The prosody of *Please*-requests: a corpus based approach[1]

Anne Wichmann
Department of Cultural Studies
University of Central Lancashire
Preston PR1 2HE

Abstract

Not a great deal is known about *please*, other than that it is syntactically unique, it is used to express politeness, and occurs most commonly with requests. The close association with requests has led some to define it as an illocutionary marker rather than as a politeness marker. However, since its omission makes a request less courteous rather than less like a request, its function is, at least to some extent, to convey interpersonal, 'attitudinal' meaning and not only to act as a discourse marker. *Please* occurs mainly in requests, but not all types of request require *please*. The first purpose of this study is to present corpus evidence for the syntactic and pragmatic restrictions on *please* in spoken English, and the distribution of *please*-requests in relation to the context of situation in which they occur. Secondly I shall examine the prosody of *please*-requests and its contribution to meaning.

Prosodic realisation is the aspect of spoken *please*-requests that has been least systematically studied in the past, and yet all speech is uttered with prosody and it is an intrinsic part of the utterance. An important component of prosody is intonation, and since intonation is known to contribute to interpersonal meaning in interaction, this is focused on in the second section. Using the original sound recordings of the data, I describe the intonation patterns of requests containing *please*, and again relate the observed patterns to the context of situation.

The features I describe - syntactic, pragmatic, prosodic and contextual – co-occur in a systematic way, and on this basis I propose that there is a unifying deontic meaning of *please,* referring to an agreed set of rights and obligations, but that the focus of a *please*-request can be both speaker and hearer-oriented, a distinction that is signalled chiefly in the prosody.

1. Introduction

1.1 Syntactic and pragmatic aspects of Please

The single word *please* is a fairly recent phenomenon in the English language: the earliest attestation in the OED is from the 19th Century. Related expressions, however, were

[1] This study was carried out during research leave awarded to the author by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB).

introduced into English from French (s'il vous plaît) in the 14th century (Allen 1995). These include the clausal constructions 'if you please' or 'if it please you'[2] and also the form requiring an infinitive 'Be pleased to'.[3] The reduction of all these constructions to a single word is thought to be the result of a process of grammaticalisation (Busse 1999).[4]

Syntactically, *please* is said to be unique (Stubbs 1983), although it may share some of the characteristics of a number of other items. For example, it behaves in a similar way to sentence adverbs, but it does not share their potential to be modified. *Very quickly* or *most happily* are acceptable but **very please* and **most please* are not (1983: 71). (I have since encountered *pretty please*, but know of no other cases that would challenge this claim.) *Please* also shares features with *just* and *kindly*, but there are fewer syntactic constraints on its position in an utterance: please can occur in initial, medial and final position, as in:

> (please) will you (please) open the door (please)
> (*kindly) will you (kindly) open the door (*kindly)
> (after Stubbs 1983: 71).

There is no constraint either, according to Stubbs, on the syntactic surface structures with which it can occur - it occurs with interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives and 'moodless clauses' e.g. 'More pudding please' (Stubbs 1983: 72). This extreme syntactic independence moves Biber et al. (1999) to categorise *please* formally as a type of non-clausal unit which they term 'inserts' (1999: 1082). Syntactically, then, *please* is so loosely connected to the clause that it may be regarded 'only marginally … as a syntactic item at all' (Stubbs 1983: 71).

While there may be no particular syntactic constraints on *please*, there does, however, seem to be a strong pragmatic constraint restricting the speech act with which it can co-occur. According to Stubbs (1983: 72)

> 'It can co-occur only with a sentence which is interpretable as a request, but cannot co-occur with statements, promises, offers, invitations, threats, and so on'

It has also been observed that *please* co-occurs only with certain kinds of requests, such as occur in 'standard situations' (House, 1989), ie. situations in which the rights and obligations of participants are clear.[5]

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[2] Instead of the word 'if' we also find 'an' or 'and' with the same conditional meaning.

