

A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Request Strategies in Chinese and American Sitcoms - A Corpus Analysis Based on *How I Met Your Mother* and *iPartment*

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Received: 19 January 2026; Accepted: 4 February 2026; Published: 24 March 2026

Abstract:

Based on Blum-Kulka et al.'s Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) framework, this study takes the American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (289 tokens) and the Chinese sitcom *iPartment* (277 tokens) as research objects. It comparatively analyzes the cross-cultural differences in request strategies between Chinese and American sitcoms from three dimensions: overall usage of request strategies, presence or absence of comedic effect, and interpersonal distance (close/distant). The results show that both sitcoms take Mood derivable as the core request strategy, but the proportion in the Chinese sitcom (75.5%) is significantly higher than that in the American sitcom (62.6%); the American sitcom uses conventional indirect strategies (Suggestory formula + Query preparatory) more balanced, while the two types of strategies in the Chinese sitcom account for the same proportion (both 9.7%); in scenes with comedic effect, the proportion of direct requests in the Chinese sitcom (79.7%) is higher than that in the American sitcom (66.1%), and the American sitcom shows a more prominent use of Hedged performative strategy; the impact of interpersonal distance on strategy selection is culturally specific— in distant relationships, the proportion of Query preparatory in the American sitcom increases significantly (16.3%), while the Chinese sitcom has a higher proportion of direct requests in close relationships (77.4%). The findings verify the core viewpoint of cross-cultural pragmatic theory that “cultural values influence speech act strategies” and provide references for pragmatic research on sitcoms and cross-cultural communication practice.

Keywords:

Request Speech Act, Request Strategy, Sitcom, Cross-cultural Comparison

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962) points out that the essential unit of linguistic communication is “doing things with words” [1]. As a core type of directive speech acts, request speech acts are one of the most frequent communicative activities in daily life (Searle, 1969) [2]. Characterized by “speaker-benefiting and hearer-costing”, request acts pose potential threats to the hearer’s negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3]. Therefore, language users need to balance request intentions and politeness principles through strategy selection.

The CCSARP framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. classifies request strategies into three major categories and nine specific forms, providing a core analytical tool for cross-cultural research on request acts (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)[4]. Existing studies have shown significant differences in the selection of request strategies across different cultural backgrounds: conventional indirect strategies are most frequently used in DCT surveys, while direct strategies dominate in corpus-based research (Liu & Wei, 2022) [5]. Research on politeness and requests among non-native speakers has also been prominent. (Mohammadi et. al., 2013) investigated Iranian EFL learners’ perceptions of politeness in requests, revealing that inter-language pragmatics and politeness strategies are crucial in understanding how requests are formulated and perceived across cultures. The study highlights the significance of politeness in request strategies and its influence on intercultural communication. As a corpus source reflecting daily communication, the use of request strategies in sitcoms not only follows general pragmatic rules but also presents unique characteristics due to comedic creation needs. However, systematic comparative studies on request strategies in Chinese and American sitcoms remain scarce [6].

1.2. Research Questions

Based on the above background, this study focuses on the following three research questions:

- (1). What differences exist in the overall usage characteristics of request strategies between Chinese and American sitcoms (*How I Met Your Mother* and *iPartment*)?
- (2). How does the presence or absence of comedic effect influence the selection of request strategies in the two sitcoms?
- (3). How does interpersonal distance (close/distant) affect the distribution of request strategies in Chinese and American sitcoms?

1.3. Research Significance

Theoretically, this study expands the application scenario of the CCSARP framework in sitcom corpora, enriches the empirical basis of cross-cultural pragmatic comparative research, and reveals the usage rules of request strategies in the specific genre of sitcoms. Practically, it identifies the pragmatic differences in request acts in daily communication between Chinese and American cultures, providing guidance for cross-cultural communicators in strategy selection, and offering references for pragmatic creation in sitcoms.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Corpus Source

The corpus is selected from two classic sitcoms: the American *How I Met Your Mother* and the Chinese *iPartment*, both focusing on the daily life and communicative scenarios of urban youth, ensuring strong comparability. A total of 566 valid request speech act tokens are screened, including 289 from *How I Met Your Mother* and 277 from *iPartment*.

2.2. Research Framework and Coding

Adopting the CCSARP framework proposed by Blum-Kulka et al., request strategies are classified into nine specific forms (Liu & Wei, 2022) [6]:

Direct strategies: Mood derivable, Explicit performative, Hedged performative, Obligation statement, Want statement;

Conventional indirect strategies: Suggestory formula, Query preparatory;

Non-conventional indirect strategies: Strong hint, Mild hint.

