



**INTRACULTURAL COMPARISON OF REQUEST SPEECH ACT
BETWEEN MAINLAND CHINESE MANDARIN AND MALAYSIAN
CHINESE MANDARIN**

By

PANG MING

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2024

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
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May 2024

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Recognized as a face-threatening act and an indispensable social activity in interpersonal communication, the request speech act has been studied by many previous studies from intercultural or cross-cultural perspectives in interlanguage or cross-language contexts. However, little attention is paid to the request speech act in intralinguistic study from intra-cultural perspective. Inappropriate request would lead to the misunderstanding or tension of people's relationship since request speech act is notorious for its face threatening nature. Request speech act needs to be investigated in order to improve communication between speakers. This study aims to find out the differences and similarities in terms of request head act strategy, as well as request modification and also investigate the impacts of three social variables, namely social distance, social power, and ranking of imposition on the use of request speech act in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. 50 mainland Chinese and 50 Malaysian Chinese participants who were divided into four groups were recruited. Role-play instrument was used to elicit data. The collected data were

analyzed by employing a revised combined theoretical framework. The results revealed that mainland Chinese participants preferred “direct” level of request head act strategy over Malaysian Chinese participants with significant differences, but there were no significant differences in the use of “conventionally indirect” level of request head act strategy and “non-conventionally indirect” level of request head act strategy. Variations existed in the use of four frequently used request head act strategies in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin, with statistically significant differences. The study also highlighted significant differences in the use of individual request modifiers, both internal modifiers and external modifiers. In addition, this study also found that three social variables had different degrees of impacts on the frequently used individual request head act strategies and request modifiers in different scenarios. And the impacts of these three social variables varied across scenarios and participant groups, with some scenarios independent of three social variables. This study is of considerable significance in terms of theory and practice. Theoretically, it proposed a revised combined theoretical framework based on the collected data. Practically, this study could help improve the communication between mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese people and it also has some implications for learning and teaching request speech act in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.

Keywords: request speech act, Mainland Chinese Mandarin, Malaysian Chinese Mandarin, three social variables

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PERBANDINGAN INTRABUDAYA LAKUAN BAHASA PERMINTAAN
ANTARA BAHASA MANDARIN OLEH MASYARAKAT CINA TANAH
BESAR DAN BAHASA MANDARIN OLEH MASYARAKAT CINA
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Lakuan bahasa yang mengancam air muka dan aktiviti sosial yang tidak dapat dielakkan dalam komunikasi interpersonal, ialah lakuan bahasa permintaan yang banyak diterokai oleh kajian terdahulu, sama ada dari perspektif inter-budaya atau silang budaya, dalam konteks antara bahasa atau silang bahasa. Walau bagaimanapun, hanya sedikit perhatian diberikan kepada lakuan bahasa permintaan dalam kajian intralinguistik daripada perspektif intra-budaya. Permintaan yang tidak wajar boleh menyebabkan salah faham atau ketegangan dalam hubungan antara individu kerana lakuan bahasa permintaan terkenal dengan sifatnya yang mengancam air muka. Justeru, lakuan bahasa permintaan perlu diteliti untuk memperbaiki komunikasi antara penutur. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk melihat perbezaan dan persamaan strategi lakuan bahasa permintaan, modifikasi permintaan serta meneliti impak tiga pembolehubah sosial, iaitu jarak sosial, kuasa sosial, dan darjah pengenalan terhadap lakuan permintaan dalam kalangan kaum Cina dari Tanah Besar China dan orang Cina dari Malaysia. Seramai 50 responden Cina dari Tanah Besar China dan 50 responden Cina

Malaysia; yang dibahagikan kepada empat kumpulan telah dipilih sebagai responden kajian. Instrumen main peranan digunakan untuk pengumpulan data. Data yang dikumpul telah dianalisis dengan mengadaptasikan kerangka teori Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa responden Tanah Besar China lebih menggunakan strategi “langsung” dalam lakuan bahasa permintaan mereka berbanding dengan responden Cina Malaysia dengan perbezaan yang signifikan. Namun yang demikian, tiada perbezaan yang signifikan dalam penggunaan strategi “tidak langsung secara konvensional” dan strategi “tidak langsung secara tidak konvensional” dalam lakuan pertuturan permintaan kedua-dua kumpulan responden. Terdapat variasi dan perbezaan yang signifikan dalam penggunaan empat strategi lakuan bahasa permintaan yang kerap digunakan dalam kalangan responden Cina dari Tanah Besar China dan responden Cina Malaysia. Dapatan kajian ini juga mempamerkan perbezaan signifikan dalam penggunaan modifikasi permintaan individu, termasuk modifikasi dalaman dan luaran. Selain itu, kajian ini juga mendapati bahawa tiga pemboleh ubah sosial mempunyai tahap impak yang berbeza ke atas strategi lakuan permintaan yang kerap digunakan dan modifikasi permintaan dalam senario yang berbeza. Impak tiga pemboleh ubah sosial ini juga berbeza mengikut senario dan kumpulan responden, dengan sesetengah senario tidak bergantung kepada tiga pemboleh ubah sosial. Kajian ini memberi sumbangan penting secara teori dan praktik. Secara teorinya, ia mencadangkan rangka teori yang dikombinasikan semula berdasarkan data yang dikumpul. Dari segi praktik, kajian ini dijangka dapat membantu meningkatkan komunikasi antara masyarakat Cina dari Tanah Besar China dan masyarakat Cina Malaysia. Ia juga mempunyai beberapa implikasi untuk pembelajaran dan pengajaran lakuan bahasa permintaan dalam kalangan masyarakat Cina dari Tanah Besar China dan masyarakat Cina Malaysia.

