

### **3 STUDIES ON LINGUISTIC POLITENESS**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

Studies on linguistic politeness have focused on the linguistic markers and strategies that are available in a language to encode politeness. Furthermore, these studies examine the relationship between utterance type and certain situational variables in effecting politeness. Relevant works on linguistic politeness in different cultural contexts and in the Malay socio-cultural context are discussed below.

#### **3.1 Research on Politeness in Malay Language (Bahasa Melayu)**

A search for work that examines politeness in Malay language has found that such studies are limited in number. Politeness studies based on face considerations are fewer still. One known study was by Khadijah Ibrahim (1993) who examined the politeness strategies employed by speakers of Malay when performing requests.

Data for the study were obtained from naturally-occurring conversations which took place in the home of the writer or the writer's relatives and friends. These conversations were conducted in a regional Malay dialect, i.e. the Johor dialect. 37 samples of casual conversations that involved the making of a request were recorded and the setting, situation, and topic for each were identified. The

subjects were the writer's family members (i.e. brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws), and close friends.

The request strategies identified from the sample data were analyzed using B and L's list of politeness strategies. It was found that 25 out of 37 request tokens (or 68%) were delivered off-record while only 5 out of 37 tokens (14%) were on-record requests. The findings did not account for the remaining 7 request tokens.

Based on these preliminary findings, the study concludes that the use of off-record strategies in making requests reflects the importance that Malay society, at least the Johor Malay, places on the use of indirectness in everyday talk. Going off-record, which the study equates with being indirect, suggests that efficiency in the communication of message is subordinate to the higher ideal of effectiveness in maintaining acceptable social links in Malay society (Khadijah Ibrahim, 1993:135). Furthermore, communication among the Malays is not only about conveying the message but it is also about communicating one's *budi* (kindness or understanding) (ibid:136). There is a Malay saying which lends support to this observation. The saying goes as follows: *Tak ada budi, tak adalah bahasa* (loosely translated as "Without *budi*, there can be no communication") (Khadijah Ibrahim, 1993:136). The use of indirectness that typifies the way of speaking among Malay people also suggests that there is little constraint of time and space in Malay thinking (ibid.).

The study also attempts to identify rules of politeness which are observed by Malay speakers. These rules, modelled closely on Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness, are as follows:

- (1) Be deferent (Lakoff's rules are assumed to be subsumed under this)
- (2) Don't be confrontational
- (3) Show appreciation

The extent to which the above rules operate in Malay society requires a much larger sample than that used in this study. Also, it should be noted that one of the main objectives of this study is to examine how deference is expressed by the young towards the old. This concern with inter-generational communication could have influenced the way in which the rules are conceived. Again, further empirical research on verbal interaction among Malay speakers with a focus on politeness issues would be able to test the applicability of these rules of politeness as suggested by this study.

Other studies on how politeness is encoded in Malay have utilized Leech's politeness maxims when analyzing data. One such study was conducted by Mohammad Idris (2000) who analyzed Malay family discourse in terms of the use of politeness maxims and their frequency of occurrence.

Data for the study were obtained by observing and recording verbal interactions among family members, and between them and non-family members, e.g.

neighbours and friends. Thirty families living in Besut, Terengganu (a small district in an east-coast state in Malaysia) were the subjects in this study. These subjects spoke the regional dialect of Terengganu. However, Mohammad Idris (2000) had chosen to transcribe the data using the standard variety, i.e. standard Malay.

65 sample conversations that involved 2-5 participants in each sample were used for analysis. The situation for each sample conversation was either formal or informal. For example, engaging in a leisure family activity or gathering together for a family dinner are typically informal activities. Formal situations would involve meeting with a school teacher or government officer to discuss relevant issues.

In terms of classifying the data for analysis, the role relationship between participants was identified and used for the purpose of classification. This produced four groups of interactants defined by the following role relationships: husband-wife, parent-child, sibling-sibling, and family member-non-family member.

As mentioned earlier, Leech's politeness maxims were used in this study to identify the features of linguistic politeness present in Malay family discourse and subsequently, the frequency of their occurrence was recorded. The findings are as follows:

Tact Maxim – 36.8%  
Modesty Maxim – 20.8%  
Agreement Maxim – 15.2%  
Generosity Maxim – 12.8%  
Sympathy Maxim – 6.4%  
Approbation Maxim – 8%

Mohammad Idris (2000), however, did not draw any significant conclusion about why one maxim is used more frequently than another or under which role relationship is one maxim preferable to others. The term ‘significant’ as used in the previous sentence refers to the importance that Malay speakers, or more precisely, the speakers of the regional dialect of Terengganu, place on these maxims when communicating with family and non-family members.

