

## *Original Paper*

# A Pragmatic Study of Requests by Males and Females in Online Religious Forums

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### **Abstract**

*The current study investigates the request strategies used by males and females in online religious forums. It aims to explore request types realized by linguistic formulas used by males and females when they make requests in computer-mediated communication. The study offers pragmatic and sociolinguistic explanations for these differences. It also discusses the functions of these requestive forms such as asking for more clarifications or to request the addressee to answer a question directly. This study found that there are seven strategies used by the participants to make their requests. Most of which are shared by males and females. The study applied Chi-square test to show whether or not the differences in the use of each type of requests between the two groups (males and females) are statistically significant.*

### **Keywords**

*requests, gender, strategies, computer-mediated communication, Chi-square test*

## **1. Introduction**

The research paper investigates the speech act of request as used by male and female writers in online religious forums. While many studies analyzed the speech act of request cross-culturally and between genders in real communication, I found very few studies that examined how people of both genders process language to make requests in computer-mediated communications. I, therefore, selected this act to investigate how people make requests in online religious forums. This paper analyzes different types of requests as linguistic choices that writers of both genders in online forums make to perform this act. These choices in turn are classified into categories using Blum Kulka' & Olshtain's framework (1984). In this study, classification of requests into categories is based on the level of directness (from the most to the least direct types). Accordingly, this research paper throws light on these linguistic formulas to

investigate how male and female writers use language to make requests.

As is the case with any speech act, requests are used by writers in online communications to achieve many purposes, like to ask for more clarification or to stop talking. According to many researchers (e.g., Herring, 2015 and Cunningham, 2016), writers employ some strategies when making requests (such as interrogative form concerned with hearer's ability) to mitigate imposition on the addressee as it is considered one of the most threatening acts. That is, it intrinsically threatens the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Requesters also use internal and external modifications along with head acts for different functions (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), as explained in the analysis section.

## 2. Literature Review

Searle (1979) classifies requests under directive acts. He defines the speech act of request as “a directive act whose illocutionary force or intended meaning is to get the addressee to do something for the benefit of the requester” (1979, p. 14). He further claims that these attempts in these directive acts vary from being very modest like “I suggest you do it” to being fierce like “I insist that you do it”. In terms of request structure, Yule (1996) maintains that English has a typical pattern where asking a question about the addressee's ability such as *can you...?* or *could you...?* can be regarded as making a request but performed in an indirect way, in addition to other structures in which requests can be formulated as declaratives and imperatives.

On another related point, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) state that while speakers make requests, they usually consider the need to lessen the imposition on the addressee. This in turn results in a variety of direct and indirect ways to perform this speech act. One strategy that the speaker employs to minimize this imposition is to select indirect expressions, represented by some linguistic formulas, over direct ones. In this regard, modifications are also used as a strategy to make requests less threatening. They further say that these modifications are described as internal or external modifications that are mainly employed to minimize the imposition of performing a request on the addressee. In internal modifications, the requester uses mitigating devices within the same head act, whereas external modifications are employed outside the head act; either in the following or preceding moves within the context in which a request is performed.

It is worth mentioning that these modifications can be used in some acts more than others. This generally depends on how much the speaker imposes on the addressee to get him/her to do what he/she wants. That is, speakers consider using modifications when they make requests much more than if they perform the speech act of invitation or offering. In the same context, there are many studies (e.g., Cunningham, 2016) that examined request modifications in synchronous computer-mediated interaction in terms of (in) directness and the use of internal and external modifications by each gender. Also, Leopold (2015) examined what strategies used to make requests in e-mails written by native professionals from a variety of companies in the United States. She found that males used more direct

and fewer conventionally indirect strategies than their female counterparts. And the most popular strategy used by both genders was the imperative. Another study whose findings agree with Leopold's is Watanabe (2005). He investigated how Chinese and Japanese make requests during small group discussions in CMC. The findings showed that group B consisting of female participants used less direct mode of requestive strategies and frequent sound checking confirmation.