Kata Kunci: Lakuan bahasa permintaan, Bahasa Mandarin Oleh Masyarakat Cina Tanah Besar, Bahasa Mandarin Oleh Masyarakat Cina Malaysia, tiga pemboleh ubah sosial

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of the Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ABSTRAK	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	x
LIST OF TABLES	xvi
LIST OF FIGURES	xviii
LIST OF APPENDICES	xix
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xx
 CHAPTER	
 1 INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1 Preamble	1
1.2 Background of the Study	1
1.3 Problem Statements	6
1.4 Research Objectives	10
1.5 Research Questions	10
1.6 Research Significance	11
1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study	13
1.7.1 Scope of the Study	13
1.7.2 Limitations of the Study	15
1.8 Definition of Key Terms	16
1.8.1 Variational Pragmatics	16
1.8.2 Intracultural	17
1.8.3 Intralinguistic Study	17
1.8.4 Request	18
1.8.5 Social Distance	18
1.8.6 Social Power	18
1.8.7 Ranking of Imposition	19
1.8.8 Mainland Chinese Mandarin	19
1.8.9 Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	19
1.8.10 Mainland Chinese Mandarin Speaker	20
1.8.11 Malaysian Chinese Mandarin Speaker	20
1.9 Organization of Chapters	20
1.10 Conclusion	21
 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	 22
2.1 Introduction	22
2.2 Theories Related to Speech Acts	22
2.2.1 Speech Act Theory	22
2.2.2 Politeness Theory	25
2.3 Speech Act of Request	28
2.4 Three Theoretical Frameworks of Request Speech Act	29

2.4.1	The Classification of Request by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989)	30
2.4.1.1	Alterer	31
2.4.1.2	Request Head Act Strategy	31
2.4.1.3	Request Modification	34
2.4.2	The Classification of Request by Zhang (1995b)	41
2.4.3	The Classification of Request by Ren (2019)	44
2.5	A Systematic Literature Review on Request Speech Act	47
2.5.1	Three Categories of Comparative Study on Request Speech Act	50
2.5.2	Three Themes of Comparative Study on Request Speech Act	51
2.5.2.1	Three Themes in Crosslinguistic Study on Request Speech Act	52
2.5.2.2	Three Themes in Interlinguistic Study on Request Speech Act	53
2.5.2.3	Three Themes in Intralinguistic Study on Request Speech Act	55
2.5.3	Specific Comparative Studies on Request Speech Act	56
2.5.3.1	Crosslinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act	57
2.5.3.2	Interlinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act	60
2.5.3.3	Intralinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act	67
2.6	Studies on Request Speech Act in Chinese	69
2.6.1	Crosslinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act in Chinese	69
2.6.2	Interlinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act in Chinese	72
2.6.3	Intralinguistic Studies on Request Speech Act in Chinese	74
2.7	Research Gaps	78
2.8	Current Study	80
2.9	Conclusion	81
3	METHODOLOGY	82
3.1	Introduction	82
3.2	Research Design	82
3.3	Conceptual Framework of This Study	84
3.4	Sample	85
3.5	Role-play Instrument	90
3.5.1	Rationale of Role-play Instrument	90
3.5.2	Design of Role-play Instrument	92
3.5.3	Validity of Role-play Instrument	95
3.6	Pilot Study	97
3.7	Data Collection Procedures	99
3.7.1	Distributing the Role-play Instrument	100
3.7.2	Role Playing the Role-play Instrument	100

