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Routine politeness in American and British English requests: use and non-use of *please*

Abstract: This paper looks at the use and non-use of *please* in American and British English requests. The analysis is based on request data from two comparable workplace email corpora, which have been pragmatically annotated to enable retrieval of all request speech acts regardless of formulation. 675 requests are extracted from each of the two corpora; the behaviour of *please* is analyzed with regard to factors such as imposition level, sentence mood, and modal verb type. Differences in use of *please* between the two varieties of English can be accounted for by viewing this as a marker of conventional politeness rather than face-threat mitigation in British English and as a marker of relationship asymmetry in American English.

1 Introduction

1.1 The dual nature of *please*

Watts (2003: 183) calls *please* "[t]he most obvious example of a politeness marker in English", yet it is a word that divides speakers of British and American Englishes (henceforth BrE and AmE), occurring about twice as frequently in British English as in American (Biber et al. 1999: 1098; Breuer and Geluykens 2007). This difference is sometimes noted in intercultural communication and contributes to stereotyping regarding politeness. Britons often accurately perceive Americans as using *please* less than they would, as in (1) and (2), and Americans' perceived lack of *please* in expected positions can be a source of intercultural friction, as in (3) and (4).

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(1) I often complain that Americans rarely say "Please" but boy do they take "Thank you" seriously (British expatriate in the US; http://pondparleys. blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/americans-brits-always-offending-each.html)

(2) Americans don't say please like we do [...] and yes it sounds like they have no manners, but it's how they are (British flight attendants; Liz & Julie 2007)

(3) [We] were in the outdoor section of a café [in the UK] once – a cramped, eat-your-lunch-and-get-out kind of place – and as a couple who'd been sitting nearby wove past our table to get themselves out, one of them said, "In this country, we say please and thank you."
Sadly, by the time we'd processed the words, they were too far away for a snappy comeback, but "In our country, we're polite to strangers," did come to mind. (American traveller in UK; http://notesfromtheuk.com/2015/01/16/manners-american-and-british/)

(4) One day, after I'd been eating [at a baked potato shop in Cambridge] for a week or so, I ordered my usual as I always did: "May I have a baked potato with cheese and broccoli?" The server responded with, "no, not unless you start saying please." (Lisa, American student in UK; Murphy 2012)

The Americans in the last two interactions had not perceived their own *please*-less requests as impolite. Would they have perceived their own requests as "more polite" if they had said *please*? There is reason to suspect that they would not. Since these Americans did not believe that they deserved scolding, they seem to feel that their *please*-less requests were already polite. Furthermore, one can find American reflections on "impolite *please*", which has "evolved into a tag meant to convey urgency or annoyance" (Trawick-Smith 2012).

The differences in frequency indicate different norms for making context-appropriate requests, which may in turn indicate different prevalent functions of *please* in the US and UK. This paper, based on workplace email data, takes the position that *please* variation reveals different aspects of appropriate interaction in British and American cultures (cf. Schneider 2012), with a greater emphasis on conventionalized formulae in BrE than in AmE. The British case in particular offers support to the argument that perceptions of what is "polite" can depend on what is familiar, rather than a calculated mitigation of face threat (Terkourafi 2015: 11). The existence of fewer and weaker patterns in the American data gives the impression that the use of *please* in AmE is less a matter of routine.[1]

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1 In considering the data, we attempt, in the first instance, a certain theoretical agnosticism. Where we use the word *polite* without reference to a particular theory, we mean to refer to first-order politeness – that is, speakers' cultural understanding of what qualifies as a "polite"

The rest of the article is organized as follows. In the remainder of this section, we provide some context for our work, discussing other studies on AmE and BrE *please*. In Section 2 we describe our data and methodology, and analyze our findings in Section 3. Finally, in Section 4, we consider possible interpretations for our results.

1.2 Background to the study

Differences in the relative frequency of *please* are not the only hint we have that *please* is used for different purposes in AmE and BrE. While past studies have not directly compared *please* in the US and UK, American and British researchers studying the word have made conclusions that, when contrasted with one another, point to national differences – although they mostly make their claims about "English *please*" without reference to national varieties. This is true regardless of the data type or research methodologies.

Working with British discourse-completion task (DCT) data, House (1989) concludes that *please* occurs when imposition is minimal and social obligation is present, as in service encounters. Wichmann (2004), working with spoken requests in the ICE-GB corpus, similarly claims that *please* is used only where very little face-work is needed.

But American studies give a different view. In observations of spontaneous spoken American English, Stross (1964) found that American waitresses used *please* to kitchen staff only when they made requests for actions that were beyond normal expectations of the job. Ervin-Tripp (1976) found that *please* marks differences in age or rank. That *please* is a power-differential marker in AmE is also supported by anecdotal observations that *please* sounds "bossy" in everyday requests (Trawick-Smith 2012) and by Leopold's (2015) US email request study in which *please* occurred in all imperative requests for permission, where the addressee can be assumed to have authority, unlike in requests for action where either party might be the more powerful (though the permission requests are just six in a corpus of 450). Pufahl Bax (1986), again observing naturally occurring workplace interactions, found *please* only in written requests, never in spoken ones, suggesting that American *please* marks a level of formality. In experimental studies carried out in naturalistic settings, Firmin et al. (2004) and Vaughn et al.