Another study which examined the use of Leech’s PP to encode politeness in Malay was conducted by Abdullah Mohd. Yassin in 1998. Data for the study was obtained from a text entitled *Lembaga Budi* written by Hamka in 1967. According to Abdullah, *Lembaga Budi* is a text that discusses the importance of politeness, appropriate behaviour, and refined manners (1998:37). It also provides examples of and suggestions on how these concepts would work in practice (ibid.). The final chapter entitled *Pedoman Menuruti Jalan Budi* which contained a summary of preceding chapters was chosen for analysis.

Analysis of the last chapter involved identifying the type and frequency of the maxims of politeness used, and this yielded the following results:

Tact Maxim – 33.9%  
Sympathy Maxim – 28.6%  
Approbation Maxim – 25%  
Agreement Maxim – 5.4%  
Generosity Maxim – 3.6%  
Modesty Maxim – 3.5%

Based on the findings above, Abdullah concluded that the maxims of Tact, Sympathy and Approbation were frequently used in written discourse while the maxims of Agreement, Generosity and Modesty were not (1998:97). Abdullah also made the conclusion that these three maxims were probably more suited for use in spoken discourse, particularly in face-to-face interaction (*ibid.*).

This appears to be a plausible assumption when the findings here are compared with those in Mohammad Idris's study. In Mohammad's study (2000), the analysis of family discourse found that the Agreement, Generosity and Modesty maxims (15.2%, 12.8% and 20.8%, respectively) had a higher percentage of use than the Sympathy (6.4%) and Approbation (8%) maxims. The Tact maxim, on the other hand, recorded the highest percentage of use in both studies.

A study by Suraiya Mohd. Ali (1998) set out to “identify, describe, and explain patterns of politeness behaviour occurring in conversational interactions between native and non-native speakers of Japanese” (p. 8). The non-native speakers in this study were Malays living and studying or working in Japan. The study also examined how a subject's “mediated character influenced and shaped the quality and the production of talk and consequently the choice of interactional strategies

the subject used” (Suraiya Mohd. Ali, 1998:8). This aspect of the study produced the following observation about a Malay’s concept of politeness when viewed from the perspective of Japanese notions of politeness as suggested by Ide (1989):

In traditional Malay discourse there is a preference for lengthy utterances and indirect expressions. To be direct is considered rude and is associated with low breeding. The Malays also value humility which is linked with the avoidance of loud attention on oneself. Indirectness and humility manifested in the Malay speech style, choice of words, and tone of voice may be regarded as volition in politeness determined by affective factors (Suraiya Mohd. Ali, 1998:46).

The use of indirectness in Malay is also common when buying-selling goods as Nor Hashimah (1992) found in her study of the art of bargaining among Kelantanese Malays (i.e. the Malays who live in Kelantan, an east-coast state in Malaysia). The writer found a high occurrence of the use of implicature (59%) between participants, i.e. the buyer and seller, when negotiating the price of an item. Specifically, implicatures were used by the buyer when asking for a price reduction, and by the seller when refusing such a request or when trying to convince the buyer that the selling price was already low or the goods were already being sold at cost price. Nor Hashimah (1992) concludes that this form of politeness strategy is one of the business strategy employed by Kelantanese traders not only to make a sale, but also to protect the feelings of their customers and ultimately to keep them coming back in the future.

This present study is another endeavour that focuses on the concept of linguistic politeness in Malay. It is similar to Khadijah Ibrahim’s study (1993) in the way

that the notion of face forms the basis for the use of politeness strategies when making requests. However, the present study is broader in scope since it also examines how offers are made. In addition, this study does not limit itself to individual speech acts like most of the studies previously mentioned. This study into how politeness is encoded in Malay also includes analyses of how conversational organization is interpreted in the light of politeness concerns. Thus, this study differs from previous studies on politeness in Malay language (known to the writer) in terms of scope and theoretical considerations.