3.7.3	Recording the Role-play Process	102
3.8	Data Analysis Procedures	102
3.8.1	Transcription of Data	103
3.8.2	Qualitative Analysis of Data	104
3.8.3	Quantitative Analysis of Data	107
3.9	A Revised Combined Theoretical Framework of Request Speech Act	108
3.10	Establishing the Reliability	114
3.11	Ethical Considerations	115
3.12	Conclusion	116
4	RESULTS	117
4.1	Introduction	117
4.2	Request Head Act Strategy	117
4.2.1	Three Directness Levels of Request Head Act Strategy	118
4.2.2	Request Head Act Strategy within Each Directness Level	121
4.3	Request Modification	128
4.3.1	Internal Modification	128
4.3.2	External Modification	135
4.4	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Speech Act	146
4.4.1	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Head Act Strategy	146
4.4.1.1	Impacts of Social Distance Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	150
4.4.1.2	Impacts of Social Power Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	155
4.4.1.3	Impacts of Ranking of Imposition Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	160
4.4.2	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Modification	165
4.4.2.1	Impacts of Social Distance Variable on Request Modification	171
4.4.2.2	Impacts of Social Power Variable on Request Modification	185
4.4.2.3	Impacts of Ranking of Imposition Variable on Request Modification	197
4.5	Conclusion	210
5	DISCUSSION	211
5.1	Introduction	211
5.2	Request Head Act Strategy	211
5.2.1	Three Directness Levels of Request Head Act Strategy	212
5.2.2	Request Head Act Strategy within Each Directness Level	218
5.3	Request Modification	229
5.3.1	Internal Modification	230

5.3.2	External Modification	240
5.4	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Speech Act	245
5.4.1	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Head Act Strategy	246
5.4.1.1	Impacts of Social Distance Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	246
5.4.1.2	Impacts of Social Power Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	248
5.4.1.3	Impacts of Ranking of Imposition Variable on Request Head Act Strategy	250
5.4.2	Impacts of Three Social Variables on Request Modification	251
5.4.2.1	Impacts of Social Distance Variable on Request Modification	251
5.4.2.2	Impact of Social Power Variable on Request Modification	253
5.4.2.3	Impacts of Ranking of Imposition Variable on Request Modification	256
5.5	Conclusion	259
6	CONCLUSION	260
6.1	Introduction	260
6.2	Summary of the Study	260
6.3	Implications of the Study	263
6.4	Recommendations for Future Study	265
6.5	Closure	267
	REFERENCES	268
	APPENDICES	283
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	311
	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	312

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Alerter in CCSARP	31
2.2 Request Head Act Strategy in CCSARP	33
2.3 Internal Modification in CCSARP	35
2.4 External Modification in CCSARP	39
2.5 Alerter in Chinese	41
2.6 Request Head Act Strategy in Chinese	42
2.7 Internal Modification in Chinese	42
2.8 External Modification in Chinese	43
2.9 Request Head Act Strategy in Chinese	45
2.10 Internal Modification in Chinese	45
2.11 External Modification in Chinese	46
3.1 Recruited Participants for Role-Play	88
3.2 Scenarios with Different Combinations of Social Variables	94
3.3 Mean Ratings of D, P, R, and F Variable	96
3.4 Request Head Act Strategy in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	111
3.5 Internal Modification in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	112
3.6 External Modification in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	113
4.1 Request Head Act Strategy in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	118
4.2 Internal Modification in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	128
4.3 External Modification in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin	135

4.4	Request Head Act Strategy with Variations of Three Social Variables	148
4.5	Internal Modification with Variations of Three Social Variables	167
4.6	External Modification with Variations of Three Social Variables	168



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 Speech Act Theory	25
2.2 Three Social Variables in Politeness Theory	27
2.3 PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review	49
2.4 Frequency of Three Types of Comparative Study of Request	50
2.5 Distribution of Three Types of Comparative Study of Request	51
2.6 Overall Distribution of Three Themes in Cross-language	52
2.7 Overall Distribution of Three Themes in Interlanguage	53
2.8 Overall Distribution of Three Themes in Intra-language	55
3.1 Conceptual Framework of This Study	85
3.2 Data Collection Procedures	100
3.3 Data Analysis Procedures	103

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
A Role-play Instrument	283
B Expert Validity Assessment of Role-play Instrument	289
C Questionnaire for Validating Variables of Role-play Instrument	292
D Ethical Approval Letter	305
E Participants' Informed Consent Form	306



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCSARP	Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern
D	Social Distance
DCT	Discourse Completion Test
EFL	English as Foreign Language
F	familiarity
FTA	Face-Threatening Act
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
MIEs	Meta-Illocutionary Expressions
P	Social Power
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
R	Ranking of Imposition
WDCT	Written Discourse Completion Test

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preamble

Language is a powerful medium that embodies the intricacies of culture and society. Request speech act involves complex socio-pragmatic dimensions. However, there are conflicting views and lack of study regarding the request speech act in Chinese. This study delves into the realm of request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin from an intracultural perspective. This chapter will provide an introduction to the current study by discussing the background of this study first, followed by problem statements, research objectives, research questions, research significance, scope and limitations of the study, definition of key terms, and organization of the chapters.

1.2 Background of the Study

With the ongoing process of globalization, mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese speakers communicate with each other more often than ever before. According to Department of Statistics Malaysia¹, Malaysian Chinese account for 22.4% of total population in Malaysia in 2021. Communication is very essential in this interconnected world and it enables people to maintain and sustain the interpersonal relationship between people. Successful communication depends on how to use appropriate form and function in a contextual interaction. Hymes (1972) pointed out that being able to speak language involved not only the grammatical and linguistic knowledge, but also the pragmatic knowledge to know how to use language

¹ Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal (<https://www.dosm.gov.my/>)

appropriately in a certain context. With the increasing communication between mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese, it is highly necessary to investigate the speech act between these two speech communities so that they can communicate with each other in a more harmonious and efficient way.