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or "impolite" behaviour. When considering whether the findings are consonant with theoretical approaches to politeness, we have not assumed that all models are equally explanatory for all cultures.

(2009), respectively, found greater compliance for a low-imposition request when it lacked *please* than when it had it, and greater compliance for a high-imposition request when it had *please*. They characterized *please* as marking a "plea", a markedly different perception of *please* than given by British commentators like Leech (2014: 135), that *please* marks "average requests" as a matter of routine.

Linguistic genre and data collection methods must be kept in mind when comparing past studies and the current work. Some of the past work involves artificial data from DCTs (e. g., House 1989; Breuer and Geluykens 2007). A great deal of caution is needed in relying on such studies, since Flöck and Geluykens (2015) have demonstrated that *please* is used in very different ways in DCTs and naturally occurring data, concluding that "*please* probably serves a different function in the DCTs than in the authentic data" (2015: 29). DCT respondents rely on highly salient strategies, and so they may overuse *please*. For the studies considering naturally occurring data, the amounts of data are often small – e. g., 64 utterances in Pufahl Bax (1986) and 84 in Wichmann (2004).

The literature described so far shows that, in a variety of communicative settings, there is a marked trend for BrE to use *please* more frequently and for more minor requests, in a way that AmE does not. In this paper, we take a more systematic and transatlantic approach to *please* and contribute a new analysis of *please* in natural, computer-mediated written communication with attention to the two national varieties. Using speech-act-tagged corpora of British and American business email, we are able to investigate the matter on a large scale using comparable data.

Of course, there may be considerable sub-cultural variation within these diverse national varieties. Nevertheless, we approach the issue at the national level for two reasons. First, we expect to find differences at the national level because there is more historical opportunity for differences to arise and be maintained where there is no geographical continuity or national identity uniting the populations. Second, there are practical reasons for investigating "American English" and "British English": few past studies or data sources give sufficient information about the varieties used in order to allow for sub-national comparison. This study adds to a growing body of studies on pragmatic variation in national varieties of English (e. g., Flöck 2011; Goddard 2012; Haugh and Schneider 2012; Schneider 2012).

2 Data and methodology

2.1 Data

To keep extraneous variables to a minimum, we have chosen two corpora representing a single genre: workplace emails. The EnronSent Corpus (Styler 2011) consists of the original, unmodified messages extracted from the Sent Mail folders of Enron employees. The messages, which cover the period 1999–2001, are written mainly by native speakers of AmE. The Corpus of Business English Correspondence (henceforth COBEC; Anke et al. 2013; De Felice and Moreton 2014) consists of emails from a British-based telecommunications company, covering the period 1999–2006; the majority of its users are native speakers of BrE. The corpora contain a variety of communications, both internal and external to the company, covering a range of topics.

Crucially for this research, the two corpora have been pragmatically annotated, such that each utterance is assigned to a speech-act category (request, commitment, expressive, question, statement). This makes it possible to carry out a comprehensive study of speech-act realizations regardless of their formulation, as we can search the corpus for all utterances tagged as requests rather than just searching for particular phrases (e. g., *can you* or *I need you to*). This means our analysis can include both occurrences and absences of *please*, as we are not limited to a lexical search for this word, but can consider the full range of requests extracted from the corpora.

The speech-act annotation for the Enron data was carried out manually by three native English speakers, all with expertise in linguistics. Each utterance was annotated by two researchers, and any differences between them were reconciled; this process is described in detail in De Felice et al. (2013). For the COBEC corpus, a hybrid approach was undertaken. The data were first processed by an automated speech-act tagger (De Felice and Moreton 2014, 2015), which achieves accuracy of around 81 %. The tagged data then underwent human post-processing to remove duplicates and erroneously tagged utterances and to identify further instances of requests not recognized by the tagger.

For both corpora, we can only analyze the available linguistic information, as information about the interpersonal relationships and roles of the correspondents is limited.

2.2 Extracting and annotating the requests

We extracted 675 requests from each of the two corpora. These span a broad range of directness, from blunt imperatives to indirect requests formulated as questions or first-person statements, as the examples below demonstrate:

(5) *Copy from this.* [AmE]
(6) *Please let* <N1> *know you are coming.* [BrE]
(7) *Can you please chase* <N2>? [BrE]
(8) *Could you resend it?* [AmE]
(9) *I would appreciate representatives from your area to cover Estates Bid and Order Processes.* [BrE]
(10) *Thank you for your reminder but I have no record of a response from you to my note which I have again attached.* [BrE]

We then manually annotated the dataset with respect to a number of features, listed in Table 1 with examples. Both authors independently coded all of the requests, and discussed and reconciled any disagreements.[2] We took all requests at face value; that is, we did not consider the possibility that they were uttered in jest or sarcastically, as this cannot be judged without detailed knowledge of the context. However, we assume that insincere utterances are unlikely in workplace email, where communication is oriented to the completion of shared tasks and sarcasm is open to misinterpretation.