[3] The analysis of *you* in *if you please* as subject (as opposed to the object in 'if it please you') is generally assumed to be a reanalysis of what was originally an (indirect) object case (cf German: *wenn es dir* (dat.) *gefällt* vs. *wenn du willst*) because of the loss of case-marking in English.This is disputed by Allen (1995), who claims that both forms existed side by side and fulfilled different functions.

[4] It may also be an example of the tendency towards subjectification in the process of grammaticalisation (Traugott 1995). According to Traugott, subjectification refers to a pragmatic-semantic process whereby 'meanings become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitude toward the proposition'. (1995: 31). 'Subjectification in grammaticalisation is... the development of a grammatically identifiable expression of speaker belief or speaker attitude to what is said.' (1995: 32). .'... forms and constructions that at first express primarily concrete, lexical, and objective meanings come through repeated use in local syntactic contexts to serve increasingly abstract, pragmatic, interpersonal, and speaker-based functions' (1995: 32).
The examples given by Traugott include the development of modal meaning from deontic to epistemic.

[5] House defines a 'standard situation' as one which is 'not associated with social or communicative difficulty' (1989: 107)

This means that *please* typically occurs for example in service encounters, where the right to ask for something and the obligation to give it is inherent in the event. It also occurs when what is being requested is a minimal imposition on the hearer (such as passing the salt at table). In situations where the imposition is greater and / or the rights and obligations of the participants are not self-evident, *please* does not occur.

1.2 The function of *please*

Please appears to resist functional categorisation. In common with other grammaticalised items, *please* does not convey (or no longer conveys) propositional meaning but operates to 'facilitate the ongoing interaction' (Biber et al.1999: 140).[6] Such items are attributable to the interactive nature of conversation and contribute to the expression of 'politeness, emotion and attitude' (Biber et al.1999: 1047). But, despite sharing this broad interactional function with other pragmatic markers, the local function of *please* seems to be different from that of other items, even those similarly classed formally as 'inserts'. Some inserts can, according to Biber et al., function in a variety of ways, for example as interjections (Oh!), responses (thanks, sorry) and discourse markers (well). For *Please*, however, and a few other items, they create a separate category of formulaic items which express politeness or respect.

> "The interactive nature of conversation … extends to the use of **polite or respectful language** in exchanges such as requests, greetings, offers, and apologies. Here certain inserts have a stereotypical role in marking polite speech acts: *thanks* and *thank you*, ***please***, *bye*, and *sorry*, for example. Such conversational routines are historically derived by ellipsis from more elaborated, clausal expressions, but for the purpose of present-day English grammar they are best regarded as unanalysed formulae." (1999: 1047 my emphasis)

It is acknowledged in passing that *please* can also occur as a formulaic response (Yes please), and that the expanded expression 'if you please' can be used in an ironic way ('and then, if you please, she ran off with the landlord'), but most attempts at defining the meaning or function of the word *please* refer to the notion of politeness, and usually in conjunction with the act of requesting. The OED defines *please* as a 'courteous qualification to a request'; Samuel Johnson calls it 'a word of ceremony'; Quirk et al (1985: 571) define it as a 'courtesy subjunct'. Biber et al. refer to it as a 'request "propitiator"' (1999: 1093). British children are taught that it is the 'magic' word to be used when asking for something.[7] Whatever the nuances of meaning, the word *please* in contemporary usage is thus undeniably associated very closely with being 'polite'. In examining the distribution, meaning, and ways of saying the word *please* in contemporary British English speech, we are therefore necessarily dealing with the concept of linguistic politeness.

[6] In terms of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) this would be seen as a change from conceptual meaning to procedural meaning.

[7] One carer reports, however, that a child who was admonished with 'what is the magic word?' replied 'abracadabra' Saga Magazine, November 2001.

