Politeness in requests: A rejoinder to Kemper and Thissen

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Abstract:

In our study 'Polite responses to polite requests',[1] we reported four experiments. In Experiment 1, people rated the politeness of 18 types of indirect requests, such as *Could you tell me where Jordan Hall is*? In Experiments 2, 3, and 4, other people rated the politeness of various responses to these requests, such as *Yes, I can—it's down the street* and *Down the street*. From the findings, we argued two things. First, politeness is roughly accounted for by a cost—benefit theory of politeness. Second, understanding such requests appears to require understanding their direct as well as their indirect meanings. In their reply, Kemper and Thissen (1981) partially redid Experiment 1 and found certain apparent discrepancies. (They did not redo Experiments 2, 3, and 4, which were a major source of support for both of our conclusions.) From these discrepancies, they concluded, "A cost benefit analysis cannot, in general, account for politeness of a wide range of requests". They did not address our second conclusion.

We suggest that Kemper and Thissen's conclusions are premature. The discrepancies they found are not replicated in six other investigations. When we tested their explanation for the discrepancies, it was decisively disconfirmed. More generally, the independent evidence for the cost—benefit theory of politeness is so extensive—quite apart from our own experiments—that Kemper and Thissen would need more than a partial failure to overturn it.

Article:

Kemper and Thissen's apparent discrepancies

When we first examined Kemper and Thissen's data, their discrepant findings didn't seem to make sense. So we redid their experiment. In our original experiment, we had asked 30 people each to rate 54 requests, three each of 18 types; the 54 requests each asked for a different piece of information. Kemper and Thissen had asked 20 people to rate only one instance each of the 18 types of requests, and all 18 requests were for the *same* piece of formation. Did this change in procedure matter? To find out, we had 36 Stanford University students each rank order 18 requests, one of each type, for politeness; all 18 requests asked for the location of nearby Candlestick Park. The students judged how polite the request would be if they were asked it by another student with whom they were acquainted but not close friends.

The results of this experiment do not favor Kemper and Thissen. The 18 mean ranks were, first of all, highly reliable, with a coefficient of reliability of 0.99. These mean ranks correlated 0.88 with our original ratings, but only 0.69 with Kemper and Thissen's (which themselves correlated only 0.40 with our original ratings). The difference between 0.88 and 0.69 is significant, $t(15) = 2.19$, < 0.05.

Previously published data do not favor Kemper and Thissen either. Mohan (1974) asked 80 people to judge the politeness of 27 requests (all requesting the same action). Seven of Mohan's request types were among Kemper and Thissen's selection, and five were among ours. Mohan's ratings correlated 0.83 with our original ratings, but only 0.70 with Kemper and Thissen's.

The one finding that Kemper and Thissen specifically questioned from our original study was the finding that requests with conditional modals *(Could you?, Would you?)* were more polite than requests with indicative modals *(Can you?, Will you?).* In our new data, *Could you?* was rated as more polite than *Can you?* by 23 of the 30 judges, $p < 0.005$ by Sign Test. And *Would you?* was rated as more polite than *Will you?* by 25 of 30 judges, $p < 0.001$ by Sign Test. These two contrasts, which replicate our original findings, are the reverse of Kemper and Thissen's data; however, Kemper and Thissen do not provide statistics for their differences. As in our original study, the difference in our new data between *Might I ask you?* and *May I ask you?* was not significant.

Previously published data do not favor Kemper and Thissen here either. Bates (1976) asked 12 Italian adults to judge the politeness of nine requests. They judged *Vorrei* (“I would like”) as much more polite than *Voglio* ("I want"), and *Mi daresti* ("You would give me") as much more polite than *Mi dai* ("You give me"). The 60 Italian children Bates tested in a separate experiment concurred on these two judgments and also rated *Potrei avere* ("Could I have?") as more polite than *Posso avere* ("Can I have?"). In ratings that we will discuss later (Schunk and Clark, unpublished), *Could I?* was judged more polite than *Can I?,* and *Could you?* more polite than *Can you?*

In brief, Kemper and Thissen's data do not fare well against five independent experiments on politeness—six if you include our original study. The specific discrepancies they noted for conditional modals do not replicate in four independent studies—five if you include our original study.