Table 1: Features and values for annotation of requests

Feature	Values	Examples
Please	Yes	*Please get copies to me asap*
	No	*Sit tight*
Position of *please*	Clause-initial	*Please get copies to me asap*
	Clause-medial	*Let's please discuss this*
	Clause-final	*Tell me that it doesn't matter, please*
	N/A	*Sit tight*

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2 We decided against using the CCSARP classificatory scheme (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) because its focus on broader pragmatic strategies does not match our need for fine-grained grammatical information about each utterance; for example, it categorizes all modal interrogatives together as query-preparatory statements.

Feature	Values	Examples
Mood	Imperative	*Please get copies to me asap*
	Conditional	*If you can get the correct addresses [...]*
	Interrogative	*Can we discuss this please as soon as possible?*
	Indicative	*I would like us also to discuss this list of projects*
Subject	0	*Any ideas on how I should respond?*
	1st singular	*I must have your input no later than 4 pm*
	1st plural	*Let's please discuss this*
	2nd	*Please get copies to me asap*
	3rd	*Folks should feel free to distribute [...]*
Modifying *if*-clause	Yes	*If you have any questions, please send us an email*
	No	*Tell me that it doesn't matter, please*
Modal form	Can	*Can we discuss this please as soon as possible?*
	Could	*Could you please call me to discuss the project?*
	May	*You may want to make sure the text is correct*
	Might	*You might consider that possibility*
	Must	*You must book a place if you wish to attend*
	Need	*We need to get them to R today [...]*
	Should	*Folks should feel free to distribute when [...]*
	Will	*I am sure you will want to thank him*
	Would	*Would you let me know?*
	Perhaps	*Perhaps give him some additional recommendations*
	Maybe	*Maybe I'll see you tonight?*
	Possible	*Is it possible to get some idea of the amount?*
	None	*If you have any questions, please send us an email*
Expression of gratitude	Yes	*I would appreciate any information you can give me*
	No	*Would you let me know?*
Expression of preference	Yes	*If we could do the 24th, that would be great*
	No	*Perhaps we could set up a call to discuss this?*
Action type,	Contact	*Please contact J as soon as possible for tickets*
for example:	Find-info	*Please check carefully your own requirements*
	Help	*Could you please assist with the following request?*
[see appendix for full list]	Offer	*If you need anything, don't hesitate to contact me*
	Schedule	*Can you do it prior to 1:30?*
Imposition level	0 (offer)	*If you need anything, don't hesitate to contact me*
	Low	*Please let me know your preference.*
	Medium	*Please do not tell P I have forwarded his letter*
	High	*Please obtain a printout and ask P to complete it*
	unknown	*That possible?*

As the table shows, the analyzed features include syntactic and lexical character-istics – reflecting pragmalinguistic choices – and the more subjective sociopragmatic judgement of imposition. This allows us to draw a picture of the linguistic context of *please* and establish how its use interacts with different levels of imposition.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Overall use of *please*

For BrE, 373 of the 675 (55 %) requests include *please*, while only 184 of the 675 (27 %) AmE requests do. The lower use of *please* in AmE is consistent with previous claims (Biber et al. 1999; Breuer and Geluykens 2007) that this politeness marker occurs about half as often in AmE. It also chimes with the impressionistic observations of non-linguists in (1)–(4) above. Still, despite Leech's (2014: 161) claim that *please* marks an utterance "as a request spoken with a certain (often routine) degree of politeness", it is absent in almost half of the BrE requests. It could be argued that this follows from the "routineness" of *please*. As a conventional marker of requests, *please* should occur regularly in conventional, unremarkable workplace requests, but perhaps not as often in less routine ones. The next subsection explores this possibility.

3.2 Use of *please* by level of imposition

The differences in the frequency of *please* could indicate that the two dialects use it for different types of requests. Like previous studies on email requests (e. g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2006; Félix-Brasdefer 2012), we have taken account of imposition levels in relation to the types of requests formulated. Unlike our work, however, previous email research has mostly concerned the highly specific context of students emailing their instructors, where the power differential is clearly defined, and the researchers, being academics themselves, can easily determine how imposing a particular action is for the participants. Because we lack information about the roles of the writers and addressees and the nature of the work involved, our imposition coding concentrated on inherent rank of imposition (Brown and Levinson 1987), which we based upon the actions requested. The main verb phrases of the request head acts were grouped into macro-categories of action types (e. g., CONTACT, MEET, INFORM, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY; see appendix). These were in turn judged to be "high", "medium", "low", or "no" imposition requests. The "no imposition" cases were those in which the addressee was not expected to take any action in response to the request. There the request form was used to make an offer, as in *Please let me know if I can help* (an offer of help). The proportions of each type in each corpus are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Occurrence of *please* within imposition levels