1.3 Please and politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987) base their theory of politeness on Goffman's notion of 'face'[8] - people's desire, on the one hand, for freedom to act (negative face), and, on the other hand, to be liked, approved of and included (positive face). Successful social interaction requires that speakers pay attention to both negative and positive face of their interlocutor; when either is potentially at risk, the speaker must take steps to minimise that threat by saying it in a way that offends as little as possible.[9]

One speech act that poses a potential threat to an interlocutor's face, the threat depending, of course, on contextual factors[10] including the culture in which it is uttered, is the request. Politeness therefore requires that they be mitigated in some way. The most common mitigation strategy in English is to be indirect, for example by posing the request in the form of a modal question (can you… would you ...). This ostensibly allows the interlocutor a way out, i.e. the chance to choose to reply to the literal meaning and ignore the intended force. Many of these indirect forms are admittedly so conventionalised that the interrogative form makes only a small token gesture towards the hearer. There are other situations, however, where more caution is necessary, and hearers must appear to have a genuine option, i.e. not feel constrained in their freedom to act. The addition of *please* is considered to be a further way of softening the force of requests, particularly if they are in the form of imperatives, in which case the force of command is reduced to that of a request.

Surprisingly, given the close association of *please* with politeness, Brown and Levinson do not discuss it. It seems, however, that its usage is closely associated with their implied gradience of indirectness. House (1989) has observed that the more indirect or opaque the request, the less likely it is to be accompanied by *please*. This is consistent with the fact that it tends not to occur in 'non-standard' situations. Where rights and obligations are not pre-determined, any request has to take particular care not to offend the hearer's face. This is done by increasing the indirectness, so that the force of the utterance is open to interpretation and the hearer may choose to attend to the propositional meaning rather than any implied request. This accounts for the fact that less conventionalised indirectness strategies (I wonder if it would be possible for you to.. etc) rarely occur with *please,* and is consistent with the notion of *please* as being propitiatory, i.e. making well-disposed.[11] An attempt to make the hearer well-disposed is a good indication that an imposition is involved, so its presence will automatically lead the hearer to infer that the

[8] These definitions of face may not be universal. The Chinese 'face' is defined differently (ref? in Pragmatics 21 1994) See also Nwoye 1992.

[9] The distinction between positive and negative politeness is not always easy to uphold. There is sometimes a primacy of one with implications for the other, sometimes both seem to be involved in equal measure, and sometimes the distinction seems impossible to make. For my purposes I shall assume that the theoretical distinction is a useful one, even if individual cases are sometimes resistant to categorisation.

[10] Summarised by Brown and Levinson (1987) as the social distance between the interlocutors, their power relative to one another, and the weight of the imposition: the greater the imposition and the greater the social distance between participants, the more 'face-work' is required. In intimate, routine encounters, on the other hand, less mitigation may be necessary. Blum-Kulka, for example, has shown that in intimate family situations "unmodified directness is neutral, or unmarked, in regard to politeness" (1990: 269).

[11] From the Latin *prope*= close

utterance is intended as a request rather than, for example, as a question. This would of course be counter-productive if the force of the utterance was being held deliberately indeterminate.

1.4 *Please* and prosody

Most discussions of *please* in spoken English make only passing reference to prosody, and yet all speech is said with prosody, including *please*-requests. This aspect of speech - how something is said rather than what is said - is an intrinsic, but often neglected, dimension of what speakers say and hearers hear.

Bolinger (1989) describes some typical contours of utterances containing *please*, but most references to the prosody of *please* refer only to whether or not it is prosodically independent. Prosodic independence usually means contained in a separate tone group, with boundaries signalled by pauses or less salient prosodic discontinuities, and the view seems to be that both integration and separation are possible. Quirk et al. (1985) claim that *please* 'frequently has a tone unit to itself, especially in final position with a rising tone' (1985: 571), while Aijmer suggests (by implication) that *please* is more likely to be integrated into a larger tone unit (1996: 170).[12] Stubbs simply observes the possibility of both integration and separation, and suggests that the prosodic integration or not of *please* depends on the degree of opaqueness of the request (the more opaque the greater the likelihood of prosodic separation) (1983: 72).