Kemper and Thissen's explanation for their discrepancies

When Kemper and Thissen collected their judgments, they included not only our 18 types of requests but also three additional types—the imperative *(Tell me),* Please + imperative *(Please tell me),* and Why don't you + imperative *(Why don't you tell me).* Kemper and Thissen argued that, when these new anchor points are included, the other 18 requests are judged very differently relative to one another, and that accounts for the discrepancies between their ratings and ours. They didn't say why this should happen, nor did they test their explanation empirically.

We decided to test their explanation ourselves. We asked 15 people to rank order the original 18 requests, and 15 other people to rank order the 21 requests—the 18 originals plus Kemper and Thissen's three additions. Adding the theft new requests made no difference to the politeness values whatsoever. The means ranks of the 18 requests for the two groups correlated 0.99 with each other. This is precisely the correlation that would be expected from the reliabilities of the two groups separately if there was no difference between the two groups. Indeed, the new ratings we described earlier, with the 30 Stanford University students as judges, are just these two groups combined. Kemper and Thissen's account for their discrepancies can safely be rejected.

Why did they find what they did? We are not certain. Clearly, the instructions to the judges are critical. In our study, the judges were asked to rate how polite each request would be if made by another student with whom they were acquainted but not close friends. It makes a difference, according to the cost—benefit theory, what relation the speaker bears to the addressee. Kemper and Thissen do not say what relation they specified for their judges. , Their judges may even have: thought they were to rate how *conventional,* instead of how polite, the 21 requests were. Their politeness ratings correlated 0.88 with our original ratings of conventionality as compared to only 0.40 with our original ratings of politeness. Although conventionality and politeness are related notions, they are conceptually and empirically distinct (see Clark, 1979; Clark and Schunk, 1980).

The cost—benefit theory of politeness

Kemper and Thissen use their data to question the cost—benefit theory of politeness. Even if their data weren't problematic, they have more to contend with than our Experiment 1 and our replication of it. They have our Experiments 2, 3, and 4. 'They have other investigators' findings on politeness in requests. And they have the extensive evidence on politeness from other domains of language.

Mohan (1974) collected politeness ratings on 27 requests in order to test a theory of politeness of his own. As it happens, that theory makes the same predictions for his set of requests as the cost—benefit theory. According to Mohan's tests, 24 of 26 predictions of his theory were significantly confirmed, and none was disconfirmed. Mohan's findings, therefore, constitute strong independent support for the cost—benefit theory as applied to requests.

In an experiment designed for quite a different purpose (Schunk and Clark, unpublished), we have found independent evidence for the cost—benefit theory. In that study, people listened to 16 descriptions of everyday situations that required requests. At the end of each description, they were to say aloud, while being tape recorded, what they would say in order to make the requests. The 20 students we tested produced 48 distinct types of requests. We then asked 32 other students to judge these 48 requests for politeness on a scale of 1 to 100. The requests fell into four main categories according to our original cost—benefit analysis: Imposition (like *Would you mind?),* Ability (like *Could you?),* Commitment (like *Would you?),* and Desire (like *I'd really like).* These four categories were ordered from most to least polite precisely as predicted, with mean ratings of 53.8, 48.0, 34.7, and 15.0, $F(3,44) = 18.56$, $p < 0.001$. The nine requests studied in adults by Bates (1976), and the 14 requests studied by James (1978), who asked 40 adults to rate the 14 requests for politeness, can be classified on similar grounds. In both experiments, the politeness ratings support the cost—benefit theory.

Aside from the experimental evidence, the cost—benefit theory vests on a firm linguistic foundation. Brown and Levinson (1978), who proposed the theory, based their arguments on a large body of prior research in linguistics plus a massive compilation of evidence of their own. They claim to be able to account for politeness in almost every guise within language, from promises and pronouns to jargon and jokes. The evidence they cite comes not only from English, but also from two non-Indo-European languages: Tzeltal, a Mayan language, old Tamil, a Dravidian language. To overturn the cost—benefit theory, Kemper and Thissen would have to address all this evidence as well.

Kemper and Thissen, then, have little basis for their conclusion that "a cost—benefit analysis cannot, in general, account for politeness of a wide range of requests". Before they can reach such a conclusion, they must offer an alternative account not only for our original Experiment 1 and our replication f it, but also for all the other data that support the cost—benefit theory.

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