The Politeness Phenomenon

An Empirical Study on the Realization of Requests and Thanks at Different Learner Levels

1 Introduction

The term "politeness" goes back to the sixteenth century (e.g. Burke 1993) and is described as "having or showing that one has good manners and consideration for other people" in the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. However, since it is associated to the terms "civility" and "courtesy", there are several connections to civilization and life-experience (see for example the Dutch translation "*be-leefd-heid*"). Therefore "politeness" is not an absolute term, but influenced by social hirarchy and social status. For about 30 years by now politeness is a very popular research topic and the term has received many different definitions and interpretations (Eelen, 2001). I therefore want to start by summarizing and discussing the most important approaches to linguistic politeness.

One of the most interesting aspects of this research field is its situation in the intersection of language and social reality. To study linguistic politeness may lead to a deeper understanding of the connections between society, ethics and language. In the linguistic perspective politeness is a form of language use, which is therefore invariably coupled with social roles and relationships.

Not only the social state in a given speech community, but also the language itself influences the expression of politeness, since speech communities differ in their notion of politeness. In second language acquisition not only vocabulary and grammar rules have to be learnt, but also the set of social norms of the foreign speech community. It is therefore of great interest, how second language learners show politeness at different learner levels. I will present an empirical study on the expression of Request and Thanks in Austrian students of different English competence level compared to a native speaking control group.

2 State of the art

This chapter shall give a short summary of the most important politeness theories described by Fraser (1990) and Held (1995) and their application on the speech acts object to the present research, namly Requests and Thanks, shall be shortly discussed. Furthermore I want to list characteristics of these speech acts.

2.1 Politeness theories

2.1.1 The social norm

Each society has a set of social rules and norms. A member of this society, who acts in congruence with the norm receives positive reactions (= politeness) by other society members. Actions incongruent with the norms evoce negative reactions (= impoliteness, rudeness). This view is supported by historical findings on changes in etiquette throughout the centuries.

2.1.2 The conversational maxim

The idea of a conversational maxim is based on Grice (1975), a work marking the beginning of linguistic politeness research, and was further developped by Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983).

Grice (1975) formulates his **Cooperative Principle** as follows:

> *"Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." (Grice 1975, p.45)*

Specifically the Cooperative Principle shall not be violated in terms of quantity, quality, relation and manner of the conversational contribution, which Grice (1975) formulated in four Conversational Maxims.

Grice adds, that maxims of aesthetic and social or moral character, such as politeness may be considered more important in specific situations and therefore lead the speaker not to fulfill the Cooperative Principle.

Leech (1983) formulates such a **Politeness Principle**:

> *"minimize the expression of impolite beliefs"*
> *"maximize the expression of polite beliefs" (Leech 1983, p.81)*

which shall *"maintain the social equilibrium"* necessary for cooperation (Leech 1983; p.82).

The less important the conversation is to the hearer, the more important is it to follow the Politeness Principle, which may outweigh the Cooperative Principle. Ways to violate one of Grice's (1975) maxims are strategies for requesting, thanking and apologizing. According to Leech (1983) an utterance is the more polite

- The higher the hearers benefit (**Cost-Benefit Scale**)
- The higher the degree of indirectness (**Indirectness Scale**)
- The less familiar speaker and hearer (**Social Distance Scale**)
- The higher the authority of the hearer (**Authority Scale**)
- The higher the optionality (**Optionality Scale**)

Wolfson (1988) found that power (authority) and social distance affect politeness in a bulge-shaped manner.

The illocutionary goal of speech acts may be

- **Competetive:** e.g. ordering, *asking*, demanding
- **Convivial:** e.g. offering, inviting, *thanking*
- **Collaborative:** e.g. asserting, reporting, instructing
- **Conflictive:** e.g. threatening, accusing

to the social goal.

2.1.3 Face saving

Brown and Levison (1987) also relate their approach to Grice's proposals. They define "face" as

> *"the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levison 1987, p.61).*

and distinguish between the want to be unimpeded ("**negative face**") and the want that the personal wants be desirable to others ("**positive face**").
Every interaction is based on the wish of the participant's to maintain their faces.