Unfortunately, identifying tone groups is, as Cruttenden so aptly puts it, 'something of a circular business' (1997: 29), which involves both internal and external criteria. Tokens that carry a rise, as in *help your\self | /please* (Quirk et al. 1985), do not necessarily form their own tone group. Cruttenden, for example, would claim (1997: 36) that two 'nuclear' contours may occur in one tone group, especially the sequence 'fall plus rise'. On the other hand, a final *please* carrying a fall or fall-rise is more likely to be perceived as independent because of the greater pitch discontinuity involved. In general, claims of prosodic integration or independence are contingent upon the theoretical model being applied and it is difficult to apply the criterion objectively.

In any case, differences in meaning are probably related less to a decision about where boundaries occur, and more to whether or not the word is accented, and which pitch contour is assigned, either to the word *please* itself or to the overall utterance which contains it. These differences can therefore be explored without the need to make theoretically controversial decisions about the presence or absence of boundaries.

2. Methodological framework: a corpus-based approach

The methodological approach adopted in this study is corpus-based, using data retrieved from a corpus of naturally-occurring spoken English. Although the contribution of

[12] She follows Faerch and Kasper (1989: 222) in claiming that *please* (together with *just, perhaps, if*) is an internal modifier. She suggests that external modifiers (longer and less conventionalised than internal modifiers) are prosodically separate tone units, thus implying that *please*, as an internal modifier is more often prosodically integrated.

prosody to interactional meaning is being increasingly acknowledged (e.g. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 1996), most work in this area consists of close textual analysis (in the Conversation Analysis framework) or experimentally controlled perception studies using signal-processing technology. Any corpus-based work in prosody tends to be based on very restricted kinds of specially elicited data.

Corpus analysis of naturally-occurring speech data is not an alternative approach but a complementary one.[13] Many questions posed in corpus research have arisen out of close textual analysis; corpus work, on the other hand, sometimes suggests questions that one would not otherwise have thought of posing and to which answers can only be sought using other methods. While the value of corpus-based research is generally acknowledged, its use in the study of prosody has been limited, largely due to practical problems. There are few spoken corpora for which the sound files are readily available, and even fewer that have been annotated prosodically. (The LLC[14] and the SEC[15] are notable exceptions, but only the SEC has readily available sound files.) Prosodic annotation is a skilled and time-consuming business, and corpus developers tend now to leave this kind of annotation to the users.

An additional problem comes from the wish to capture speech only in its natural habitat. This results in some noisy recordings that do not lend themselves to instrumental analysis. The prosodic analysis therefore has to be primarily auditory, a method which is often criticised as too impressionistic. However, even instrumental analysis does not reveal any phonological truths, and systems for annotating the wave-form directly, while constituting a considerable advance in practical terms, are more subjective than might appear. Auditory analysis will always have a role to play when dealing with natural data recorded in the field.

This study is based on the data contained in the ICE GB Corpus. This is a corpus of British English compiled at the Survey of English Usage at University College London. The corpus contains 1million words in all, including 600,000 words of orthographically transcribed speech. The texts have been fully tagged and parsed, and are automatically searchable. There is no prosodic annotation other than the indication of salient pauses, but the transcription is also linked to the original soundfiles so that parts of the corpus, e.g. a concordanced list of items, can be listened to repeatedly and transcribed auditorily as required. Unfortunately the naturalness of the data also means that a complementary instrumental analysis is not always possible. The sound recordings vary in quality, and in particular those made of informal private conversations contain inevitable background noise.