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984, p. 197) assumed that the diverse realizations of speech acts within a given context can be attributed to three distinct forms of variability: “(a) intracultural/situational variability; (b) cross-cultural variability; (c) individual variability”. Nguyen & Le Ho (2013) also argued that pragmatic performance was affected by both intercultural and intracultural variability. Language and culture are “intricately interwoven” and are inseparable with each other (Brown, 2000, p. 171). Malaysian Chinese inherit the traditional Chinese culture very well. Despite the fact that mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese live in two different regions in Asia, they share the same cultural origin and value (Yingqi, 2017). Therefore, a better understanding of intracultural variability between these two speech communities is equally important so as to achieve successful and effective communication between mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese speakers.

Pragmatics has many subdisciplines, such as contrastive pragmatics, cross-cultural pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics and variational pragmatics (Barron & Schneider, 2009). Schneider & Barron (2005) first proposed to establish the variational pragmatics as the subfield of pragmatics to investigate the effect of different macro-social factors on the language use conventions, such as social class, gender, region, and age. It investigates the intralinguistic variations between and across the varieties of the same language and not much attention was paid to this area (Barron & Schneider, 2009). According to Barron & Schneider (2009), it is the

sociolinguistics that fails to address the pragmatic aspect of language and the pragmatics that fails to address the variation of macro-variables that lead to the variational pragmatics.

People from different countries have different understanding of verbal behaviors and insufficient knowledge or understanding of these differences can cause misunderstanding and failed communication between them (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). Request is a type of speech act that people use quite often in daily life (Halupka-Rešetar, 2014). As defined by Rue & Zhang (2008, p. 1), “[a] request is to ask someone to do/not do something or to express the need or desire for something”. According to Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, request speech act is considered a face-threatening act (hereafter referred to as FTA) because it inevitably puts pressure on the requestee by asking them to do something. Akmal et al (2022) also held that completing a request can be a challenging task due to the presence of unforeseen misunderstandings between requester and requestee. For its problematic nature and frequent use in daily communication, the request speech act has garnered the interest of numerous researchers (e.g., Abidi, 2022; Akmal et al., 2022; Barron, 2008; Hendriks, 2008; Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016; Nugroho, 2019; Nugroho et al., 2021; Nugroho & Rekha, n.d.; Ogiermann & Bella, 2020; Otcu & Zeyrek, 2008; Yassin & Razak, 2018). “Requesting is one of the most commonly studied speech acts” (Wang, 2011, p. 11).

Request head act strategy plays an essential role in making the appropriate request. Ren & Fukushima (2020) held that making request and employing request head act strategy were inseparable from each other. Brown & Levinson (1987) claimed that any interlocuter who was face-bearing rational would tend to employ strategies to

minimize or avoid face threatening context based on the assessment of seriousness of FTA. People from different cultures would employ request head act strategies to save the interlocutors' face wants when requesting (Lee, 2005).

Successful request is not necessarily determined by employing appropriate request head act strategy (Han, 2012). Request modification also plays an important role (Sifianou, 1992). In addition to request head act strategy, various request modifications are employed to make a request either more forceful or less forceful in its illocutionary force (Šegedin Borovina, 2017). Request modification can function as a way of reducing the face-threatening degree of request when speakers make a request (Al Masaeed, 2017). Modifiers in different languages are used differently (Lin, 2009).

Barron & Schneider (2009) assumed that social variables can not only influence the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, but also the language use. Barron & Schneider (2009) identified two categories of social variables. The first category comprises macro-social variables such as "region, social class, ethnicity, gender, and age" (p. 426). The second category is made up of micro-social variables, which encompass power, distance, and other situational variables. Social distance (hereafter referred to as D), social power (hereafter referred to as P) and ranking of imposition (hereafter referred to as R) are the most important and most widely examined social variables in the speech act area by previous researchers (e.g., Chen & Chen, 2007; Francis, 1997; Fukushima, 1996; Jalilifar et al., 2011; Nugroho, 2019; Nugroho et al., 2021; Wei-Hong Ko et al., 2015; Wen, 2018; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016), which were proposed in Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. People vary their request head act strategy from the most direct to the most indirect based on different

social variables (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). The employment of request modification is also affected by these situational variables (Economidou-Koetsidis, 2008; Lin, 2009).

Mandarin Chinese, known as *Putonghua* in Mainland China, is the official language of China (Ho, 2003). It is also widely spoken in several other countries or regions of Asia (Ren, 2019), including Malaysia, where it is referred to as *Huayu* (Wang, 2022). Mandarin spoken in Mainland China (Mainland Chinese Mandarin) and Malaysia (Malaysian Chinese Mandarin) reflects differences due to their unique sociolinguistic environments (Khoo, 2017). Since Chinese language is spoken in different regions in Asia, the request speech act may be expressed differently across different regions and dialects (Ren, 2018). The same holds true when it comes to Malaysian Chinese Mandarin and Mainland Chinese Mandarin. Understanding these differences is crucial as they provide a deeper insight into how request speech act is performed in different varieties of Mandarin, which reflects broader cultural and societal norms.