### **3.2 Research Based On the Face-saving View of Politeness**

As mentioned earlier, B and L's politeness model has been widely adopted in studying politeness phenomena within a culture or across different cultures. In addition, such studies have focused on understanding the link between speech act patterns and politeness in a way that would make it possible to identify the factors that motivate "the choice of politeness strategies in context" (Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gheron 1985). In studying requests, for example, Blum-Kulka et al. (1985) suggest that a speaker's choice of a request strategy from "the wide range of alternative strategies" reveals his appraisal of social and situational variables (p. 114). Cross-cultural studies have also investigated the role politeness plays in the performance of specific speech acts in attempts to test the universal validity of B and L's theory and more importantly, to learn about a speech community's notion of politeness. The rest of this section will discuss some studies on linguistic



politeness that either support B and L's model or offer evidence that raises some questions about its claim of universality.

Based on B and L's model, politeness research has examined the relationship between the interpersonal variables, i.e. social distance (D), relative power (P), and imposition ranking ( $R_x$ ). Specifically, the main objective of these studies is to gauge the effect of these variables on politeness. Also, most of these studies use the experimental method in obtaining data where situations are constructed and subjects are asked to rate the sociological variables or the speech acts. One such study was by Holtgraves and Yang (1992) who examined the simultaneous effects of all three variables on politeness since B and L's theory assumes that the effects of these variables are additive, i.e. the sum of the three variables results in a specific degree of politeness.

Three vignettes which differed in the size of a request (R) were used. Three levels of hearer power(P) and relationship distance(D) were identified. Thus, nine versions of each vignette, i.e. a total of 27 vignettes, were created from the three levels of request size, power, and distance. 338 subjects were presented with three of these vignettes, and for each vignette they were asked to indicate their perception of the size of the request, the hearer's power, and the distance between the interactants.

It was found that the 3-way interaction of Power, Distance, and Size did not contribute significantly; “the effects of the three variables were not additive”. On the other hand, the 2-way interactions (Power x Size and Size x Distance) indicated that “the effects of P and D on politeness varied as a function of request size; as the size of the request increased, P and D mattered less” (Holtgraves and Yang, 1992:252). The authors concluded that when any of the three interpersonal variables reached a particularly high level, the effects of the remaining variables lessened or dropped out completely (*ibid.*).

In an earlier study, Holtgraves and Yang (1990) tested the effects of P, D, and R on strategy choice by asking subjects to rate ten requests based on the subjects’ perceptions of how likely a speaker would use each request and how polite it would be if he used each particular request. The requests reflected the use of the four super-strategies, i.e. one request used the bald on-record strategy, two were positive politeness strategies, five negative politeness strategies, and two off-record strategies.

Unlike their later study, this study used two levels of each variable. There were two levels of P (low and equal), two of D (close and distant), and two levels of R (small and large requests). Four vignettes were written which described a situation in which one person was about to make a request of another person. Two of the vignettes involved a relatively large request and two involved relatively small requests. In Experiment 1, the effects of request size were tested (there was no

information regarding the relationship between the two interactants in the vignettes) by asking subjects to read each vignette and rate ten requests which followed it in terms of likelihood of use and politeness. Experiment 2 studied the effects of both power and relationship distance by creating four versions of each vignette; a total of 16. Subjects were asked to perform the same task as in Experiment 1.

The results of Experiment 1 showed that “the least polite strategies were less likely for large than for small requests”. However, “there was little evidence for the prediction that the politer strategies would be more likely for a large than for a small request” (Holtgraves and Yang, 1990:725). Thus, the imposition variable (R) had little effect on the choice of a politeness strategy. In Experiment 2, interactions between power and distance did not produce the predicted outcomes. “P had the predicted effect on the likelihood of a strategy when the relationship was distant but not close, and D had the predicted effect when the power was equal but not low” (Holtgraves and Yang, 1990:725).

Holtgraves (1986) studied the relationship between the appropriateness of direct and indirect replies and the predictor variables of face threat (the FTA was a request for information), and between these reply types and the status of interactants. Since an indirect reply encodes concerns for face, the author hypothesized that “indirect replies would be perceived as more appropriate in face-threatening than in non-face-threatening situations” (Holtgraves, 1986:306).

Also, status may affect the choice between direct and indirect replies where an indirect reply would be perceived as more appropriate for the low-status speaker (relative to the hearer). In addition, the use of a direct reply “would result in inferences of greater liking and closeness” (ibid: 309).