Other studies (e.g., Dresner & Herring, 2010) examined paralinguistic features that can be employed when performing some speech acts in online communication. They argue that emoticons are used not only as signs of emotions in online communication, but also as indications of the intended action (the illocutionary force) of the textual utterances that they accompany. Simply put, they play an important role in conveying the writer's emotions so that the addressee can understand what the writer means rather than says. They, therefore, help reveal the illocutionary force of an utterance.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

The paper aims to explore request types realized by various linguistic tokens used by male and female writers when they make requests in religious forums (in computer-mediated communication) and to show whether the difference in the use of each type between the two groups (males and females) is statistically significant. This study offers pragmatic and sociolinguistic explanations for these differences. Thus, the significance of the study stems from the fact that it explores an area of pragmatics concerning gender differences that has not, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, been investigated in online religious forums. It, therefore, fills in an existing gap in research.

### **4. Research Questions**

The study tries to answer the following main questions:

- What are request types used by male and female writers in online religious forums?
- What are the preferred types used by each gender in these forums?
- Is there a statistically significant gender difference in the use of these request types?

### **5. Data Collection**

The data was collected from male and female writers participating in religious discussions in two online forums. This data is publicly available. I selected these forums on the basis that there is a high level of involvement of both male and female writers. This is attributed to the fact that topics discussed in these forums are of interest to both genders. This can ensure that writers of both genders are motivated to participate and respond to one another. Consequently, their speeches are of dialogic character. This in turn made it easier to find more linguistic variation in which requests made by both genders.

The number of requests collected under different categories over the period between September 2015 and October 2016 for this study is (292) from male and female writers, with (187) requests made by males and (105) requests by females from two religious forums. These forums are:

- 1) <http://www.gracecentered.com/>
- 2) <http://www.religiousforums.com/>

I tried to collect data from participants whose gender is indicated or whose names or nicknames clearly denote their gender in order to be able to make a clear analysis based on this variable.

## 6. Methods of Analysis

I adopted Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's framework (1984) to analyze requests made by both genders in online forums, classifying them into different categories. In this research, quantitative analysis is employed to find out whether the difference between the two groups (male and female writers) in the use of each request type is statistically significant to answer the main question of the study.

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) framework:

- 1) Mood Derivative (imperative).
- 2) Explicit Performative.
- 3) Hedged Performatives.
- 4) Locution Derivable or Obligation Statement.
- 5) Scope Stating.
- 6) Language Specific Suggestory Formula.
- 7) Reference to Preparatory Conditions.
- 8) Strong hint.
- 9) Mild hint.

In Blum-Kulka & Olshtain's (1984) framework, directness is classified into three levels that are realized by different linguistic representations: That is, the first level is concerned with the most direct forms. At this level, request types are realized by either imperatives or the act as being named by the speaker irrespective of whether it is hedged or explicit (hedged performatives and explicit performatives). This level includes the first three linguistic categories of the framework stated above. The second level in the framework consists of conventionally indirect types, including the second four categories which are less explicit or direct than those in the first level. In addition, the last level is the least direct level consisting only of hints.

While classifying the data collected into different request types, I was guided by Searle's (1979), Yule's (1996) and Blum-Kulka' & Olshtain's (1984) definitions of these types in which linguistic tokens included. Thus, in the table below I listed those linguistic tokens through which I could realize the different types of requests making up the framework adopted in this study.