Brown & Levison (1987) further distuinguish
- **negative politeness**, which threatens the hearers negative face and supports the speakers positive face, and
- **positive politeness**, which supports the hearers positive face and threatens the speakers positive face.

Request for example are negative politeness, while Thanks are positive politeness (Held, 1995).

2.1.4 The conversational contract

The approach of Fraser (1975) integrates the Cooperative Principle and the face-saving view. Whenever two persons start a conversation, they asign to a **Conversational Contract**, the terms of which depend on time and situation.

> *"Being polite constituetes operating within the then-current terms and conditions of the CC [Conversational Contract].*
> *Politeness is a state that one expects to exist in every conversation; participants note not that someone is being polite – this is the norm – but rather that the speaker is violating the CC." (Fraser 1990, p. 233)*

Weydt (1983) in a similar approach postulates a **Pragmatic Mechanism**, through which different linguistic forms out of a great variety of possible polite utterances are integrated, to form politeness under the given circumstances.

2.1.5 The boomerang model

The boomerang model applies to all the views described above and emphasizes the rule: *"You get what you give"*, since the consequence of being polite usually is polite behaviour of the hearer.

2.2 Characterization of Requests and Thanks

Table 1, which was adopted from Farcher (2001), lists the most important characteristics of the speech acts object to the present research: Requests and Thanks. The categories used by Farcher (2001) are oriented on Searle (1969) and the politeness theories discribed above.

	REQUESTS	THANKS
Classification (Leech 1983)	Competetive	Convivial
Propositional Content	Future act done by the hearer	Past act done by the hearer
Preperatory	1. Hearer is able to do the act or the speaker believes him to be able. 2. It is not obvious to both speaker and hearer that the latter will do the act in the normal course of events of his own accord.	1. The act benefited the speaker. 2. The speaker believes that the act benefited him.
Sincerity	The speaker wants the hearer to do the act.	The speaker feels grateful or appreciative for the act.
Essential	Counts as an attemt to get the hearer to do the act.	Counts as an expression of gratitude or appreciation.
Order/Role	Rather at the beginning of a conversation	Rarely at the very beginning of a conversation.
Orientation	Future oriented, hypothetical estimation of the act aimed at.	Past oriented, belated estimation of the act.

Social effects (Held 1995)	It is used to ease the burden of a future service.	It is used to restore social balance after a service.
Type of politeness Effects on "faces" (Brown & Levison 1987)	Negative Politeness: Threatens the hearer's negative face. In rare cases they are perceived as positive politeness (e.g. invitations).	Positive Politeness: Threatens the speaker's negative face and support the hearers positive face.

Table 1: Characterization of Thanks and Apologies after Searle (1969), Leech (1983), Brown & Levison (1987) and Held (1995). Adapted from Farcher (2001).

3 The research problem

During second language acquisition, different interlanguages develop of the mother tongue and become closer to the second language, the more learning improves (Archibald 1997). Conventionalized forms for pragmatic universals like requesting and thanking are mainly language specific and have to be learnt during second language acquisition (Kasper 1990). However, proficiency has long been neglected by researchers in the field of interlanguage pragmatics (Maeshiba, 1996). This paper shall deal with the differences in contextually appropriate choices of speech acts at different learner levels. In particular I want to find out whether higher linguistic competence also leads to higher competence in the use of pragmatic forms.

4 Method

4.1 Design

Students of 4th, 5th and 7th form of Austrian AHS are compared for their expression of Requests and Thanks. Second language learners are furthermore compared to a native speaking control group of the same age.

4.2 Data

Students completed Questionnaires on Requests and Thanks (Appendix), each consisting of 7 situations. Students were asked how they would express their request or thank in the given situation, with no hints on length or tense. The Coding Manual (Appendix 8.2), which is based on Blum-Kulka (1989) and Held (1995) was adopted from Farcher (2001). The total occurrence of different types of Pre-phrases, Supportive Moves and Head Acts (see Appendix for explanations) are counted and compared between the different learner levels.