	High	Medium	Low	Offer	unknown
AmE	25 % (45/180)	19 % (17/88)	30 % (110/368)	23.5 % (8/34)	40 % (2/5)
BrE	43 % (86/201)	30 % (21/70)	65 % (245/377)	91 % (21/23)	0 (0/2)

In our AmE data, imposition level has little bearing on the use of *please*. However, imposition level appears to play a role in the BrE data, with more frequent use of *please* at the lower end of the scale. The higher frequency of *please* in low-stakes requests in BrE supports the view that it is primarily part of a conventional requesting routine rather than a mitigator of serious face-threat. This is congruent with House's (1989) finding in BrE DCTs and Wichmann's finding that in spoken BrE "indirect *please*-requests tend to be towards the more transparent and conventionalized end of the scale, where the imposition is socially licensed (such as a court hearing) or where the imposition is low (such as passing the salt), or where it is of benefit to the hearer" (2004: 1532).

Both corpora include several examples of requests imposing effortful work which are not mitigated by *please*, as in (11) and (12):

(11) *See if you can turn this note from AZ into more understandable English.* (BrE)
(12) *Can you track down this bill and determine impact?* (AmE)

The difference in occurrence of *please* in high-imposition contexts is not due to a difference in sentence type: in both AmE and BrE about 76 % of the high-imposition requests were imperatives or modal questions, the sentence types that accommodate *please*.

Further confirmation of the routineness and lack of face-mitigation of BrE *please* is given by its very high frequency in the small class of offers, which, unlike other requests in the database, do not ask the addressee to act for the benefit of the requester, as in (13) and (14):

(13) *Please let me know if I can be of any more help.*
(14) *Please accept my apologies for cluttering your inbox.*

We take this as further evidence of the routineness of *please* use in low-stakes BrE directives, since here the utterances request no necessary action from the addressee. That they only have the surface form of a directive is indicated by how easy it is to paraphrase them without a request form: (13) *I am available to help you* or (14) *I'm sorry for cluttering your inbox.*

3.3 Use of *please* and directness: sentence type and modal verbs

Requests can also vary along the dimension of directness, as expressed by syntactic mood and subject type. In our data, imperatives and questions far outnumber indicatives and conditionals in both varieties, as shown in Table 3.[3]

Table 3: Requests by mood type

	Imp	Int	Cond	Indic
AmE*	43 %	46 %	<1 %	8 %
	(289)	(328)	(5)	(52)
BrE	38 %	46 %	3 %	13 %
	(258)	(309)	(21)	(87)

*AmE adds up to <100 % because one example was a sentence fragment.

Please is never used in conditionals or indicatives in either data set. This is to be expected, since these moods represent less explicit ways of formulating a request. Their syntactic form mitigates the directness of the request, and adding *please* would only make them overtly directive (Blum-Kulka 1987). These indirect formulations are often used for higher imposition, non-routine requests. For example, 57 % of BrE conditionals, 39 % of BrE indicatives, and 40 % of AmE indicatives were categorized as high-imposition requests (based on their verb/action classifications). Table 4 shows the rate of *please* use in imperatives and interrogatives.

Table 4: Use of *please* by mood type

	Imp	Int
AmE	43 %	18 %
	(124/289)	(59/328)
BrE	86 %	49 %
	(221/258)	(152/309)

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3 The figures relating to indicative mood need to be taken with some caution: it is possible that there are very indirect requests, phrased as declarative sentences, which have not been recognized as such by either automated or human annotators, but which would be recognized as requestive hints by the intended recipient.

In both varieties, *please* is used much more in imperatives than in interrogatives, which is in line with the assumption that the interrogative is used for mitigation, and thus needs *please* less than the more direct imperative. However, *please* is used much more by speakers of BrE, where the vast majority of imperatives feature *please*, than by speakers of AmE, where fewer than half do.[4] There is a similarly large disparity in the use of *please* in interrogatives. This difference relates to imposition level: imperatives and interrogatives are most often used to express low-imposition requests (half of interrogatives in both varieties, 59 % of imperatives in AmE, 67 % of imperatives in BrE), and, as discussed in Section 3.2, BrE is more likely to use *please* in these contexts. These figures indicate that using *please* with imperatives is unmarked and preferred in our BrE data, whereas it cannot be said to be unmarked in the AmE data.

For interrogatives, 97 % of BrE and 80 % of AmE requests feature modal verbs.[5] Among these, only *can*, *could*, and *would* are regularly used; all other modals (*may, might, must, need, should, will*) occur 10 times or fewer, and so we do not discuss them further.