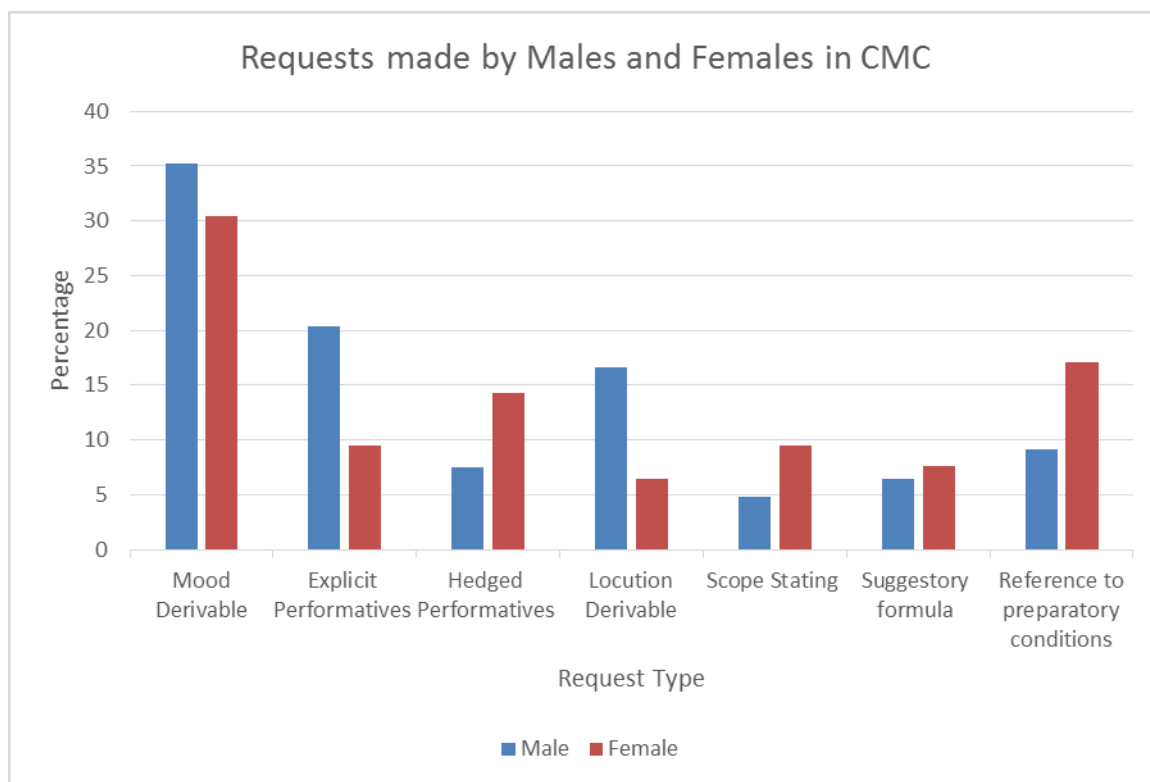
**Table 1. Types of Requests**

NO	Request Type	Linguistic Tokens (Examples)
1	Mood Derivable	Imperative forms
2	Explicit Performatives	I ask.../I (want to) ask you...
3	Hedged Performatives	I would ask you.../I might ask you...
4	Locution Derivable	need to/have to/ should/must/ought to
5	Scope Stating	I wish/I wonder/I hope/I would like (you) to/
6	Suggestory Formula	What about...?/How about...?/Why don't...?/Why not...?/Let's
7	Reference to Preparatory Conditions	Can you...?/Could you...?/Would you...?/

## 7. Results and Discussion

The strategies used to make requests by male and female writers are defined and discussed through examples extracted from the obtained data, provided with the frequency and percentage of the use of each request type, with showing whether the difference between the two groups (males and females) in the use of each type is statistically significant at the degree of probability (P). Thus, gender in this research is an important variable that was examined to analyze linguistic choices that writers made to perform the speech act of request in online interaction in two forums.

The chart below shows the request types representing the data collected in this study and the percentage of the use of each type by each gender.



**Figure 1. Percentages of Frequencies of Requests**

The table below shows that while there are two types of requests (*Mood Derivable* and *Suggestory Formula*) where gender difference between males and females is not statistically significant, the Chi-Square value test indicates that the other five types in the table have a statistically significant gender difference between the two groups at different degrees of probability (P) between (0.1-0.5), either in favor of male or female writers. This is explained below in detail and with exemplification.

**Table 2. The Differences in the Frequencies of Requests Types between Males and Females**

NO	Request Type	Writers				Total	Chi-Square	Sig (P) value
		Male		Female				
		Frequency	percent	Frequency	Percent			
1	Mood Derivable	66	35.29	32	30.47	98	0.45	0.57
2	Explicit Performatives	38	20.32	10	9.52	48	5.40	0.02
3	Hedged Performatives	14	7.48	15	14.28	29	5.22	0.02
4	Locution Derivable	31	16.57	12	6.41	43	6.65	0.01
5	Scope Stating	9	4.81	10	9.52	19	5.32	0.02
6	Suggestory Formula	12	6.41	8	7.61	20	0.14	0.75
7	Reference to Preparatory Conditions	17	9.09	18	17.14	35	3.43	0.05
<b>Total</b>		187		105		292		

\*\* Chi-Square is Sig. at ( $P < 0.05$ ).