4.3 Subjects

Participants were 30 Austrian AHS-students of 3 different learner levels (Table 2).
The control group consisted of 10 native speaking students of the same age from a hospital school in Dublin (Ireland).

Forms 1-4 use the textbook *"The New You and Me"* (Gerngroß et al. 1997), forms 5-8 use the textbook *"Make Your Way with English"* (Davis et al. 1994). AHS corresponds to grammar school or high school in British and American school systems.

AGE	Form	Years of Englisch	Experimental group			Control group		
			Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
13-14 years	4th form AHS	4 years of AHS-English	5	5	**10**	2	1	**3**
14-15 years	5th form AHS	5 years of AHS-English	6	4	**10**	2	2	**4**
16-17 years	7th form AHS	7 years of AHS-English	4	6	**10**	2	1	**3**
			15	**15**	**30**	**6**	**4**	**10**

Table 2: Number of Male and Female Participants of different Age in Experimental Group and Control Group.
(Years of English correspond to AHS-English and does not include phonetic training in the last year of primary schools in Austria.)

5 The results

5.1 Description of results

Figure 1 shows the use of Pre-Phrase (PP), Supportive Moves (SM) and Head Acts (HA) for all Request- and Thanks-situations in the three groups of second language learners and the control group of native speakers. If a neglectable number of participants used the combination in any situation, diagrams are not displayed.This was the case for the bare HA structure for Requests and the PP and HA combination for Thanks.

As represented by green bars the distribution of response frequencies of Austrian student overall is consistent with the response frequencies of native speakers, most of whom use alle 3 for Requests but only HA & SM for Thanks. However in some situations differences between native speakers and learners occur, which vary between different learner levels, although not always decreasing with increasing learner level.

Only few 4th graders and no one of the higher forms or native speaker solely uses Head Acts to express requests. Most of the students use all 3 forms or at least PP and HA, some use SM and HA. 4th graders more often than 5th and 7th graders and natives use simple Request structures, consisting only of PP and HA or HA and SM (figure 1). The PP and HA structure is more frequent among natives than the HA & SM structure. However for situation 7 only few participants use all 3 acts, while most use the PP and HA structure.

In a Kruskall-Wallis-test the 4 groups differ significantly in their use of PP, HA and SM in Request situation 4 ($X^2(3) = 7.77$, $p = 0.05$), but not in the other Request situations (all $X^2 < 4.40$, all $p > 0.22$). 4th form students differ significantly from 5th form students ($U = 27.00$, $p < 0.05$) and 7th form students ($U = 24.00$, $p < 0.025$) in situation 4, but not in other Request situations, which becomes clear in Figure 1. The frequency of Request-formulation through all 3 of PP, HA and SM is distinctly higher for 5th and 7th formers compared to 4th formers in the first 6 request situation, while it

is higher in 4th formers compared to 5th and 7th formers in the 7th request situation. 5th and 7th form students do not differ in the structure of their requests. 4th form students differ from native speaker only in Request situation 1 (U = 27.00, p < 0.05), but not in other Request situations. However a clear difference can be observed in request-situation 7. 5th and 7th form students do not differ significantly from native speakers. Surprisingly in Situations 2-5 4th form students differ least from native speakers (Figure 1), while in situations 1 and 7 5th and 7th formers respectively show greater similarity to native speakers responses.

Only one 4th form and one 5th form student buildt their thanks through PP and HA. Some 4th form and 5th form student use bare SM, very few PP and SM, without HA. The most thanks are buildt through HA and SM. 5th and 7th formers more often than 4th formers and natives use all 3 acts to express their Thanks (Figure 1). Exceptions are situations 1 and 3, for which many participants of all levels use all 3 acts.