During the coding process, two researchers independently coded the corpus, achieving an inter-coder agreement of 92.3%. Discrepancies were resolved through negotiation.

2.3. Statistical Methods

Descriptive statistical methods are used to count the frequency and percentage of each type of request strategy from three dimensions (overall usage, presence/absence of comedic effect, interpersonal distance), so as to comparatively analyze the differential characteristics between Chinese and American sitcoms.

3. Research Results

3.1. Comparative Analysis of Overall Usage Characteristics of Request Strategies

3.1.1. Overall Characteristics of the American Sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*

The American sitcom is dominated by Mood derivable, accounting for 62.6% (181 tokens); followed by Suggestory formula (17.3%, 50 tokens) and Query preparatory (8.3%, 24 tokens); Obligation statement and Explicit performative have the lowest proportions (both 0.7%); no Mild hint strategy is found (Table 1). Direct strategies account for 70.9% in total (Mood derivable + Explicit performative + Hedged performative + Obligation statement + Want statement), conventional indirect strategies account for 25.6%, and non-conventional indirect strategies only account for 3.5%, showing a distribution characteristic of "direct strategies as the mainstay and conventional indirect strategies as supplementary".

3.1.2. Overall Characteristics of the Chinese Sitcom *iPartment*

Mood derivable in the Chinese sitcom accounts for as high as 75.5% (209 tokens), significantly higher than that in the American sitcom; Suggestory formula and Query preparatory account for the same proportion (both 9.7%, 27 tokens); Explicit performative and Strong hint have the same proportion (1.8%); Want statement has the lowest proportion (0.4%); no Obligation statement or Mild hint strategy is found

(Table 1). Direct strategies account for 78.8% in total, conventional indirect strategies account for 19.4%, and non-conventional indirect strategies account for 1.8%. The proportion of direct strategies is higher than that in the American sitcom, while the proportion of indirect strategies is lower.

Table 1. Comparison of Overall Usage of Request Strategies in Chinese and American Sitcoms.

Request Strategy Type	How I Met Your Mother		iPartment	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Mood derivable	181	62.6%	209	75.5%
Explicit performative	2	0.7%	5	1.8%
Hedged performative	11	3.8%	3	1.1%
Obligation statement	2	0.7%	0	0.0%
Want statement	9	3.1%	1	0.4%
Suggestory formula	50	17.3%	27	9.7%
Query preparatory	24	8.3%	27	9.7%
Strong hint	10	3.5%	5	1.8%
Mild hint	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Total	289	100.0%	277	100.0%

3.2. The Impact of Comedic Effect on the Selection of Request Strategies

3.2.1. Scenes with Comedic Effect

In the American sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 66.1% (78 tokens), Hedged performative accounts for 6.8% (8 tokens), and Suggestory formula accounts for 13.6% (16 tokens); in the Chinese sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for as high as 79.7% (59 tokens), significantly higher than that in the American sitcom, Suggestory formula and Query preparatory account for 8.1% (6 tokens) and 5.4% (4 tokens) respectively, and Hedged performative only accounts for 1.4% (1 token) (Table 2). The usage frequency of Hedged performative in the American sitcom is 4.9 times that in the Chinese sitcom in scenes with comedic effect.

3.2.2. Scenes without Comedic Effect

In the American sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 60.2% (103 tokens), Suggestory formula accounts for 19.9% (34 tokens), and Query preparatory accounts for 9.9% (17 tokens); in the Chinese sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 73.9% (150 tokens), Query preparatory accounts for 11.3% (23 tokens), and Suggestory formula accounts for 10.3% (21 tokens) (Table 2). In scenes without comedic effect, the proportion of Mood derivable in both Chinese and American sitcoms is lower than that in scenes with comedic effect, and the proportion of conventional indirect strategies increases.

Table 2. The Impact of Comedic Effect on Request Strategies in Chinese and American Sitcoms (Frequency/Percentage).