In this section, one example is provided to each request type taken from either male or female sample depending on where it is more used (male or female sample).

### 7.1 Mood Derivable

Searle (1979) argues that when speakers make requests using imperatives, they leave no option for the addressee to refuse what is requested. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) states that such a type is realized as a request by the grammatical mood of the verb formulated in the imperative form.

The data analysis shows that mood derivable type is the most common type employed by both genders. This generally indicates that people tend to use more direct language in online communication than in face to face communication. This type of requests represents (35.29%) of the male writers sample and (30.47%) of the female writers sample. But the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant at  $P=(0.57)$ .

“...You asked the question in the other thread twice. The second time like I had not answered the first time. And I did answer you. **Slow down and read what I am saying** or why bother asking me in the first place?”

(Believer-Male). Topic: Is it...?

Believer makes a direct request, using mood derivable type in which he asks the addressee (Memyself) to read what is posted first before she repeatedly asks her question (true that its always God's will to heal?) in different threads. Here the speaker (Believer) employs external modifications "You asked the question... I did answer you" before making the request to justify what he asked Memyself to do. Jalilifar (2009) argue that using modifications doesn't necessarily affect the level of directness (e.g., making requests less direct) but they are used to minimize the request imposition on the hearer.

### 7.2 Explicit Performative

Performative utterances can be defined in terms of a grammatical formula consisting of a first person singular and an active verb in the simple present tense "I hereby verb present active X..." And consequently, the illocutionary force of the request is realized by that formula in which the utterance is named by the speaker as a request (Searle, 1979; Horn & Ward, 2006).

This type of requests represents (20.32%) of the requests made by the males and (9.52%) of the requests made by the females. And the difference between the two groups is statistically significant at  $P=(0.02)$ , in favor of the male writers. This statistically significant gender difference shows that men tend to use requests with explicit formulas, such as "I ask" or "I want to ask" much more than their female counterparts.

"Hi guys, I don't know if the topic was mentioned before, I didn't manage to find it. **I want to ask you about some parental control methods over my kids' computer.** Is there any easy to use software or some settings in windows 7 that will allow me to control my kids during using the internet?"

Thanks for any help in advance!"

(Barbar-Male) Topic: Family

Here Barber explicitly requests the writers in the forum to help him control his kids while using the internet. The request is performed explicitly and realized by the active present verb "ask". The head act "I want to ask...my kid's computer" is preceded and followed by external modifications. In this regard, Blum Kulka and Olshtain (1984) argue that these modifications play an important role in minimizing the imposition on the addressee as they function as justifications and explanations for the speaker's request. The speaker first uses *alerter* "Hi guys" and *preparator* "I don't know if the topic was mentioned before, I didn't manage to find it" as external modifiers functioning as justifications for his request. In addition, he uses *appreciator* "Thanks for any help in advance!" which shows respect and consideration to the requestee. Cunningham (2015) argues that such preparators, which prepare the address to do something, and appreciators are frequently used when requests are made.

### 7.3 Hedged Performatives

This type of request is similar to the previous one (explicit performatives), with the difference that a hedge device is used within the head act. And by this way, hedged performatives and explicit performatives are distinguished from each other.



This type of requests represents (7.48%) of the male sample and (14.28%) of the female sample, with the difference between the two groups is statistically significant at  $P=(0.02)$ , in favor of the female writers. This indicates that the female writers in this study tend to use more hedges than their male counterparts to mitigate their request. This significant difference between the two genders in the use of this type also shows that females generally realize the nature of this act as being one of the most threatening acts more than men, and hence hedges are more considerably used by them.

**“I would ask Mr. Crossan if he believes that all the miracles attributed to Jesus were meant to be symbolic”.**

(Viole-Female). Topic: Are There Good Grounds for Asserting the Ancients Took Their Religious Stories Only Symbolically?

In this example, the writer (Viole) makes her request, using “would” as a hedge device embedded within the performative head act in order to mitigate the request force on the addressee. In this type, requesters leave more options for the addressee to refuse to perform the action than the two previous types of requests as they show that they are less sure or confident that the addressee will perform the action.