In a Kruskall-Wallis test, the four groups differ significantly in their Thanks structure in Thanks situations 2 (X^2(3) = 9.65, p < 0.025) and 3 (X^2(3) = 8.93, p < 0.05). The difference nearly reaches significance in Thanks situation 6 (X^2(3) = 7.34, p = 0.06). In U-tests, 4th and 5th form students differ significantly in situation 2 (U = 19.50, p < 0.025), 5th and 7th form students in situation 3 (U = 20.00, p < 0.025), while 4th and 7th form students do not differ significantly (all U > 30.00, all p > 1.00) in any situation. However looking at Figure 1 in Thanks situation 3 the response patterns of 4th and 5th formers are very similar and differ both from the response patterns of 7th formers. Especially in this situation 7th formers do not use the HA & SM strategy but use any other combination (although those not displayed in figure 1) with equal frequency. Compared to native speakers 4th form students differ significantly in Thanks situation 2 (U = 23.50, p < 0.025), 5th form students in Thanks situation 6 (U = 21.00, p = 0.01) and 7th form students in Thanks situations 3 (U = 19.00, p = 0.01) and 5 (U = 23.00, p < 0.025). Looking at the use of HA & SM the difference between natives and learners seems to decrease with increasing proficiency in situations 1, 2 and 5, but increases in situations 3, 4 and 6.
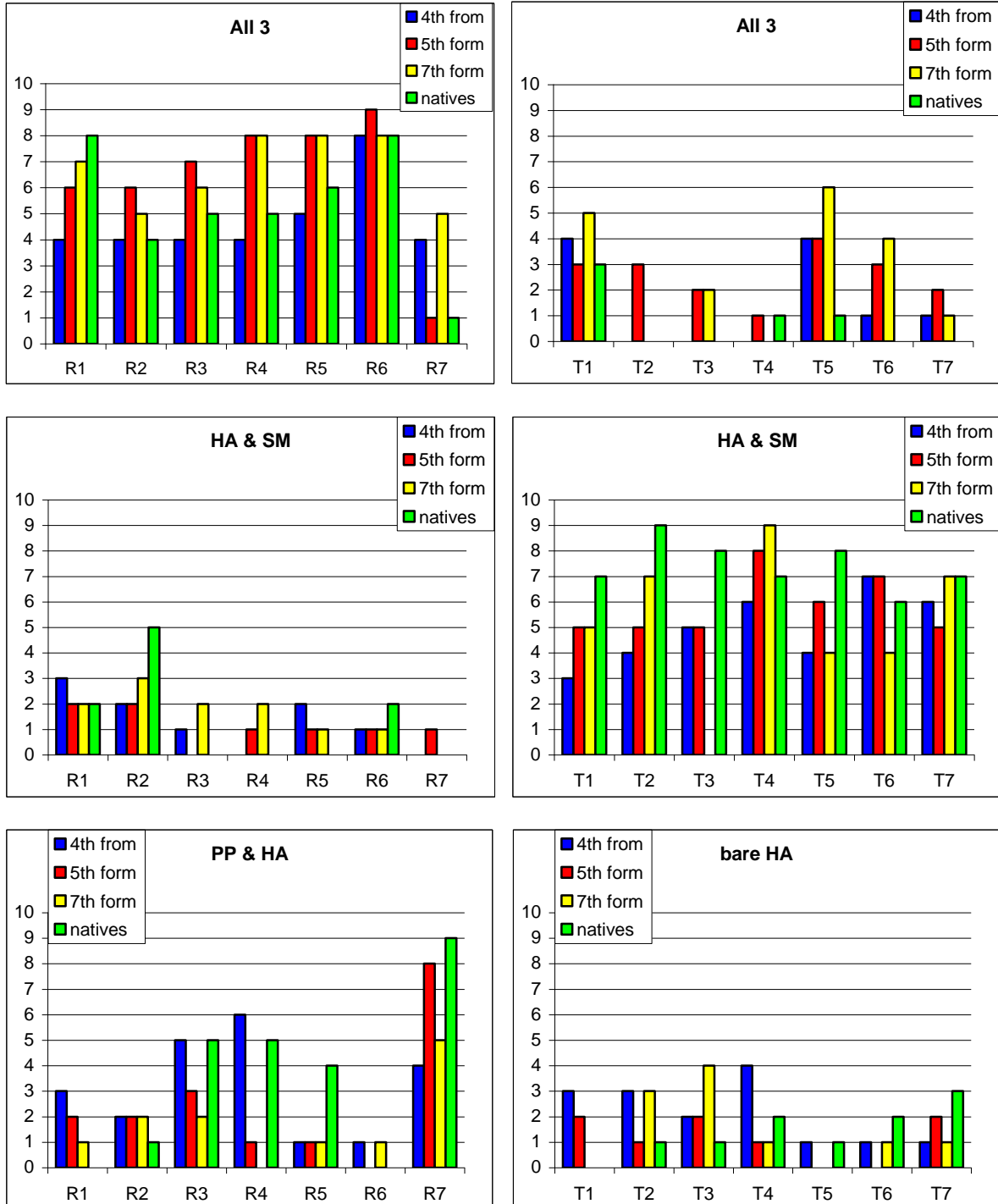
Figure 1: PP, SM and HA use of students of different proficiency in 7 Request and 7 Thanks-situations.