Just as Barron & Schneider (2009) stated, pragmatic variations can happen across varieties of one single language. Different speech communities have different ways to demonstrate request (Joyce, 2021). Being aware of the intralinguistic differences of a language in different regions can help to reduce the possible conflicts between different communities in society (Wolfram & Schilling, 2015). In addition, knowing how to make appropriate request plays a crucial role in the successful communication between people (Shams & Afghari, 2011). However, the lack of pragmatic knowledge related to request speech act “may lead to communication breakdown and causes misunderstandings” (Michelle & Manivannan, 2023, p. 40). Therefore, investigating

the request speech act in two varieties of Mandarin Chinese spoken by mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese people is both an interesting and necessary inquiry.

1.3 Problem Statements

Making appropriate request can be a very daunting task (Li, 2014) and inappropriate request would lead to the “unintended offense and communication breakdown” (Taguchi, 2006, p. 518). It involves not only linguistic forms that constitute request speech act but also contextual variables that would influence the selection of these linguistic forms (Barron & Schneider, 2009). Although both mainland Chinese speakers and Malaysian Chinese speakers share the “monolithic Chinese culture” (Yingqi, 2017, p. 35), their speaking is stylistically different from each other (Vollmann & Soon, 2018). These differences would lead to the misunderstanding and communication breakdown between people from Malaysia and mainland China (Beng, 2012). For instance, in a workplace setting, a mainland Chinese employee might straightforwardly say, “请把报告发给我 (Please send me the report)”, whereas a Malaysian Chinese employee might phrase it as, “你能帮忙把报告发过来吗? (Could you possibly assist with sending over the report?)”. This difference in approach could lead to misunderstandings if not understood within the respective societal contexts. Most of previous studies were conducted either from cross-cultural perspective (e.g., Abidi, 2022; Ninomiya & Shadayeva, 2020; Ying & Hong, 2020) or intercultural perspective (e.g., Cenoz, 2003; Ho, 2014; Huang, 2000; Huth, 2010). Previous studies rarely investigated the request speech act from the intracultural perspective. This study aims to explore the request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin from an intracultural perspective. Exploring request speech act between two varieties of Mandarin Chinese within a specific cultural

context provides valuable insights into the intricacies of interpersonal communication. Wolfram & Schilling (2015) also argued that the social importance of differences in language use across various varieties of a language, such as English, should not be underestimated since speech acts, such as request speech act, may vary across varieties of a language (Félix-Brasdefer, 2009).

As to the first research problem, as one of the most demanding speech acts (Otcu & Zeyrek, 2008), request speech act is notorious for its face threatening nature (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As a face threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987), request speech act would inevitably threaten interlocutors' face since speaker imposes his/her own will upon the hearer in a direct or indirect way (Alaoui, 2011). Request speech act may cause communication problems for the speakers if not handled appropriately (Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Therefore, various request head act strategies are required in order to avoid conflict and clashes in request (Akmal et al., 2022; Khalib & Tayeh, 2014; Nugroho, 2019). With many researches that focus on request speech act in English (e.g., Abidi, 2022; Vassilaki & Selimis, 2020) or European languages, such as French (e.g., Marsily, 2018), Spanish (e.g., Márquez Reiter, 2002) and Germany (e.g., Huth, 2010), only marginal attention is paid to request speech act in Asian languages (e.g., Ninomiya & Shadayeva, 2020), especially in different varieties of one language (e.g., Mainland Chinese Mandarin vs. Malaysian Chinese Mandarin). Although in recent years, more studies have been conducted on request speech act in Chinese (e.g., Chen & Wang, 2021; Ren, 2019; Ren & Fukushima, 2020, 2022), only few studies, for instance Ren (2018), address the pragmatic variations in different varieties of Chinese. Little is known about how Malaysian Chinese Mandarin speakers differ from and resemble Mainland Chinese Mandarin speakers in terms of employing

request head act strategy. Eslamirasekh (1992) suggested that the research scope must be consistently expanded so that the non-European languages can be included into this enterprise. Face-threatening acts, such as request speech act are important to investigate as they can cause miscommunication (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989), which is also one major impetus for this study. In order to avoid the potential conflict between people, it is necessary to investigate how to make appropriate request speech act.