Request Strategy Type	How I Met Your Mother		iPartment	
	With Comedic Effect	Without Comedic Effect	With Comedic Effect	Without Comedic Effect
Mood derivable	78/66.1%	103/60.2%	59/79.7%	150/73.9%
Explicit performative	1/0.8%	1/0.6%	2/2.7%	3/1.5%
Hedged performative	8/6.8%	3/1.8%	1/1.4%	2/1.0%
Obligation statement	0/0.0%	2/1.2%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%
Want statement	2/1.7%	7/4.1%	0/0.0%	1/0.5%

Request Strategy Type	How I Met Your Mother		iPartment	
	With Comedic Effect	Without Comedic Effect	With Comedic Effect	Without Comedic Effect
Suggestory formula	16/13.6%	34/19.9%	6/8.1%	21/10.3%
Query preparatory	7/5.9%	17/9.9%	4/5.4%	23/11.3%
Strong hint	6/5.1%	4/2.3%	2/2.7%	3/1.5%
Mild hint	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%
Total	118	171	74	203

3.3. The Regulatory Role of Interpersonal Distance on the Selection of Request Strategies

3.3.1. Scenes with Close Interpersonal Relationship

In the American sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 65.6% (137 tokens), Suggestory formula accounts for 18.2% (38 tokens), and Query preparatory accounts for 5.3% (11 tokens); in the Chinese sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 77.4% (151 tokens), Suggestory formula accounts for 10.8% (21 tokens), and Query preparatory accounts for 8.2% (16 tokens) (Table 3). The proportion of Mood derivable in the Chinese sitcom is 11.8 percentage points higher than that in the American sitcom in scenes with close interpersonal relationship.

3.3.2. Scenes with Distant Interpersonal Relationship

In the American sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 55.0% (44 tokens), a decrease of 10.6 percentage points compared with close relationships; Query preparatory accounts for 16.3% (13 tokens), an increase of 11 percentage points compared with close relationships; Suggestory formula accounts for 15.0% (12 tokens). In the Chinese sitcom, Mood derivable accounts for 70.7% (58 tokens), a decrease of 6.7 percentage points compared with close relationships; Query preparatory accounts for 13.4% (11 tokens), an increase of 5.2 percentage points compared with close relationships; Strong hint accounts for 3.7% (3 tokens) (Table 3). The increase in the proportion of conventional indirect strategies in the American sitcom is greater than that in the Chinese sitcom in scenes with distant interpersonal relationship.

Table 3. The Impact of Interpersonal Distance on Request Strategies in Chinese and American Sitcoms (Frequency/Percentage).

Request Strategy Type	How I Met Your Mother		iPartment	
	Close Relationship	Distant Relationship	Close Relationship	Distant Relationship
Mood derivable	137/65.6%	44/55.0%	151/77.4%	58/70.7%
Explicit performative	0/0.0%	2/2.5%	4/2.1%	1/1.2%
Hedged performative	7/3.3%	4/5.0%	1/0.5%	2/2.4%
Obligation statement	2/1.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%
Want statement	7/3.3%	2/2.5%	0/0.0%	1/1.2%
Suggestory formula	38/18.2%	12/15.0%	21/10.8%	6/7.3%
Query preparatory	11/5.3%	13/16.3%	16/8.2%	11/13.4%
Strong hint	2/1.0%	3/3.8%	2/1.0%	3/3.7%
Mild hint	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%	0/0.0%
Total	209	171	195	82

4. Discussion

4.1. Cross-Cultural Differences in the Overall Usage of Request Strategies

Both Chinese and American sitcoms take direct strategies as the mainstay, which is consistent with the conclusion that “direct strategies are most frequently used in corpus-based research” (Liu & Wei, 2022) [5], reflecting the colloquial and fast-paced communicative characteristics of sitcoms—direct strategies can quickly convey request intentions, adapting to the needs of comedic plot development.

The proportion of direct strategies in the Chinese sitcom (78.8%) is higher than that in the American sitcom (70.9%), and the proportion of Mood derivable (75.5%) is significantly leading, which is related to the pragmatic habit of “direct expression among acquaintances” in Chinese communication (Zhang & Wang, 1997)[7]. *iPartment* focuses on close relationships such as roommates and friends, and the high usage of direct strategies is consistent with the pragmatic rule that “the closer the relationship, the more direct the language”. The proportion of conventional indirect strategies in the American sitcom (25.6%) is higher than that in the Chinese sitcom (19.4%), and the proportion of Suggestory formula (17.3%) is prominent, reflecting the communicative trait of “valuing negotiability” in English culture. Even in sitcoms, there is an emphasis on maintaining the hearer’s face through indirect strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3].