In a Kruskall-Wallis test, the 4 groups differ significantly in their HA-types and SM-strategies for Requests (HA: $X^2(3) = 10.85$, $p < 0.025$; SM: $X^2(3) = 21.62$, $p < 0.001$) and Thanks (HA: $X^2(3) = 7.63$, $p = 0.05$; SM: $X^2(3) = 9.64$, $p < 0,025$).

While all 4th form students and native speaker use preparatory Request Head Acts, half of the 5th form students uses mood derivable Request Head Acts and some 7th form students use perfomative requests and strong hints. Most second language learners, except two 7th form students use justifications as SM-statements, while most native speakers like the two students from 7th form use relief and repair.

4th form students express their Thank HA mainly "Thank you"-based (8 out of 10), while 5th form students more often use "Thanks" (6 out of 10). Some 7th form students know the personalized form (2 out of 10), which is the most frequent in native speakers (5 out of 10). All 4th form students use Appreciation Acts as SM statements for thanks, which is also the most frequent strategy in native speakers (8 out of 10). Half of 5th form students use Compensation Acts, while half of 7th form students use Social Acts.

Syntax of Requests HA's does not differ significantly between the four groups. However there is a tendency from indicative to conditional form with growing competence level. All 4th form students ask indicative, while half of the native speakers use conditionals.

5.2 Discussion

Comparing Requests and Thanks it can be seen in Figure 1, that Requests require a more complex structure than Thanks and mor often consist of all three or at least two elements, while Thanks may only consist of a bare HA. This may be explained by the "face-saving" view. If I threaten the negative face of someone, i.e. if I want something, I have to be extra polite, resulting in a more complex structure and indirect formulation of the request. Furthermore a request needs Pre-Phases as Introduction, while such Pre-Phases are not used at all with Thanks. They could possibly be even

unpolite in the case of Thanks, since the speaker owes something to the hearer, i.e. the thank, and should not waste time to express it.

From the response pattern of native speakers it can be depicted, that the appropriate formulation of a Request or Thank also depends very much on the situation.

In Request situation 7 for instance, in which a couple has to be asked for a chair in an overcrowded restaurant, only 1 native speaker used all 3 acts, while the others used PP & HA. In Request situation 2, in which you have to ask a mate for quik help with your math homework, three different response patterns occur among native speakers with equal frequency. In situation 7 it may be unpolite to use a complex request formulation, since the couple wants to stay undisturbed and the request should be expressed as efficiently as possible. In situation 2 a complex formulation would maybe be polite, but there's only very few time left to finish the homework. In this case the complexity of the request could depend on how urgently you need help and result in a more polite Thanks formulation. This situation is a good example for the coupling of Requests and Thanks. The formulation of Requests may influence the formulation of the corresponding Thanks. It would be interesting to investigate these interdependencies, e.g. through a questionnaire asking for both a Request and a Thanks formulation for the same situation.

Among the Thanks situation 1, in which you have to thank your Grandmother for an ugly Christmas present, seems to elicit a slightly different response in native speakers compared to the other situations, since about a third of them used all 3 acts, which is not the case for any other Thank-situation. They may use this more complex structure for formulation of their thanks in order to overplay the discrepancy between what they say and what they feel. Interestingly more foreign learners than natives use Thanks of higher complexity for this situation.