In terms of the second research problem, if people cannot modify the request speech act appropriately, it can lead to the tension of people's relationship. Most previous studies either compared the request modifications of two different languages or learners of one language with native speakers of that language (e.g., Abidi, 2022; Al-Gahtani & Roevers, 2015; Daneshpazhuh & Shahrokhi, 2016; Ninomiya & Shadayeva, 2020; Savić et al., 2021) from either cross-cultural or intercultural perspective. Few investigate the request modifications in different varieties of one language (e.g., Malaysian Malay vs. Indonesian Malay) from intracultural perspective. In addition, lots of people mistakenly think that the Anglo-Saxon linguistic behavior can represent the human behavior in general since most previous studies have shown dissimilarities in request modifications in English (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Fakher Ajabshir, 2021; Halupka-Rešetar, 2014; Majid & Rasheed, 2020; Šegedin Borovina, 2017) and European languages, such as Greek (e.g., Vassilaki & Selimis, 2020). Just as Wierzbicka (1985) argued, studies on speech acts suffered greatly from "ethnocentrism" (p.145). However, Chinese linguistic behavior is largely ignored by previous researchers (Ying & Hong, 2020). Due to the scarcity of related literature on comparison of request modifications in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin, there is a dire need

to investigate the request modification in these two varieties of Mandarin Chinese. This study could help mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese community have better communication.

With regard to the third research problem, Brown & Levinson (1987) argued that D, P and R variable had impacts on the realization of FTAs, including request speech act. Barron (2005) claimed that the conventions of language use varied among social variables in an intra-lingual manner. Lee (2005) also held that speakers would take social variables, such as social power, social distance and context into consideration when they formulate a request. These variables have different degrees of impact on request speech act in different languages and different cultural contexts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Nwoye, 1992; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016; Yeung, 1997). If speakers are not aware of the impacts of these social variables and make requests appropriately, it would cause possible “communication problems” (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016, p. 3). The impacts of these variables have been validated in many western languages, such as Dutch (e.g., Hendriks, 2008), and English (e.g., AlMujaibel & Gomaa, 2022; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2010). However, only few researchers examined the impacts of these variables on Asian languages, such as Japanese (e.g., Fukushima, 1996), and Vietnamese (e.g., Nguyen & Le Ho, 2013). Moreover, in traditional variational pragmatics, macro-social variables, such gender, age and region are examined (Barron & Schneider, 2009). It remains to be known how micro-social variables, such as D, P, and R, influence the request speech act in variational pragmatics. Therefore, further investigation needs to be conducted. This investigation could help speakers have a better and deeper understanding about how to request appropriately in various situations of their daily life.

1.4 Research Objectives

The overall aim of the current study is to fill in the existing literature gap by investigating the request speech act between two intralinguistic regional varieties of Mandarin Chinese, namely Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. What differs the current study from the previous ones is that this study compares the request speech act in two varieties of Mandarin Chinese that are rarely investigated from an intralinguistic and intracultural perspective. The specific objectives of this study include:

- 1) The first objective is to identify the request head act strategies in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.
- 2) The second objective is to analyze the differences and similarities of request head act strategies between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.
- 3) The third objective is to identify request modifications in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.
- 4) The fourth objective is to analyze the differences and similarities of request modifications between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.
- 5) The fifth objective is to investigate to what extent social variables of social distance, social power, and ranking of imposition account for the variation in the use of request speech act in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.

1.5 Research Questions

The desideratum of this study lies in the scant attention paid to request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. The

problematic nature of the request speech act also serves as the motivation for this study. The research questions in this study are formulated as follows:

- 1) What are the request head act strategies employed in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin ?
- 2) How do request head act strategies in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin differ from and resemble each other ?
- 3) What are request modifications employed in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin ?
- 4) How do request modifications in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin differ from and resemble each other ?
- 5) To what extent do variables of social distance, social power, and ranking of imposition influence the utilisation of individual request head act strategies and request modifications in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin ?

1.6 Research Significance

This study has great value in terms of practice and theory.

First, practically, this study could help improve intracultural communication, and avoid possible misunderstandings and clashes between mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese speakers. Just as Barron (2008) pointed out, increasing the awareness of differences in language use conventions can potentially reduce the misunderstandings between cultures that share a single language and between social sub-groups within these cultures. Since inappropriate request may cause problems (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016), the study of request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin can be beneficial for both mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese community. The study can help these two

communities appreciate, expect and accept the variations of request speech act in two varieties of Mandarin Chinese.

Second, practically, this research generates new data that expand the people's understanding of request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. This research expands the scope of intracultural comparative study on request speech act by including two varieties of Mandarin Chinese, namely Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. It can also contribute to the diversity of language studies by examining two varieties of Mandarin Chinese that are underrepresented in comparative study of request speech act. An investigation of request speech act can provide an opportunity for people to know the politeness, cultural values, and other aspects of one community better (Han, 2013). This study can also help to reveal the communication styles that underlie the request speech act in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin.

Third, theoretically, this study revised and combined the CCSARP theoretical framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) and two other theoretical frameworks of request proposed by Zhang (1995b) and Ren (2019) through investigating request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. Based on the collected data, five new categories, namely “inquiry for information/solution”, “getting familiar”, “negative consequence”, “encouragement” and “seeking empathy” were proposed and added to the existing theoretical frameworks. Moreover, this study can also provide further evidence that these three theoretical frameworks can be applied to analyse intralinguistic data from intracultural perspective.