In this study, subjects were asked to read a scenario which described one interactant requesting information from the other followed by six possible replies. Next, they rated the replies on the following dimensions: perceived likelihood and politeness of each reply as a function of face threat (Experiment 1). Subjects also rated the perceived likelihood and politeness of replies as a function of the relative status of the interactants, how much the questioner liked the replier, how much the replier liked the questioner, and the closeness of the interactants’ relationship (Experiment 2).

The results showed that indirect replies were perceived as more likely in face-threatening situations. It was also found that a direct reply used by a speaker in a face-threatening situation resulted in inferences of relatively higher status. This reply type (direct and true) also produced perceptions of liking and closeness. “Thus, greater directness was associated with greater liking and closeness” (Holtgraves, 1986: 312).

Other than using constructed situations in an experimental study to gauge the effects of P, D, and R on politeness, other data type has also been used. Brown

and Gilman (1989) used plays by Shakespeare for a study of politeness theory. The claim that power (P), distance (D), and the ranked extremity (R) of a face-threatening act (FTA) were the universal determinants of politeness levels in dyadic discourse was tested for Shakespeare's use of Early Modern English. The authors chose plays because such "dramatic texts provided the best information on colloquial speech of the period" (1989:159). In selecting FTAs which threatened positive and negative face, Brown and Gilman focused on the most frequent and most easily identified ones. These were commands, requests, and advice which threatened negative face; and criticisms, insults, disagreements, and corrections which threatened positive face.

The study began with a search for "speeches which may be regarded as minimal contrasts". This meant locating a pair of speeches "involving the same two characters such that the relationship between the characters would be the same on the occasion of the two speeches with respect to two out of three weightiness variables (P, D, and R) but clearly different on the third" (Brown and Gilman, 1989: 173). "Whenever such a pair was found, a pair contrasting only in P or only in D or only in R, there would be two speeches to be scored for politeness" and "the stretch of speech scored was to be long enough to specify the full FTA but not so long as to include more than one speech act" (ibid:184). Scoring was done by assigning one point (+1) for each instance of any of the sub-strategies of positive politeness and negative politeness. "The total politeness score for a speech was the sum of its points" (Brown and Gilman, 1989:184).

The results confirmed the effects of power (P) and extremity of face threat (R) on politeness levels in discourse dyads. “Politeness in Shakespeare’s plays increased with the relative power of the hearer over the speaker, and it increased with the extremity of the FTA” (Brown and Gilman, 1989:199). However, the results for D were not those predicted by politeness theory. “Distance” in this study was defined as relationship closeness (familiarity) or affect (liking) or both. As such, politeness increased with an increase of affection and decreased with a decrease of it; the changes in closeness or intimacy and its effects on politeness were absent or insignificant.

Politeness theory has suggested that the values which are assigned to P, D, and R in a particular context and for a particular FTA are subject to cultural differences. Thus, cultural differences in the perceptions of these variables may result in differences in politeness in the same situation (Holtgraves and Yang, 1992). For example, the assumption of greater distance among members of a given cultural group will result in greater politeness in interactions with each other (Scollon and Scollon, 1981). Related to these differences in perceptions are the cultural differences in the weighting of the three variables which should also result in variability in politeness (Holtgraves and Yang, 1992). For instance, individuals in one culture (e.g. Korea) may tend to weigh power more heavily than do those in another culture (e.g. America) (Hofstede 1980, cited in Holtgraves and Yang, 1992).

Cross-cultural studies have also found that variability in politeness strategies between western and non-western cultures is due to the different weighting given to the social bases for P; for example, age and occupation. Age, considered a determinant of P, matters more among equal-status speakers in Asia than among those in the West (Kasper, 1998). The Japanese tend to weigh status, in terms of the position an individual holds in a work institution, more heavily than the Americans, and thus vary their politeness strategies accordingly (Beebe and Takahashi 1989, cited in Kasper 1998). The following discussion describes some studies that have examined the perception and weighting of the P, D, and R variables in a single culture (i.e. Blum-Kulka et al., 1985) or across cultures (i.e. Holtgraves and Yang, 1990, 1992; Ambady et al., 1996).

A cross-cultural study by Holtgraves and Yang (1992) examined the differences in the perceptions and weighting of power, distance, and size of an imposition between Americans and Koreans. There were 177 English-speaking Americans and 161 Koreans who participated in this study. These subjects were asked to indicate their perception of the size of a request, the hearer's power, and the relationship distance by reading three vignettes. They were then instructed to write down exactly what they would say when making the request in each of the three situations.