Starting a request with *can*, *could*, or *would* is a frequent, highly routinized occurrence, and our data is in line with Watts' claim that *can you* and *could you* questions have become the "unmarked forms [for requesting] within the scope of politic behaviour for a very wide range of verbal interaction types" (2003: 193). Both data sets have both second-person (henceforth 2p) and non-2p subjects in modal interrogatives, with 2p being far more frequent. Closer analysis showed that the small group of non-2p utterances differ in the two varieties, with AmE mainly using them as outright requests (*Can I have x*), and BrE more often using first-person modal interrogatives as hedged performatives (*Can I suggest/ ask that...*). Given the small size and heterogeneity of the first-person subset and the fact that they rarely include *please*, these examples are not discussed further here.

Table 5 shows different patterns of *please* occurrence in the two varieties, with AmE consistently preferring *please*-less versions with all three modals, and BrE preferring *please*-ful versions.

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4 This contrasts with Leopold (2015), in which 67 % of 155 American imperatives included *please*. She does not report the rate of *please* in interrogatives. Her email data differs from ours in being collected from self-selected volunteers from a range of professions.

5 A very small set of non-interrogative utterances feature modal verbs. None of these have *please*, and they constitute too small a group for meaningful analysis.

Table 5: Proportion of *please* use with *can/could/would you* interrogatives

modal	Can you	Could you	Would you
AmE	21 % (18/84)	33 % (32/98)	29 % (5/17)
BrE	55 % (87/159)	60 % (44/74)	65 % (11/17)

Our British email data is notably different from that in the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English, in which Aijmer (1996) found 20 *can+you* requests without mitigation and only one with *please*, and 25 affirmative *could+you* requests without mitigation and 12 with *please* (plus others with other lexical mitigators including *kindly* and modal adverbs). This lower rate of *please* use is no doubt due to the relative informality of contexts in the London-Lund corpus, compared to our written workplace data. Aijmer notes the expectation that *please* would be more frequent in business correspondence, as well as its greater use in telephone conversations in the corpus.

3.4 Conventionalization in interrogative requests

To better understand the degree of conventionalization in BrE and AmE requests, we used AntConc software (Anthony 2014) to extract 3-grams and 4-grams in order to identify repeated phrases. Table 6 shows those that were particular to 2p interrogative requests.

Table 6: Most frequent 3-grams and 4-grams in 2p modal interrogatives

	AmE	BrE
4-grams	*can you give me* (6) *could you let me* [*know*] (6) *could you **please** forward* (5)	*can you **please** confirm* (10) *could you **please** confirm* (8) *can you **please** ensure* (7) *can you let me* [*know*] (6) *can you **please** forward* (5) *can you **please** provide* (5)
3-grams	*could you **please*** (31) *can you **please*** (16) *can you help* (7) *can you give* (6) *could you let* (6) *can you send* (5) *could you call* (5)	*can you **please*** (76) *could you **please*** (39) *can you help* (13) *would you **please*** (10) ***please** can you* [9] *can you let* (8) *can you confirm* (5)

AmE	BrE
could you forward (5)	
could you give (5)	
could you resend (5)	
*would you **please*** (5)	

The effect is that BrE interrogative requests start more repetitively, with larger numbers of requests starting with the same three or four words. One quarter of BrE interrogatives and 11 % of all requests (regardless of mood) start with the same three words: *Can you please*. The most frequent interrogative 3-gram in AmE, *could you please*, occurs in less than 10 % of the AmE interrogative requests and less than 5 % of requests overall. The average rate of occurrence across the AmE interrogative 3-grams is just under 9 times, while the average for the seven BrE 3-grams is about 23 times. This leads to the conclusion that the BrE requests are more repetitive because they start with highly conventionalized formulae. The fact that the actions requested involve low imposition on the addressee give further evidence that convention, rather than calculated face-threatening act mitigation (as per Brown and Levinson 1987), is at play. The verbs that occur in these interrogatives are much the same across AmE and BrE: verbs of communication, such as *contact* and *call*, and tasks related to email communication, such as *forward* and *(re)send*.

Furthermore, the table shows a tendency to place *please* in a fixed medial position, as part of the modal verb + *you* + *please* chunk. In line with Sato (2008), our data has no instances of initial *please* in AmE interrogatives, and a very strong preference for medial over final position (only 3 % of American interrogatives feature utterance-final *please*). BrE can feature *please* in any position, but also strongly prefers question-medial *please* (7 % are utterance-initial and 6 % utterance-final, contra Wichmann's (2004) finding of no initial *please* in spoken questions).[6] The strong tendency for medial *please* in interrogatives supports the proposition that *please* occurs as part of conventionalized constructions, in this case MODAL-PRONOUN-*please*. This fits Terkourafi's notion of "a conceptualization of politeness as a repertoire of expressions that are retrieved as a whole in context and to which speakers have recourse routinely when being (or teaching others how to be) polite" (Terkourafi 2015: 14).