#### 7.4 Locution Derivable

Searle (1979) states that some requests are performed by verbs with imperative meaning. In this regard, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, p. 202) asserts that “the illocutionary point is directly derivable from the semantic meaning of the locution”. They further state that in this type of requests people use obligation statements containing verbs such as *have to*, *need to*, *must* and the like.

This type of requests represents (16.57%) of the requests made by the males and (6.41%) of the requests by the females. And the difference between the two groups is statistically significant at  $P=(0.01)$ , in favor of the male writers. One of the reasons that would explain why this type is frequently used by male writers is that it contains verbs with imperative meaning that would attract male writers’ selection of this type of requests.

“I know I’m just a drop in the sea, but I’ll be boycotting football until the NFL compels the spoiled brat to show some respect to the fans who pay good money to watch a game, not to watch BLM activism.

**More Christians need to practice boycotts.** The Left uses boycotts to great effect” (Tertullian-Male).

Topic: Why does the NFL allow Kaepernick to be a jerk at work?

This request is classified under *locution derivable* in which the illocutionary force is realized by the verb “need to” which has imperative meaning. In this example, the speaker uses the verb “need to” to show the necessity of the audience’ compliance to his request. The request followed by an external modification “The Left uses boycotts to great effect” which serves as a justification of why he is asking the people in the forum to boycott. While “I know I’m just a drop in but I’ll be boycotting...BLM activism” which precedes head act is *small talk* to establish kind of a positive atmosphere which qualifies the speaker to make his request in the following move, according to Cunningham (2015).

### 7.5 Scope Stating

According to Blum Kulka and Olshtain (1984), this type of requests is concerned with speaker's wish or desire that hearer performs what is requested. So, this type of request is considered indirect as the request in this type is implicitly stated, that is, the request is made as the speaker expresses his/her wish or desire.

This type of requests represents (4.81%) of the requests made by the males and (9.52%) of the requests made by the females. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant at  $P=0.2$ , in favor of the females. Scope stating is classified as an indirect type that female writers used much more than their male counterparts.

**“I was wondering if you could keep me in prayer.** I am in a hard situation where my bf who appeared to be a new christian has in fact not been born again. He is very confused, and unsure. I have had to let him go and just pray for him. He had bought a ring but kept stalling on proposing. I believe now that him stalling has been a blessing in disguise. I don't know how long to wait for, or what is going to happen but it has been a really hard situation, very stressful very gut wrenching.

Please keep him in prayer.

I am currently unemployed which adds to my stress. I feel like I am in a situation where my life is at a standstill, not going anywhere”.

Thank you”

(Gods Princess -Female) Topic: Prayer

In this example, the request is realized by the verb “was wondering”. The speaker indirectly performed her request as she expresses her wish or desire that the forum audience prays for her because of the difficult situation in which she is stuck. As the example indicates, Gods Princess uses a lot of external modifications through which she is justifying her head request “I was wondering if you could keep me in prayer”. The speaker politely tries to get the addressee to do what is requested. Additionally, she makes another request, realized by the imperative form of the verb keep, preceded by a politeness marker “please”. Then the speaker uses *appreciator* “thank you”.

### 7.6 Suggestory Formula

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) say that such a request strategy involves a suggestion to the hearer. So, the speaker requests the addressee to do something in a way that shows that he/she suggests something for the addressee to do.

This type of requests represents (6.41%) of the male writers sample and (7.61%) of the female writers sample. The difference, however, is not statistically significant at  $P=0.75$ . *Suggestory formula* was one of the least requests used by both genders in this study.

“You have many questions for the purpose of pulling down. **Why don't you answer my question?**

Believer-M

And, you make baseless and false accusations against me”.

**“Why don’t you just stop that.** If I have a question of you it is NOT for the purpose of pulling you down. Not.at.all.

What question was there? I must have missed it”.

(Memyself- Female) Topic: What was Paul’s thorn?

