. As illustrated by the term, the speaker gives reasons for justifying his/her request.<sup>12</sup> Disarmers<sup>13</sup>, on the other hand, are external modifications employed with the purpose of ‘disarming’ the addressee from the possibility of refusal. Disarmers can be realised in a number of ways; in this study there were only instances of ‘disarming’ reasons.

Both PS and US showed parallels not only in the choice of grounders and disarmers as their most preferred external modification device but also in the frequency with which they were employed. Whereas the use of disarmers by the Spaniards is slightly higher than that of the Uruguayans, both cultures employed a very similar number of grounders. It is, however, worth noting that the Uruguayans showed more explicitness in the way in which their grounders were realised. In other words, in giving reasons Uruguayans were more ready to disclose (personal) information about themselves than the Spaniards, as exemplified in (16) and (17) below:

- (16) *¡Hola, buenos días! Soy la chica que trabaja en el departamento de aquí al lado.*

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<sup>12</sup> The giving of reasons has been associated with showing co-operation and consideration between the interlocutors. Grounders stand out as the single most frequent supportive move in request studies (House and Kasper 1987).

<sup>13</sup> The term has been taken from Blum-Kulka et al.(1989).

*Estoy teniendo un pequeño problema. Necesito pagar un par de recibos que he recibido y no puedo pagarlos por ahora. Me preguntaba si Ud. podría darme un anticipo...*[S5, PS]

‘Hello, good morning! I’m the girl that works in the office next door. I’ve got a little problem. I need to pay a couple of receipts which I’ve received and I can’t pay them for the time being. I was wondering if you<sup>U</sup> could give me an advance.’

- (17) *¡Buenos días Sr. Gerente! Venía a pedirle a ver si no me podía ayudar en la situación en la que estoy. Me llegaron las cuentas de la luz, de la intendencia y todo y tengo que pagar. Si no pago, la verdad que me echarían de la casa y eso sería bravo porque no tengo a quién pedirle prestado. Quería pedirle por favor, si Ud. no me podría adelantar algo de sueldo.* [S5, US]

‘Good morning Mr Manager, I came to ask you<sup>U</sup> if you could help me due to the situation I’m in. I’ve got the electricity bill and the town hall bill and everything to pay. If I don’t pay, the truth is they would throw me out and that would be grave because I don’t have anyone to borrow from. I wanted to ask you<sup>U</sup> if you could give me an advance of some of my salary.’

Another observed linguistic difference, is the fact that US grounders were more frequently downgraded than PS ones. The disclosure of personal information of the type described before together with mitigated reasons made US requests sound more pleading than PS ones.

### 3.2. Head acts

Both US and PS exhibited a similar range of head acts mainly in the present indicative and in the conditional although there were sufficient instances of head acts realised in the imperfect and in the subjunctive. As expected, all head acts in both varieties were hearer-orientated.

The differences found are mainly of a formulaic nature. Just as the Spaniards showed a preference for head acts of the *Te/le importa/ría + VERB* type, the Uruguayans showed a very high incidence of negatively phrased head acts as illustrated by examples (9) and (17) above.

Despite the fact that the negation of interrogative forms has been interpreted by some as a downgrader (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 amongst others) and by others as an upgrader (cf. Koike 1989) of the requesting force of the utterance; in US the negation of interrogative forms appears to be a standardised formula for requesting. The US corpus had almost the same number of negatively phrased requests in the indicative and in the conditional than positively phrased ones. From discussions with native speakers of US, it would appear that the inclusion of the negative particle does not clearly change the requesting force of the utterance. It should be noted that the use of negatively phrased head acts was significantly different at  $p > 0.05$  according to the results of a paired t-test at 95% confidence interval and with  $df=5$ .

There were also differences in the way in which requests were hedged in both languages. The frequency of hedged requests varied situationally and cross-culturally with

both varieties showing an overall similarity in the number of hedges employed. Hedging was mainly realised through verbs of cognition with the purpose of mitigation. While in US the most preferred hedges were: *No sé si* ('I don't know if'), *quería pedirte* ('I wanted to ask you<sup>TV</sup>') and *quería saber* ('I wanted to know'), PS speakers preferred: *Me preguntaba* ('I was wondering'), *me gustaría saber* ('I'd like to know'), *estaba pensando en si* ('I was thinking if').

### **3.3. Internal modifications**

This type of modification is achieved by intensifying or downgrading the force of the head act. The most commonly found modifiers were in decreasing order: Adverbs of time and place (e.g.: *Un minuto* ('one minute'), *un ratito* ('a little while'), *aquí a la vuelta* ('round the corner'), diminutives, indefinite pronouns (e.g.: *Algo* ('some') and adjectives such as *poco* ('little'). An example of an adverb of time working as an internal modifier can be found in (6).