The results showed that perceived distance was greater for Americans than for Koreans and this perception resulted in American requests which were more

polite than Korean requests. However, Holtgraves and Yang (1992) did not preclude the effects of other variables (e.g. Americans' concern for greater self-presentation) on both politeness and perceptions of distance. There were also "relatively small but significant American-Korean differences in the weighting of power and relationship distance; the politeness of Korean requests varied more as a function of P and D the smaller the size of the request than did the American requests" (Holtgraves and Yang, 1992:252). Therefore, the researchers suggested that it was more accurate to describe Korean use of language as being more responsive to the interpersonal features of situations (i.e. the greater weighting given to P and D) than to characterize them as more polite than Westerners (a common assumption not supported by this study) (ibid:252-3).

In a 1990 study, Holtgraves and Yang explored American and Korean judgments of a speaker's relative power and the degree of distance between two interactants given a request strategy. This study was conducted by asking subjects (36 Americans and 37 Koreans) to read four vignettes (each described a situation in which one person is about to make a request of another person) and ten requests which followed each vignette. For each request, the subjects were asked to indicate their perceptions of the power of the speaker relative to the hearer and the closeness of the relationship. It was found that Koreans perceived power and distance as more significant when making a request than did the Americans.



One of the aims of Ambady, Koo, Lee, and Rosenthal (1996) cross-cultural study was to discover the cultural differences between American and Korean interpretation of social and contextual cues by analyzing the use of politeness strategies in these cultures. The study involved two sets of subjects: 36 Korean stockbrokers and 30 American graduate students. These subjects were asked to role-play delivering good and bad news to three targets (a superior, a peer, and a subordinate). The content of the good and bad news was framed so as to make it realistic and relevant to the two different sets of subjects.

The findings revealed that Koreans used more other-oriented strategy (comprising both positive and negative strategies) with superiors than with peers and subordinates whereas Americans were equally other-oriented towards all three targets. This indicated that Koreans paid more attention to interpersonal and contextual cues (e.g. the roles of the interactants and group membership) in communicating information. The findings also showed that Americans used other-oriented strategies when they delivered good news rather than bad news but Koreans' use of this strategy did not vary as a result of the type of news communicated (Ambady et al., 1996:1010). It could be said that Americans valued the content of communication more than the relationship with the target listener when presenting information (ibid.).

In studying the range of variation in the use of requesting strategies in Hebrew, Blum-Kulka, Danet, and Gherson (1985) sought to answer the following question:

Are relative distance, relative power, and degree of imposition the principal factors which subsume all others in explaining variation in use?

Data for the study were requests which were drawn from three sources: 1) requests which occurred in “live” face-to-face interaction; 2) requests identified in transcripts of tape-recorded conversations; and 3) requests in written correspondence. The predictor variables which were used to investigate variability in requesting behaviour were sex, age, relative power, relative social distance, request goal, setting, and medium. Two types of statistical analysis were used “to assess the relative importance of these variables in shaping choice of request strategy” (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:124). The first was a cross-tabulation of each variable with the three levels of directness, i.e. direct, conventionally indirect, and nonconventional indirect, in order to discover “the unique contribution of each to the choice of request strategy” (ibid:121). The other was a stepwise multiple regression analysis.

Analysis of the relationship between the variables and levels of directness which was examined using the cross-tabulation method revealed the following: 1) requests made by people in positions of power were mostly direct while those made by people in a powerless position were largely indirect; and 2) requests were more direct with a decrease in social distance or increase in familiarity. As for the multivariate analysis where all variables were taken into account, the role

of relative power was small and that of social distance was insignificant in explaining the various uses of request strategies in Israeli society.

Blum-Kulka et al. (1985) also studied the combined effect of relative power and relative social distance on the choice of a request strategy and found that in asymmetrical power situations the role of P outweighed that of D. In situations of equal power, the degree of familiarity (D) determined the type of request strategy used, i.e. a request to a stranger was indirect while that to a friend was direct.