2.1 Analysis

The analysis was carried out in three stages. The first stage consisted of a lexical search of the orthographically transcribed texts for all occurrences in the corpus of the token

[13] see Heritage 1999 on quantitative approach within CA
[14] London-Lund Corpus: Svartvik & Quirk, 1980
[15] Spoken English Corpus: Knowles et al., 1996

please; the second involved the categorisation of the tokens according to syntactic and contextual criteria; in the third stage all utterances containing *please* were transcribed prosodically.

2.1.1 Stage 1.

Using the dedicated retrieval system ICECUP[16] all tokens of *please* were retrieved from the entire corpus (400,000 words of written text and 600,000 words of spoken text). For this study, given the focus on prosody, only the tokens found in spoken utterances were considered for further analysis.

2.1.2 Stage 2.

All the spoken utterances (in the terminology of the ICE GB: 'text units') containing *please* were categorised according to the following criteria:

- formal markers (declarative, interrogative, imperative, isolate) with some subdivisions (e.g. interrogative modal + 3rd / 2nd / 1st person).
- utterance type (indirect request, mitigated imperative, other)
- position of *please*: initial, medial, final, other
- situation ('public' vs. 'private')

Categorisation of the tokens as initial, medial or final was based on the orthographic transcription. Doubtful cases were resolved by recourse to syntax and semantics.
Final: In cases where the word occurred between coordinated items, it was usually assigned to the clause that contained other request markers e.g.:

> Can I create staff shortages please as well as snow <,>

Initial: Initial *Oh, and*, and filled pauses (*er*) were ignored, as were vocatives e.g.

> Oh Colin (? name unclear) please eat something <,,>

Medial: In most cases of medial position the *please* occurred before the main verb. In two cases the please occurred after the main verb but before another essential sentence element: e.g.

> could you tell me please what would happen
> Would you look please at <,> page two thirty-three <,> page nine in the interview My Lord <,,>

The medial position of *please* is thus not absolutely fixed, and there may be subtle differences between for example pre-verb and post-verb positions. However, there are not enough examples of each in this data for this to be examined further.

The ICE GB corpus provides a large amount of 'demographic' information about the texts it contains. This includes details of the situations in which the recordings were made, and the age-range, gender and occupations of the participants. The texts are categorised broadly according to whether they occurred in private, e.g. in participants' homes, or in public, i.e. broadcast in the media, or in a public setting such as a classroom or a court of law. It is thus possible to gain some idea of the criteria that Brown and Levinson cite in relation to politeness: social distance and power relations. Although the two criteria do not necessarily co-vary, the spoken texts in the 'private' category are characterised in the main by both minimal social distance and symmetrical power relations. In the 'public' texts, on the other hand, the social distance between participants

[16] ICECUP - dedicated retrieval software attached to the ICEGB corpus

is greater, and the power relationships are generally asymmetrical. Any differences in the distribution of the data can therefore only be attributed to these features together and not to social distance or power relations independently.

2.1.3 Stage 3.
This stage of the analysis, the prosodic annotation, was carried out by the author and noted in terms of both the British system of analysis and the Autosegmental-metrical system (see e.g. Cruttenden 1997, Ladd 1996). Further details of the prosodic analysis are given in the relevant section below.

3. Findings (1): syntactic and pragmatic characteristics of please

The lexical search for *please* generated 208 tokens in all, 120 in the written texts (400,000 words) and 88 in the spoken texts (600,000 words). Of the 88 tokens of *please* in the spoken part of ICE GB, that is the section consisting of dialogue and monologue, there are three cases of repetition and one case of *please* being used as a main verb ('I need to be doing something to please him'). If we discount these we have 84 utterances containing, or in some cases consisting solely of, the word *please.*

3.1 Utterance position of the marker *please*

The extreme syntactic independence of *please* already observed is firstly reflected in the fact that it does not need to be part of a longer utterance to be meaningful. It can occur in isolation as an utterance in its own right, and it can occur in very short responses such as *Yes please,* and *Please do*. When it does occur as part of a longer utterance it can occur in several positions: initially, medially and finally. In this respect it displays greater flexibility than, for example, similar modifiers (e.g. *just, kindly*) and behaves more like a sentence adverbial. This may reflect the fact that the earlier clausal form (e.g. *If it please you*) could also be used parenthetically, a characteristic that favours the process of grammaticalisation. The various sentence positions are, however, not evenly distributed, but depend very much on the utterance type. Table 1 shows that imperatives have a far greater tendency to use *please* in initial position (77% of imperatives), while indirect requests prefer final position (76% of indirect requests).