As they discuss the mysteries of God, Believer accuses Memyself that she tries not to answer his question because he thinks that she just asks questions in an attempt to pull down. In this example, the request type that both speakers use to formulate their request is classified under *suggestory formula*. Believer’s request is preceded by “You have many questions for the purpose of pulling down” which serves as *grounders* functioning as an explanation or justification for the request. Memyself uses the same linguistic realization to perform her request which is followed by *grounders* to justify her request “Why don’t you just stop that” and to refuse those accusations against her.

### 7.7 Reference to Preparatory Condition

Searle (1969) states that this type of request is concerned with hearer’s ability or willingness to perform what is requested by the speaker. So the requester assumes that the addressee will be able to perform that action.

This strategy type represents (9.09%) of the requests made by the males while (17.14%) of the requests made by the females, with the difference between the two genders being statistically significant at  $P=0.05$ , in favor of the female writers. This type is classified as the least direct type, which gives us concrete evidence that females use much less direct request types than their male counterparts.

“So, you attend the Assembly of God Church? Sounds great.

**Can you say more?** What’s it like? I’ve never been to this section of the forum. I’ve been missing out. I’ve never been to an A/G. But I may now!

Thanks”

(Elaine-Female). Topic: Please help to define.

In this example, the requester (Elaine) asks the addressee for more clarification that enables her to understand how the assembly of God works and what it is like? This form of request is classified under reference to preparatory condition. Elaine reformulates her request indirectly by asking a question if the addressee is able to provide more information regarding the assembly. The last utterance “I’ve never been to an A/G. But I may now!” mitigates the threatening face of Elaine’s request since this utterance serves as a justification for her request of asking for more clarification. And the pre-request “So, you attend the Assembly of God Church? Sounds great” functions as a *preparator*, that is, it is used by Elaine in this example to prepare the addresses for the request formulated in the interrogative form “Can you say more?” Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) argue that the imposition of requests on the addressee can be mitigated through using syntactic formulations such as interrogative forms as shown in the example above.

## 8. Conclusions

The data collected for this study was classified into seven categories representing requests made by both genders in two online religious forums. I relied on linguistic tokens as tools to classify the data collected into these categories making up the framework adopted, guided by the definitions provided for these categories especially from Searle (1979) and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984).

Applying Chi-square test, the analysis shows that *Explicit Performatives*, *Hedged Performatives*, *Locution Derivable*, *Scope Stating*, and *Reference to Preparatory Conditions* have statistically significant differences between males and females. But the gender difference in the two remaining types (*Mood Derivable* and *Suggestory Formula*) is not statistically significant.

Regarding the preferred types by each gender, the analysis shows that the most preferred request types used by female writers: *Mood Derivable*, *Hedged Performatives*, *Scope Stating*, *Reference to Preparatory Conditions*, and the most preferred request types used by male writers: *Mood Derivable*, *Explicit Performatives*, *Locution Derivable*. However, the most common type used by both genders: *Mood Derivable*.

The findings of this study are in harmony with traditional findings of many studies in that males used more direct strategies than their female counterparts. The study agrees with Leopold (2015) in that males used more direct and fewer conventionally indirect strategies than their female counterparts to make requests in electronic communication. Also, it agrees with Watanabe (2005) that female participants used less direct mode of requestive strategies. By applying the Chi-Square test, the results show that while some differences are statistically significant in favor of women or men, others are not. The findings also show that *Mood Derivable* type was the most preferred type of requests used by both genders with a high percentage each in comparison to other request types used. This indicates that people generally tend to use more direct language in online communication than in real communication. This might help avoid misunderstandings “because it can clear up misunderstandings and have a better feel for intent by reading body language. You can even have engaging discussions, something that is hard to do online” according to Ricigliano cited in face-to-face vs. online communication. This explains why people use this strategy, and correspondingly this (online) type might not be the most preferred type if the data was drawn from the real communication.

## 9. Future Research

Based on this study, it is recommended in larger research:

- 1) To study requests along with emoticons in CMC as they play an important role in realizing the illocutionary force of utterance as argued by many researchers (e.g., Dresner and Herring, 2010).
- 2) To study hints as a strategy to make requests in computer-mediated interaction.
- 3) To investigate internal and external modifications as used by both genders when performing directive acts to investigate how they are used by both genders in CMC.

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