Whereas both cultures internally downgraded their requests in almost all the situations of the role-play with the exception of situation 4 (swap bus seats) by the Spaniards, the Uruguayans showed a much higher incidence of internal modifications. The difference in the frequency with which they were employed is attested by the results a paired t- test showing a significant difference at  $p < 0.04$  with  $df = 5$  and at 95% confidence interval. Therefore, while there is cross-cultural agreement in terms of choice and use of internal modifiers, there is disagreement with respect to the frequency with which they should be employed. In other words, it would seem that less tentative requests are not only appropriate but most probably expected in PS than in US.

## **4. Conclusion**

The analysis of the data showed similarities and differences in the way in which speakers of Peninsular and Uruguayan Spanish realise conventionally indirect requests.

Despite the fact that Spaniards tend to be seen as more direct and abrupt than Latin Americans, this study has shown that there were no differences at the level of the linguistic encoding of the utterances analysed. In fact, this study has provided further support for the negative correlation found between social distance or familiarity and indirectness in that both, Spanish and Uruguayan university students have been shown to be indirect with people they are not familiar with.

The findings of this study have also pointed out that one of the possible explanations as to why Spaniards are regarded as more direct could reside in the lack of tentativeness conveyed by their requests relative to other varieties of Spanish. In contrast with PS speakers, US speakers showed a preference for more external and internal modification of the downgrading type, thus making their requests longer than those in PS and more tentative. The tentativeness expressed in US as opposed to that of PS, has been reflected by slightly higher levels of formality as expressed by US formulaic expressions and more of an awareness of their space and that of the other.

It could be argued that it is the difference in linguistic formulae that creates the basis

for generalisations. Just as Spaniards might interpret the use of apologetic verbs as attention-getting devices as (slightly) formal, Uruguayans see it as everyday since in their linguistic variety, they are usually employed in such contexts for such purposes. Likewise, Uruguayans might consider the use of discourse markers such as *oye* as too intruding an attention-getting device, since in US the particle has retained its full semantic meaning. Thus it would appear that negative generalisations of the type described stem from the different pragmatic functions which similar lexical items realise in different cultures.

It is hoped that this article will provide a Southern Cone perspective to the study of Hispanic pragmatic variation and thus contribute, if only one more piece, to what is an exciting puzzle waiting to be built upon.

## Appendix

### Situation 2 (from the US corpus)

*Informante A:*

*Sos empleado/a de una compañía para la cual trabajás hace ya bastante tiempo. Entre tus tareas tenés que atender el teléfono. Te acercás al escritorio de un/a aprendiz y le pedís que atienda el teléfono mientras salís a buscar unas cosas. ¿Qué le decís?*

Informant A:

'You've been an employee of a company for a while now. One of your duties is to answer the phone. You walk towards the desk of an apprentice and ask him/her to answer the phone for you while you pop out to get some things. What do you say?'

*Informante B:*

*Sos un/a nuevo/a aprendiz en una compañía. Uno/a de los/las empleados/as que está a cargo de atender el teléfono se acerca a tu escritorio y te habla. Respondele.*

Informant B:

'You're a new trainee in a company. One of the employees who is in charge of answering the phone walks to your desk and talks to you. Respond'

- A: *Tengo que salir un segundo/ no te animás a atenderme el teléfono un minutito cuando/ cuando salga*  
 ‘I have to pop out for a second/ do you<sup>V</sup> mind answering the phone for me for a minute<sup>Diminutive</sup> while/ while I’m out’
- B: *Bueno bueno yo te lo atiendo/ no/ no hay problema/ vas a demorar mucho*  
 ‘OK OK I’ll answer it/ no/ no problem/ are you<sup>T/V</sup> going to be long’
- A: *No/ voy a ir hasta/ ahí/ tengo que dar unas vueltas y/ vuelvo*  
 ‘No/ I’m going to/ there/ I have to run some errands and/ I’ll come back’
- B: *Tratá de no/ de no demorarte mucho porque yo/ me tengo que ir en un rato/ así que*  
 ‘Try<sup>V</sup> not to/ not to be too long since I/ I have to leave in a while/ so’
- A: *Ta/ sabés utilizar la central o*  
 ‘OK/ do you<sup>V</sup> know how to use the switchboard or’
- B: *No/ la verdad que no tengo mucha idea/ si me decís*  
 ‘No/ to be honest I’m not too sure/ so if you<sup>V</sup> tell me’
- A: *Bueno/ si apretás éste botón/ se la pasás a / Gerencia/ si apretás éste se la pasás a Secretaría y/ bueno/ acá tenés la lista de/ todas las demás Secciones*  
 ‘OK/ if you<sup>V</sup> press this button/ you<sup>V</sup> will put it through to/ Management/ if you<sup>V</sup> press this one you<sup>V</sup> will put it through to the Secretary and/ OK/ here you<sup>V</sup> have the list of/ the rest of the sections’
- B: *Ta/ ta ta*  
 ‘OK/ OK OK’
- A: *Bueno gracias*  
 ‘OK thanks’

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