In describing the politeness strategies used to perform FTAs, B and L extend the description to include the general “quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society”, i.e. ethos (1987:243). They argue that this type of generalization is possible given the “culture-specific dimensions of social relationships, as assumed by D and P” (ibid.). For example, high P values result in an emphasis on status differentiation and low P values entail an egalitarian emphasis. Related to the culture-based assessment of D and P is “the cultural composition of  $W_x$ ” as determined by the sum of P, D, and R values. According to B and L, “the general level of  $W_x$  (the weightiness of the face-threatening act) in a culture allows for a general description of the culture as either a “positive-politeness culture” or a “negative-politeness culture” (1987:245). Positive-politeness cultures are those where “impositions are thought of as small, easy-going interaction is reflective of low social distance, and relative power as never very great” while the reverse holds for negative-politeness cultures (ibid.).

A study by Blum-Kulka et al. (1985) mentioned above describes Israeli society as one that is positive politeness oriented. This is due to the relatively high frequency of direct strategies when making requests which in turn is explained by the low value placed on relative social distance. This emphasis on common ground or solidarity is linguistically realized in the use of mitigators. The presence of these elements with direct strategies serves to soften “the impact of the bald on-record approach” (Blum-Kulka et al., 1985:136). An investigation of polite usage in Ojibwa society (Rhodes, 1989) also showed an emphasis on positive politeness.

Rhodes (1989) studied how requests were made by Ojibwas (an American Indian group of the upper Great Lakes region) using data drawn from published texts. He found that requests that asserted instead of questioned the hearer’s willingness to perform an act were considered “conventional and polite”. Such requests contained “the predictive future morpheme *ga*”. Rhodes observes that “the assertion of a future act or state resulting from a future act” when requesting presumes cooperation among Ojibwas and typifies a positive politeness strategy (1989:256). Furthermore, this request form is motivated by the presumption that each Ojibwa is considered a “classificatory relative” by other Ojibwas and is accorded the same “level of intimacy and cooperation typical of family members” (ibid:253). As such, social distances are short, power differential is slight, and positive politeness characterizes requesting behaviour in Ojibwa society.

One similarity that is shared by the studies mentioned above is their focus on the speech act 'request'. In fact, most politeness studies have examined the linguistic realizations of requests to uncover how this utterance type is marked for politeness. As such, studies on the degree of politeness associated with a particular request act have focused on indirect requests. One such study is by Clark and Schunk (1980) who studied the degree of politeness associated with a level of directness using conventionally indirect requests.

In studying the politeness of indirect requests, Clark and Schunk (1980) adopted B and L's (1987) face-work theory of politeness which, among others, predicts that "a request is polite to the extent that it increases the benefits or lowers the costs to the requestee" (p. 137). Since requests are intrinsically face-threatening, a speaker will attempt to reduce or eliminate the threat to the addressee's face by using indirect requests. The face-redressive feature of indirect requests is present in their literal meanings, in most cases.

Clark and Schunk used 18 types of indirect requests that requested for information in their experiment. They were sorted into six broad categories which were "ordered approximately for their benefit to H", i.e. in decreasing level of politeness. These categories described the literal meanings of the indirect request which were permission (e.g. May I ask you...?), imposition (e.g. Would you mind telling me...?), ability (e.g. Can you tell me...?), memory (e.g. Have I already

asked you...?), commitment (e.g. Will you tell me...?), and obligation (Shouldn't you tell me...?).

The results showed that the politeness ratings of the indirect requests were very much as predicted. Requests that were face-oriented (benefits H) were judged more polite than those that were not. These requests reduced or eliminated the threat to H's face via linguistic devices where S could subordinate himself to H by asking permission to make his request, as in "May I ask you?"; S could offer H the authority to say that the request was too imposing, as in "Would you mind?"; or S could give H the chance to say that he was unable to carry out the request, as in "Can you tell me?" (Clark and Schunk, 1980:137-8).

Another study by Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999) examined the relationship between indirectness and politeness through the analysis of perceptions of non-conventional indirect requests or requestive hints by native speakers of Japanese and English. Investigation of the perceived politeness of hints was undertaken by comparing this request form to direct and conventional indirect requests. In addition, the request forms represented two formality levels ("less formal" and "more formal") for English and three formality levels ("informal", "formal", and "very formal") for Japanese.