In addition, the American sitcom includes Obligation statement (0.7%), while the Chinese sitcom does not, which is related to the explicit characteristic of obligation expressions such as “time norms and rule requirements” in English (e.g., It’s time for a talk). In contrast, obligation expressions in Chinese are mostly integrated into direct instructions and rarely used as independent request strategies (Su, 2003) [8].

4.2. The Influence Mechanism of Comedic Effect on Strategy Selection

In scenes with comedic effect, the proportion of Mood derivable in both Chinese and American sitcoms is higher than that in scenes without comedic effect. The reason is that the “explicitness of directive expressions” of direct strategies is prone to forming contrastive humor—comedic effect is generated through the dislocation between exaggerated and straightforward requests and the hearer’s reactions. The proportion of this strategy in the Chinese sitcom (79.7%) is higher, reflecting the “direct exaggeration” humorous style of Chinese sitcoms; the proportion of Hedged performative in the American sitcom (6.8%) is significantly higher than that in the Chinese sitcom. This type of strategy modifies performative verbs with hedges (e.g., I’d like you to...), forming “contrast between euphemism and straightforwardness”, which is a typical pragmatic path of Western humor (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986) [9].

In scenes without comedic effect, the proportion of conventional indirect strategies in both sitcoms increases, which is in line with the pragmatic principle of “valuing politeness in conventional communication”—indirect strategies reduce the threat to the hearer’s negative face by mentioning the preparatory conditions of the request (such as ability and willingness) (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [3]. The proportions of both Suggestory formula and Query preparatory in the American sitcom are higher than those in the Chinese sitcom, reflecting the higher emphasis on politeness in conventional communication in English culture.

4.3. The Pragmatic Regulatory Role of Interpersonal Relationship

In close relationships, the proportion of Mood derivable in the Chinese sitcom (77.4%) is higher than that in the American sitcom (65.6%), which is consistent with the cultural value of “no need for excessive euphemism in close relationships” in Chinese culture. Direct requests among friends and roommates are regarded as a manifestation of harmonious relationships; although the American sitcom mainly uses direct strategies, the proportion of Suggestory formula (18.2%) is higher than that in the Chinese sitcom (10.8%), indicating that even in close relationships, English culture emphasizes retaining the hearer’s right to choose through suggestive indirect strategies (Liu & Zhang, 2012) [10].

In distant relationships, the proportion of Query preparatory in the American sitcom (16.3%) increases by 11 percentage points compared with close relationships, while that in the Chinese sitcom increases by 5.2 percentage points. This verifies Blum-Kulka’s cross-cultural pragmatic theory—in distant relationships, language users increase the use of indirect strategies to maintain social distance (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)[4]. The greater increase in the American sitcom reflects the emphasis on “individual boundaries” in Western culture, while the Chinese sitcom still maintains a high proportion of direct strategies (70.7%) even in distant relationships, reflecting the cultural trait of “valuing relationships over boundaries” in Chinese communication (Qian, 2000) [11].

5. Conclusions

5.1. Main Findings

Both Chinese and American sitcoms take Mood derivable as the main request strategy, but the Chinese sitcom has a higher proportion of direct strategies and a lower proportion of indirect strategies, reflecting the directness of Chinese communication;

Comedic effect strengthens the use of direct strategies—the Chinese sitcom relies on “direct exaggeration” to create humor, while the American sitcom forms euphemistic contrastive humor through “Hedged performative”;

The impact of interpersonal distance on strategy selection is culturally specific—the proportion of indirect strategies in the American sitcom increases more significantly in distant relationships, while the Chinese sitcom maintains a high proportion of direct strategies even in distant relationships.

5.2. Research Significance

Theoretically, this study verifies the applicability of the CCSARP framework in sitcom corpora, enriches the empirical data of cross-cultural request act research, and reveals the usage rules of request strategies in the specific genre of sitcoms. Practically, it provides pragmatic references for cross-cultural communicators in sitcom scenarios—when communicating with native English speakers, appropriate use of indirect strategies such as Suggestory formula can be increased; when communicating with native Chinese speakers, direct strategies can be adopted in close relationships, and the proportion of indirect strategies should be moderately increased in distant relationships.

5.3. Research Limitations and Prospects

This study only uses corpus from two sitcoms, with a limited sample range; variables such as gender and age are not included. In the future, the corpus source can be expanded to include more Chinese and American sitcoms, and variables such as gender and social status can be introduced to further deepen cross-cultural pragmatic difference research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge teachers and classmates in School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology.

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