Politeness is among the most slippery of qualities to analyze and quantify in any language. We know it when we see it, and we certainly notice its absence, but describing it is difficult. It has a thousand faces that shift according to such variables as the interlocutors’ relationship, the goals of the exchange, and their idiolects.

Jack Hoza’s book compares the use of politeness strategies in American Sign Language (ASL) and English and is an admirable and ambitious effort to analyze this aspect of language use. The author’s springboard is the common assertion that Deaf people’s use of ASL is more direct (less mitigated) than hearing people’s use of English. The target of analysis is a comparison of requests and rejections among ASL–Deaf interactions, and English–hearing interactions, in the workplace.

The book begins with an impressive taxonomy and literature review of previous work in cataloguing politeness strategies. This provides the backdrop necessary to understand the main section of the book, the author’s report of a study he conducted. His investigative tool was a discourse completion test in which seven Deaf native signers and four native English speakers were asked to perform a series of role plays: (a) making six requests with varying degrees of difficulty (e.g., borrowing a pen vs. borrowing $50) of other people in varying power relationships (boss, co-worker, subordinate) and (b) refusing six requests. The subjects were informed of their roles and asked to behave accordingly; that is, use language and strategies appropriate to the assigned roles. The interactions were recorded and very thoroughly analyzed for language use, and, for the ASL interactions, nonmanual modifiers (NMMs)—raised eyebrows, a smile, or grimace, etc.—used to soften the impact of requests or rejections. He compared the frequency and distribution of such mitigating strategies as apologizing, joking, demonstrating deference, etc.

The study’s conclusions are not surprising. ASL requests in the study do tend to be more direct than English requests, but there are examples of both indirect ASL requests and direct ASL requests. Or, as the author eloquently phrases it, “Deaf people are both direct and indirect, and hearing (non-Deaf) people are both indirect and direct.”

There are a few problems with this study. As the author acknowledges, the sample reported on is rather small, and additional larger studies are needed to replicate the findings. However, his conclusions are appropriate to the scale of the study and he does not make claims the data cannot support. I am more concerned with the study’s reliance on role playing. Valid analysis of politeness strategies requires fully natural language samples that are unaffected by any meta-awareness or performance anxiety, and role-play situations cannot guarantee this. This might be one reason for the book’s startling claim that NMMs are “unique to signed languages such as ASL” (p. 101). Perhaps the spoken English samples in this study did not show any NMMs due to the stilted language that role plays tend to produce, but even casual observations of spoken language request situations will reveal common use of NMMs. It would be interesting to see a similar analysis applied to language samples taken from real workplace interactions.

*It’s Not What You Sign, It’s How You Sign It* provides an excellent framework for studying this very intriguing topic and reveals some fascinating examples of how people use ASL to negotiate difficult interactions.

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