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6 The number of utterances with initial *please* is too small to derive any meaningful generalizations about what types of contexts would give rise to this use; the only feature they share is that they are mostly low-imposition requests.

3.5 Other forms of mitigation

In intercultural communication, the low frequency of *please* in AmE seems to contribute to a reported British perception of American speakers as "rude". However, speakers can use other strategies to mitigate a request in order to maintain politeness and avoid threats to the hearer's face (Holmes 1984; Blum-Kulka 1987; Curl and Drew 2008). We looked at whether other sentence-internal mitigators were used in place of *please*, focusing on conventionally indirect modal questions, since these are the forms where speakers have the greatest opportunity to choose or not choose to use *please*. The mitigators we investigated include: expressions of gratitude and preference; downtoners including *possible*, *possibility*, *maybe*, *perhaps*, *chance*, *wondering*, and *just* (e.g., *when you get a chance*, *is it possible*); and *if*-clauses. However, few were found in any great number and their presence did not seem to depend on either the absence of *please* or the level of imposition. *If*-clauses are somewhat more frequent in *please*-less requests, though more in BrE than AmE, but these included plainly mitigating ones, like *if you wouldn't mind* or *if folks agree,* and more contingent types, as in *If you have any problems, contact me.*

A complicating factor in looking at mitigators, however, is that we, like many other researchers, have only considered the head act of the request (as tagged in the corpora). Breuer and Geluykens' (2007) comparative DCT study analyzed mitigation within (internal to) and external to the head act. Internal mitigators include *please*, non-imperative clause types, modals, and so forth. External mitigators could involve separate expressions of gratitude, acknowledgement of the imposition, expressions of indebtedness, context for the request, et cetera. Breuer and Geluyken found that British requesters used more mitigation than Americans, both internal and external to the head act. But American subjects were much more likely to use *only* external mitigation of their requests. (In the two contexts for which they give figures, external-only mitigation was found in 28 % and 41.5 % of American requests, versus 7 % and 22 % respectively for British requests.) If the DCT results are comparable to naturally occurring requests, then looking only at head acts gives a lopsided impression of American mitigation. (But see Flöck and Geluykens' [2015] caution regarding DCT results in Section 1.) There may be far more mitigation than sentence-level data extraction can detect, and so absence of *please* in the American data does not entail complete inattention to conventional politeness or face-work.

4 Discussion and conclusions

The first available citation of *please* as a stand-alone pragmatic marker is from 1771 (*OED Online* 2016), and *please* only became commonplace in requests in the 19th century (Akimoto 2000). In other words, the first known use of *please* as a stand-alone pragmatic marker is from 150 years *after* the English made their first successful settlement in the New World, and its use was not common until *after* the United States had declared independence and American English had become notably distinct from British varieties.[7] Given these facts, perhaps it is more surprising that American and British English use *please* similarly than that they use it differently. Still, pragmatic-marker *please* arose from a common situation in AmE and BrE: both shared the older phrases from which it is presumed to develop (*if you please; if it please you; please to* [verb]) and had experience of a similar request marker, *pray* (Faya Cerqueiro 2013).

Investigating *please* in present-day English, we have reported on the presence and absence of *please* in 1,350 requests in British and American corporate emails. Like other studies that have compared *please* occurrence in AmE and BrE (Biber et al. 1999; Breuer and Geluykens 2007), we have found that *please* is used in British requests at more than twice the rate of *please* in American requests, regardless of request mood type.

Earlier monocultural studies suggested that British *please* would be found in routine, low-imposition requests, while American *please* would occur in higher-imposition requests (Stross 1964; Vaughn et al. 2009), more formal requests (Pufahl Bax 1986), and in requests with greater power differentials (Ervin-Tripp 1976; and possibly Leopold 2015, although *please* was not the main focus of her study). The nature of our data meant that we could only consider the nature of the action requested in relation to imposition level. The nature of the interpersonal relationships between interlocutors can be expected to affect the formality of the exchange and the extent to which a request is felt to impose. However, we did not have sufficient information to take these matters into account. The large amount of data we had to consider and its comparability in terms of formality and content type goes some way towards reassuring us that the effects

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7 Fittingly for our research, the first recorded usage of the pragmatic marker *please* is in a letter from Virginia to London (Mason 1968). The letter-writer, Price Davies, was an Oxford-educated Welsh clergyman, who had emigrated to Virginia in 1763 (Weis 1955: 13). Of course, *please* was probably used in spoken requests far earlier, but how far earlier is difficult to know. Anselm Bayly's 1772 grammar (London) gives as an example "*please* or *pray give*" (cited in Faya Cerqueiro 2013: 209).

found here are a matter of pragmatic variation between national varieties. This is supported by the fact that our findings are consonant with earlier indications that British *please* would be more frequent in highly routinized, low-imposition requests.