Fourth, theoretically, this study proves the validity and applicability of Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962a; Searle, 1979) and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) based on the collected data in the area of variational pragmatics. The main concepts in Speech Act Theory, such as request speech act and the main concepts in Politeness Theory, for instance situational variables of social power, social distance and ranking of imposition were explored in this study. This study can help to enrich the literature on Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory with the collected new data from intracultural perspective.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The scope and limitations of this study are presented in the following two sections.

1.7.1 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is presented as follows:

First, this study focuses exclusively on investigating request speech act between two regional varieties of Mandarin Chinese: Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. Varieties of Chinese in Malaysia, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, and Hakka, as well as other regional varieties of Chinese in mainland China, are outside the scope of this study. By narrowing the scope in this manner, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and variations in request speech act specifically within the Mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin contexts.

Second, the study is narrowly scoped to examine the request speech act, specifically excluding investigation into other speech acts such as refusal, apology, and thanking.

By concentrating solely on request speech act, the study aims to provide detailed insights into the request head act strategies and request modifiers employed in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. By delving exclusively into the request speech act, the study aims to offer subtle insights into the request head act strategies and request modifiers employed within these two linguistic contexts.

Third, this study specifically compares the request speech act employed by Mainland Chinese Mandarin speakers and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin speakers. This deliberate exclusion of other speech communities ensures that the study remains tightly focused, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of request speech act used by Mainland Chinese Mandarin speakers and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin speakers. It also helps a concentrated examination within the distinctive linguistic environments of these two specific communities.

Fourth, this study exclusively investigates the impacts of three social variables—D, P and R—on request speech act in Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. Including gender, age and social background variable would significantly broaden the scope of the study, potentially undermining the depth of exploration. Moreover, although studies support the concept that gender is influential (e.g., Esfahlan & Boroumand, 2020; Yujie, 2021), its impacts may be more context-specific and less universally applicable compared to D, P and R variable, which are universally recognized in Brown & Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Additionally, the impacts of age variable lack empirical evidence, as little attention has been paid to this variable in the existing literature (Barron, 2005).

1.7.2 Limitations of the Study

Although this study provides insights into the request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin, it is also important to be mindful of certain limitations.

First, the majority of participants in the present study consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students. This demographic limitation hinders the generalizability of these findings to other social groups, as they may not fully represent the entire population of both mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese communities. The findings are most applicable to younger adults and university students. Moreover, while the sample size is larger than that of previous studies, it remains insufficiently large. Cautions need to be taken to generalize the findings of this study to the broader population as the limited sample size cannot represent the whole population of mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese community.

Second, the data that were used in this study were not collected in natural condition. Due to the requirement of a large scale of data collection within a limited period, role-play instrument was employed. However, the data collected through this instrument can hardly be equal to the data collected from the natural speech (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010). Moreover, since the role plays of 25 mainland Chinese participants with Malaysian Chinese interlocutor were conducted online, not in a face-to-face manner, this may also influence the authenticity of collected data.

Third, another limitation lies in the design of scenarios within the role-play instrument. Most of these scenarios were related to university life, which limits the possibility of

generalizing the results of this study to the other work places of society. In addition, although researchers endeavored to meticulously design suitable variable combinations for each scenario, achieving consistency proved challenging due to variations in participants' interpretations of these variables. Their different understandings would also influence the results.

Fourth, this study is limited to investigating the isolated aspect of conversation, which is the making of request speech act. However, it is only one piece of the puzzle. A genuine and real-life conversation is a multifaceted exchange that encompasses not only the act of making a request speech act but also the subsequent responses to that request speech act, whether they be acceptances or refusals. Within the framework of communication, understanding the complete sequence of request speech act in a conversation is essential, as it provides a holistic view of how individuals request and reply in everyday situations.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

To avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity surrounding key terms, it is crucial to clarify their definitions due to the terminological inconsistency associated with them.

The key terms of this study are defined as follows:

1.8.1 Variational Pragmatics

Variational pragmatics is “a study of intralingual macrosocial pragmatic variation” (Barron, 2014, p. 1). It concerns with how the speakers of a variety of language realize a certain speech act, such as request speech act in a given context. According to Barron & Schneider (2009), variational pragmatics is specifically an intersection of

pragmatics with dialectology in order to study language variation. The really important issue for variational pragmatics is to contrast the varieties of a language (Barron & Schneider, 2009).

1.8.2 Intracultural

While culture refers to the beliefs, behaviors, values, customs, and traditions shared by members of a specific cultural community (Bates & Plog, 1990), the term “intra-cultural” refers to interactions or phenomena that occur within a single culture or cultural group. Intracultural communication takes place when individuals within a specific first language (L1) speech community interact using established language conventions and usage norms, while also incorporating their own personal choices and preferences (Kecskes, 2015).