To study the politeness phenomenon in a more detailed way questionnaires should distinguish between different kinds of Request or Thank situation in order to allow a comparision in terms of e.g. difficulty. However maybe greater generality of effects throughout situations could be obtained in greater samples.

For the situations which differ from the general rule differences between native speakers and learners are more likely. They may be attributed to some kind of overgeneralization of the structure appropriate for most situations. However these special situations could also be more sensitive for cultural differences in the interpretation of polite behaviour.

Differences in the structure of Request could be found in Request situation 4 between the groups. In this situation students have to ask tourists for their reasons to visit Austria for a survey. I would judge this situation as rather unusual and unfamiliar, which may account for the differences, especially because differences are only found between 4th form students and older Austrian students, but no differences between the higher competence levels. Older students might be more familiar with surveys due to experience through school projects. Compared to native speakers there was no difference in Request situation 4 but to 4th form students in Request situation 1. In this situation students have to ask an unfriendly neighbour for sugar, because want to bake a cake and have run out of sugar themselves. However no other differences in Request situation 1 could be found. This could point to a gradual improvement in the structure of Requests in such situations, so that only the difference between the lowest and the highest competence level reached significance. The fact that there are no differences in other request situations allows the conclusion that the structure of requests is learnt very early in second language acquisition.

More difference could be found in the structure of thanks at different learner levels. Thanks situation 2 differs between 4th and 5th form, Thanks situation 3 between 5th and 7th form. Differences to native speakers could also be found in Thanks situations 2, 3 and 6. Thanks situation 3 describes an ill student, who is visited by a friend an told news about school. This situation differs between 5th and 7th form and between 7th form and native speakers. This may in part be explained through social development, because younger students interact differently than older ones. However the expression clearly improves with competence level.

Thanks situation 2 describes dropping a wallet and being helped in collecting the coins. This situation differs between 4th form and 5th form as well as native speakers.

This also point to an improvement with competence level, although performance seems to drop in 7th grade.

Thanks situation 6 describes a mother cooking a complicated favourite meal. This situation differs between 5th form and native speakers, although pointing to an improvement with competence level.

A clear indicator of such an improvement is the fact that the complexity of Request and Thanks structure increases with learner level. It can clearly be seen in Figure 1 that 4th graders use all 3 acts for Requests least often compared to other participants and more often use combinations od PP and HA or HA and SM. For Thanks they tend to use pure HA more often than paricipants of higher learner levels.
However 5th and 7th graders are more likely to use all 3 acts for the expression of Thanks, indicating some kind of overgeneralization here again, since a comlex Thank formulation may not necessarily be polite, as discussed above.

Examining the HA-type and SM-strategy and HA-syntax a clear tendency of higher forms to perform better and more similar to native speakers than lower forms can be observed (SM-strategies for requests, HA-types of thanks). However another tendency of great similarity between 4th form students and native speakers (HA-types of requests, SM-strategies for thanks) but more complicated forms in students of higher forms can be observed. It may be that students of form 4 do not yet know Compensation and Social acts, while students of form 5 and 7, who have just learnt them, overestimate its importance and use it more often as necessary.

6 Conclusion

Overall there is great support for the hypothesis, that the use of pragmatic forms differs between different competence levels during second language acquisition. This is in line with findings of Farcher (2001).

Concerning the structure of such speech acts, clear improvement with competence level can be concluded for Thanks, while the structure of Requests is learnt at an early level. However there is improvement of Requests in unfamiliar situations.

Concerning the type of expressions two tendencies have been observed: The first supports the view that linguistic competence goes together with pragmatic competence, since students of higher forms use similar expressions like native speakers. The second finds similarities between lower forms and native speakers, while students of higher forms express their Requests far too complicated.

Taken together these findings show, that the expression of Thanks and Apologies clearly improves with linguistic competence. However this improvement is not continous. Rather Performance seems to decline sometimes, e.g. if new formulations are learnt and students don't know yet, when and how to use them.

7 References

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Appendix