While the proportion of requests with *please* is greater at all imposition levels in the British data, the pattern of distribution is noticeably different in the two national datasets. We indeed found that British *please* is strongly associated with lower levels of imposition, with 65 % of low-imposition requests having *please,* compared with 30 % of medium-imposition ones. American *please* did not, contrary to our expectation, lean to the opposite side of the imposition-level continuum. Instead, American *please* was fairly evenly distributed at the four imposition levels, with no level having less than 19 % or more than 30 % *please*-marking. Our coding for imposition levels was driven by the verb phrase of the head act of the request, and it was necessarily subjective. It is perhaps least trustworthy in the division of medium- and high-imposition requests. Most of the requests in our data probably relate to actions that are part of the recipient's job description – and therefore unlikely to be "high" in imposition. But in favour of the results presented here, the coding was completed independently by the two investigators, who were very confident in the lowest two categories: low imposition and no imposition (offers).

The British use of *please* is particularly striking (91 %) in the no-imposition category, consisting of periphrastic, directive-phrased offers of help, thanks, apologies and congratulations (e. g., *Please accept my appreciation*). Given the formulaic nature of expressions like *Please accept my/our* [polite act] and the (at most) quasi-directive nature of these offers, the use of *please* in these largely British contexts appears to be a matter of saying the habitual words for the situation, rather negative-face-threat mitigation in a Brown and Levinson-type politeness model. Formulaic language is also seen in some of the low-imposition requests, such as *please find attached* [a document], in which the imperative form is used for an informative illocution: 'here is a document for you'. The British data included 20 such instances of indication of document location, all with *please*. The American data had only two. Garner (2002) notes that American business-writing guides have "consistently condemned" *enclosed please find* and *please find enclosed*, the paper-mail predecessors to *please find attached*. As early as Richard Grant White's *Every-day English* (1880), "please find enclosed" was dismissed with "A more ridiculous use of words, it seems to me, there could not be". By the 1920s, *Crowell's Dictionary of English Grammar* (Weseen 1928) saw it as a "worn-out formula" and by 1989 *Effective Business Writing* described it as "borrowed from an earlier generation" (Piotrowski 1989), with the suggestion that *I am enclosing* would be a good replacement for *please find enclosed* (all cited in

Garner 2002). We have found no such equivalent condemnation in British writing advice.

Since American *please* seems less tied to routine, its use probably depends more on interpersonal relationship factors, including power relations and level of familiarity or intimacy. The same is true of *please* used in non-routine ways in BrE, where, as Aijmer (1996) notes, it conveys appeal or persuasion. But if, as our data indicate, *please* is less routine in low-imposition requests in AmE, it may be a more risky strategy to use in AmE than in BrE, since *please* is more marked in the American context. Following Watts' (2003) distinction between the politic and the polite, *please* in BrE low-imposition routines is politic: its presence does not make a request polite, but its absence may make the request seem impolite. In AmE, on the other hand, the relative weakness of *please* routines means the presence of *please* in a low-imposition request has more potential to be interpreted as polite or impolite.

Greater use of *please* in BrE gives rise to more and longer predictable strings of words starting requests. Repeated exposure to such formulae conventionalizes them and entrenches their status as "how one does polite requests" for a particular type of context (in this case, business emails). The association of highly ritualized expressions with politeness follows Blum-Kulka's (1987) observation that across national varieties of English, conventionalized indirectness is often perceived as more polite than the unconventionally indirect. This is attributed to the lesser cognitive burden that conventionalized forms place on the addressee, who can easily recognize the request and know the options for responding to it.

American requests also use conventional direct and indirect request structures; the main difference is the low rate of *please*. This is not part of a general lesser use of politeness formulae in the US, since *thanks* and *thank you* are found more often in American speech than in British (Biber et al. 1999; cf. example [1] above). If American *please* is perceived as a marker of power differentiation (Ervin-Tripp 1976), this would help explain why it is less consistently used. American culture enforces the appearance of egalitarianism in business interactions, and so markers of power distance are often unwelcome: "Interpersonal relations are typically horizontal, conducted between presumed equals. When a personal confrontation is required between two persons of different hierarchical levels, there is an implicit tendency to establish an atmosphere of equality" (Stewart and Bennett 1991: 89). The same is true of requests.[8] If American *please* is more

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8 In a study of spoken business interaction in a New Zealand workplace, Vine (2004: 99) explains lack of *please* by the routineness of the requests: "The infrequent use of *please* in my data can be accounted for by the workplace context in which my data was collected. The actions

associated with relationship asymmetry than British *please*, then this can help explain its steady occurrence across imposition levels. *Please* in this case is less a matter of routinized behaviour for a particular type of request than a marker of a particular type (or types) of interpersonal relationship. In those relationships, requests might be expressed that involve various levels of imposition.