The findings showed that, in Japanese, the informal hint was perceived as far less polite than the very formal hint (ranked ninth and first, respectively). Rinnert and

Kobayashi (1999) suggested that this outcome could be due in part to the linguistic forms of these requests which carried social information about the speaker's relationship to the hearer. Specifically, the verb endings in informal hints "evoked a close relationship between S and H" and therefore, were "associated with direct requests although the hints did not communicate the speaker's intent clearly" (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999:1182-3). On the other hand, the very formal hint which was marked with polite honorifics retained its feature of indirectness. In short, "Japanese perceptions of politeness depend heavily upon the formality level of the utterance" (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 1999:1182-3). On the other hand, English speakers' perceived politeness of hints was not affected by formality level but by the very nature of hints. According to Rinnert and Kobayashi (1999), hints were perceived as less polite than conventionally indirect requests possibly because "their open-ended propositional content, linguistic form, and pragmatic force" could lead to a misinterpretation of the message and unsuccessful communication (p. 1184).

Apart from using a particular strategy type to mitigate a request, syntactic elements also serve to soften a request made at any of the three levels of directness. One way in which surface structure is able to lessen the face threat of a request is by encoding deference in its form. Fraser and Nolen (1981) conducted a study to identify the types of linguistic forms that "contribute[d] to the relative deference of an utterance". The utterances used were typical of the speech act of requesting, specifically, "25 English sentences that reflected frequently used

requesting forms” were used in this study. Fraser and Nolen (1981) postulated that “each of the 25 sentences possessed a varying but unknown degree of deference” (p. 99). The task then was to determine whether “native speakers would associate a degree of deference relative to others in the set of sentences” and, if so, “the linguistic factors which might create this difference in relative deference” (ibid.).

The ranking of the set of sentences confirmed Fraser and Nolen’s (1981) first hypothesis, namely, “that native speakers of English were able to make consistent judgments about the relative degree of deference associated with a sentence used to make a request” (p. 102). It also made apparent the linguistic features of the sentences that determined their relative deference. One such feature is the use of “the interrogative (e.g. Can you do that?) rather than the declarative (e.g. That needs to be done) or imperative (e.g. Do that) syntactic form” to convey more deference (Fraser and Nolen, 1981:102). A speaker who uses an interrogative form to make a request allows the hearer to decide “whether he can or cannot and whether he wants or needs to take the implied or indirect request as the intended meaning” (Fraser and Nolen, 1981:102). Thus, the speaker presents the hearer with options and such options “enhance the status of the hearer, the essence of deference” (ibid.).

Another feature that contributes to relative deference is the presence of “a conditional form rather than the indicative one” (Fraser and Nolen, 1981:103).



For example, “Could you do that” was judged to be more deferential than “Can you do that” since the conditional conveyed more tentativeness on the part of the speaker when making the request. A third linguistic feature involves the use of negative markers and their “affirmative counterparts”. The presence of negatives in the sentences (generally in combination with modals) was associated with less deference compared to the same sentences with positive modals. For instance, “Can you do that” was judged to be more deferent than “Can’t you do that”. In addition, requests with the modal “will” were judged to be more deferential than the corresponding requests with “can”.

In short, the three linguistic features that play a role in the assignment of deference to request forms are 1) interrogatives which are judged more deferent than imperatives, 2) requests using a conditional modal rather than an indicative one, and 3) those with a positive modal (vs. negative modals). However, before any stronger conclusions can be drawn, Fraser and Nolen (1981) suggest further study to examine the effects of additional linguistic expressions on deference judgments of these requests. Such linguistic items include the presence of a “real” verb such as “help” or “try that on”, the effect of “please”, the use of the phrase “for me” as in “Can you do that for me?”, and the effect of time expressions (e.g. “now”, “sometimes”, and “later on”) (Fraser and Nolen, 1981:105).

### 3.3 Conclusion

The study of politeness across different cultures or within a particular culture mentioned in this chapter has revealed how politeness is perceived by diverse cultures or subcultures and also how it is identical or is distinct among cultures. For example, such investigations into cultural notions of politeness involve looking at how politeness is encoded in the performance of face-threatening acts in different societies given the same culturally-defined situational variables. B and L's work, in particular, suggests cross-cultural parallels in the use of politeness strategies to perform FTAs. Further, these parallels can be explained in terms of face concerns which are said to be universal or present in all cultures.

A concern for face is also present in Malay society and it is believed to permeate communication among its members, i.e. it is evident from the way its members are polite to one another. A Malay speaker's use of linguistic means to perform face-threatening acts (in this study the speech acts 'offer' and 'request' are FTAs) also encode face-redressive features, which in turn, encode politeness. Politeness is also assumed to motivate the performance of FTAs over several turns and the responses to these FTAs. The following chapter details how this study into politeness in Malay is carried out.