1.8.3 Intralinguistic Study

Intralinguistic study refers to the study of the same language without reference to external languages or cultures (Liu et al., 2021). Intralinguistic study involves the analysis of different dialects or varieties within a particular language (Lewandowski & Mateu, 2020). This encompasses a comprehensive analysis of regional, sociolectal, and idiolectal variations that contribute to the linguistic landscape of a language community. Such investigations not only unveil the structural divergences within the language but also shed light on the sociolinguistic factors influencing linguistic variation and evolution.

1.8.4 Request

Request is defined as “an illocutionary act whereby a speaker (requester) conveys to a hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the requestee to perform an act which is for the benefit of the speaker” (Trosborg, 1995, p. 187). It is directive speech act that shows a speaker’s attempts to get the hearer do a certain act (Barron, 2016). Since requester imposes his/her willingness upon the requestee when making request, request speech act is considered to impositive (Trosborg, 1995) and face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

1.8.5 Social Distance

Social distance can be defined as “the degree of familiarity between speaker and hearer in a situation” (Hendriks, 2008, p. 339). Economidou-Koetsidis (2010) also defined social distance in terms of familiarity between interlocutors. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), social distance is “a symmetric social dimension of similarity/difference” (p.76). When there is a close relationship between the speaker and hearer, their social distance is low. Conversely, if there is no close relationship between them, their social distance is high.

1.8.6 Social Power

Social power refers to the dynamic of power or the level of influence between the speaker and the hearer in a given situation (Hendriks, 2008). It is “an asymmetric social dimension of relative power” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 77). In this study, the definition of social power also refers to social status or social rank (Cansler & Stiles, 1981).

1.8.7 Ranking of Imposition

Imposition refers to “how great is the request you are making” (Thomas, 1995, p. 130). According to Fukushima (2000), imposition is related to rights and obligation and the size of imposition also relies on the time, efforts, and psychological burden on the part of requestee. So ranking of imposition is the degree to which impositions “interfere with agent’s wants of self-determination or of approval” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 77). It indicates the extent to which a speaker enforces his/her desires on the hearer (Chen & Chen, 2007; Trosborg, 1995). If a speaker asks something that is difficult to fulfil, then the ranking of imposition is relatively high. If a speaker requests a small favor, then the ranking of imposition is low.

1.8.8 Mainland Chinese Mandarin

Mainland Chinese Mandarin refers to the standard variety of Mandarin Chinese spoken in mainland China. Mandarin Chinese, also known as *Putonghua*, is the official language of China and serves as a lingua franca among the diverse population of mainland China (Ramsey, 1987). It is the most widely spoken language in mainland China and is characterized by its adherence to the standardized pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

1.8.9 Malaysian Chinese Mandarin

While mandarin is one of the official languages in Malaysia (Lim et al., 2015), the term “Malaysian Chinese Mandarin” is not commonly used to describe the Mandarin spoken by Malaysian Chinese people. So in this study, Malaysian Chinese Mandarin

refers to “local varieties of Malaysian mandarin” (Lim et al., 2015, p. 797) and is defined as mandarin Chinese that is spoken by Malaysian Chinese people.

1.8.10 Mainland Chinese Mandarin Speaker

A Mainland Chinese Mandarin speaker is an individual who is a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese, residing in mainland China. This community typically uses Standard Mandarin, also known as *Putonghua*, which is the official language of mainland China and is based on the Beijing dialect (Ramsey, 1987).

1.8.11 Malaysian Chinese Mandarin Speaker

A Malaysian Chinese Mandarin speaker is an individual of Chinese descent living in Malaysia, who speaks Mandarin Chinese. This speech community speaks Mandarin Chinese influenced by local Malaysian languages, reflecting a unique blend of linguistic characteristics that is different from Standard Mandarin spoken in mainland China (Khoo, 2017).

1.9 Organization of Chapters

Below is an outline detailing the organization of this thesis:

Chapter 1 introduces the background, problem statements, research objectives, research questions, research significance, scope and limitations of this study, and definition of key terms so as to present an overview for this study. In chapter 2, previous literature on the theories related to speech act, and speech act of request are reviewed. Previous studies on request speech act were also reviewed. Based on literature review, the research gaps that motivate this study are presented. In Chapter

3, research design, the sample, conceptual framework, role-play instrument, pilot study, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, a revised combined theoretical framework, establishing reliability and ethical considerations are presented. Chapter 4 presents the detailed results, then followed by comprehensive discussions of this study in Chapter 5. Finally, the conclusion of the current study is reached in Chapter 6.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has laid the foundation for this PhD thesis by providing a comprehensive introduction to the topic of this study, including background of the study, problem statements, research objectives, research questions and so on. Overall, Chapter 1 serves as a crucial starting point and also a roadmap of this study, offering a clear and compelling rationale for the pursuit of knowledge related to request speech act between Mainland Chinese Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese Mandarin. Chapter 2 will review the theoretical works, as well as empirical studies which are closely related to request speech act.

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