This is not to say that British interactions with *please* are anti-egalitarian, but it is a supposition that *please* sits more comfortably within British social structures than American because BrE speakers have the option to interpret *please* as a matter of routine, while Americans do not have that option to the same extent. The interpretation of AmE use of *please* as less routine brings to mind Alexis de Tocqueville's (1840: 506) comments on the divergence of manners between the US and aristocratic Britain, "[American] manners are neither so tutored nor so uniform, but they are frequently more sincere".

AmE *please* seems to mark both upward and downward power differentials, and therefore it can make requests sound like either orders or pleas. For instance, one American blog commenter noted: "*Please* winds up feeling impolite with people that you don't have the right to order around, i.e. anyone other than your children" (blog commenter Wyndes at Murphy 2012). In the other direction, Firmin et al. (2004) concluded that low-stakes requests with *please* were unsuccessful because they sounded inappropriately like pleading.

To test this matter further, data collection with more sensitivity to interpersonal factors is needed. Cross-cultural comparisons across genre are also needed. While email is a useful source of request data, it sits in a place between informal speech and formal letter-writing. Norms of email structure and tone may differ in the two nations or more specifically in the two corporate cultures we have examined, therefore more support is needed from naturalistic spoken and further written data. In addition, studies of the interpretation or perception of *please* in natural contexts in the two varieties could be interesting. These must be carefully designed in order to avoid interference from the explicitly taught notion that *please* is a "polite word".

But in itself, this comparative study is a solid step forward in understanding a key lexico-pragmatic difference in British and American English. Most comparative studies to date have concerned native-versus-learner request formation and

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requested refer to the participants' job obligations and are not outside the responsibilities of the addressee." This suggests that the New Zealand workplace might have more in common with an American one than a British one. This is not surprising, since like American English, New Zealand English has developed in a "new" culture that is likely to tend toward solidarity-type behaviours (Scollon and Scollon 1981).

use of *please*. The present study emphasizes that "native-speaker behaviour" is not only not uniform, it may observe some major dialectal boundaries.

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Appendix: Action types for utterance classification

Imposition level act type	Example requests
High imposition	
document preparation	– Please **amend** the newsflash – Could you please **translate** the following for me.
favour	– I would like to seek a bit of **advice**. – I would appreciate your **guidance** on whom I should involve.
find info	– Could you please **chase** N as per email below. – Can you **find** me bios of these folks?
go someplace	– Can you **attend** an audio conference? – Can you **leave** early enough today to pick up a sleeping bag?
influence	– Can you **persuade** [NAME] to part with the cash? – Could you use your contacts with [COMPANY] to get on the phone with [NAMES] to jump start this thing?
meeting	– Could we **meet** on any of the above dates? – Can we **visit** in advance of your meeting?
read	– Please **read** this for your information. – **Take a look** at the competitor data.
secretarial tasks	– Could you **print** 4 copies of this for us – Can you **provide us with a desk and phone** for the 3 days?
take responsibility	– Can you please **arrange** for it to be paid immediately. – Can you **take** this **on**?
think-work	– Please **comment on/amend** this proposal before I send it to R. – Can you **plan** your detailed discussions with the architect?
Medium imposition	
collaborate	– Perhaps we can **talk** then? – Can we **discuss** these possibilities further?
elaborate	– Can you **clarify** their role & duration of the arrangements. – Can you **explain** what is the impact of this new name on what we agreed?
help	– Could you please **assist** with the following request? – Can you **help**?
interact (with third party)	– Please can you **ask** K what the sum relates to and who author- ised it. – When you get a chance can you **talk** to him about this.
prevent	– Please **do not deviate** from this statement. – Please **do not tell** P I have forwarded his letter.
Low imposition	
contact	– Please **contact** J as soon as possible if you require tickets. – Please **call** for further clarification.

Imposition level / act type	Example requests
endorse	– Can you please **provide funding authorization** for these two items today? – Would you please **sign** a copy of each for C?
extend politeness	– I am sure you will want to **thank** B. – Please join me in **welcoming** W to [COMPANY]
hold doc	– Can you please **save** copies of your plans as Project 98 file. – Write it down and **keep** it somewhere safe.
hold info	– Please **note** that... – **Keep in mind** that the situation remains extremely fluid
inform	– Please **confirm** ASAP – Please **let me know** your preference.
nominate	– L can you **identify** people for the areas I listed you under. – I would appreciate it if you would **nominate** a Recruitment champion for each of these territories.
receive document	– Please **find** attached two documents.
schedule	– Can I **suggest** Tuesday 12 at 13:00 when K will also be in [PLACE]? – Can we **make** it at 2pm?
transmit	– Would you please **cascade** this information within your area. – Can you please **forward** this to A.
wait	– Until we've had a chance to talk, could you **wait** before forwarding my name?
No imposition (offer)	
offer	– If you have any queries, please **don't hesitate** to contact me. – **Feel free** to question my estimates.
receive politeness	– Please **accept my appreciation** for sparing your time **and apologies** for the fact that we cannot consider you further.

Bionotes

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