

# The Influence of Foreign Accent on Politeness Perception in French as a Foreign Language (FLE)

**Lisa Schneider**

University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

Email: [lisa.schneider@unifr.ch](mailto:lisa.schneider@unifr.ch)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7850-2809>

---

## Abstract:

This study explores the influence of foreign accents on the perception of politeness in French as a foreign language (FLE), with a particular focus on the impact of intonation in French requests. Given that Russian speakers are sometimes perceived as "impolite", this research compares the perception of politeness in requests made by Russian and Spanish speakers. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), daily interactions constantly threaten the "face" of interlocutors, particularly through face-threatening acts (FTAs). To manage this threat, speakers use politeness strategies, including mitigation techniques. One typical mitigation strategy involves framing a request as a question, which presupposes the use of interrogative intonation. Canepari (2017) highlights that Russian speakers often use a bell-shaped intonation (rising and then falling) for questions, while French speakers favor rising intonation, perceived as less conclusive. This contrast may influence the perception of politeness. This qualitative study involved three Spanish-speaking and three Russian-speaking participants who were recorded reading requests in French in contexts requiring varying degrees of politeness, based on criteria defined by Brown and Levinson (1987). These recordings were evaluated by native French speakers (N=21), who rated the perceived politeness of the requests on a Likert scale (1=very impolite to 5=very polite). The results revealed no significant differences between the Spanish-speaking and Russian-speaking groups. However, a correlation was observed between language proficiency and perceived politeness: the higher the participants' proficiency level, the higher the politeness judgements. Additionally, evaluators' comments underscored the importance of phonological features, particularly intonation, which was mentioned in 30% of the responses.

**Keywords:** accent, politeness, pragmatics, intonation, FLE, prosody