Table 1. Utterance position of *please* in requests and mitigated imperatives

	final	**initial**	**medial**	**total**
indirect requests	32 (76%)	2	8	**42 (100%)**
imperatives	7	23 (77%)	0	**30 (100%)**
Total	**39**	**25**	**8**	**72**

3.2 Co-occurrence with speech act 'request'

The results reported here are consistent with previously observed pragmatic constraints on *please*. Except for those that are part of a short formulaic response or occur in isolation, all tokens of *please* co-occur with requests. These fall into two broad

categories: indirect requests and mitigated imperatives (Table 2). I will deal with these in turn.

Table 2. Utterance types co-occurring with *please*

utterance type	no. of occurrences
indirect requests	42
mitigated imperatives	30
Yes please/ please	12
total	**84**

3.2.1 Indirect requests

The indirect request forms that co-occur with *please* in the data are listed in Table 3. We can classify these first according to their grammatical form (see Aijmer 1996): by far the most frequent is the interrogative, of which the majority are modal. The less frequent forms are declaratives and elliptical requests.

Table 3. Forms of indirect requests co-occurring with *please* in ICE GB

Forms of indirect requests with *please*	no. of occurrences
modal interrogatives	26
declarative	8
Elliptical (NP, VP, PP + please)	8
interrogative (non-modal)	2
total	**42**

The (infrequent) use of the declarative is illustrated in examples [1] to [3]:

[1] so I ask for single questions please
[2] I'll have strawberry ice cream please
[3] I want to hear what the witness says please

The declarative can also be part of an *if*-clause, either further modified by *I wonder* [4] or on its own, without a related main clause [5].

[4] I wonder if we could uh <,> uh somebody would please propose for Treasurer to start with <,,>[17]
[5] So <,> Mr Lehrer if I can take you back please to page one <,> of the the uh agreement <,,>

A further, infrequently occurring, form of indirect request consists of elliptical utterances containing a phrase and *please.* These are Stubbs' 'moodless clauses', or, according to Aijmer (1996: 133), cases of 'naming', i.e. NP + *please*; there are examples of this in the data ([6] and [7], and also some which include NPs with pronominal reference ([8] and [9]):

[6] Mr Carter your full names please
[7] And our first question please
[8] All of them <,> please
[9] Some of that please <,,>

[17] Brackets containing commas indicate pauses

There are also two examples, [10] and [11], of elliptical requests with different phrases (VP, PP):

[10] Opened please <,,>
[11] And to our next question please

As Table 2 shows, by far the most common form of indirect request with *please* uses interrogative constructions. These are mostly modal constructions; there are only two examples in the corpus of questions without a modal auxiliary - a wh-question [12] and a yes/no question [13]:

[12] What 's the question please
[13] Have you got the A to Z please[18]

The modal interrogatives, which constitute the majority of indirect requests co-occurring with *please*, are generally either with first or second person subject [14-20].

[14] Can I have a glass of water please
[15] Could we have the first question please <,>
[16] may I have your full name please Miss White
[17] Can you pass the s the sour cream please
[18] Could you repeat the question please
[19] and please will you just point out any slight differences you note <,>
[20] Would you look please at <,> page two thirty-three <,> page nine in the interview My Lord <,,>

Only one [21], in the formal setting of parliamentary debates, uses the third person:

[21] Would the Secretary of State please try to do better this year in protecting the budget of his department

The choice of modal verb in modal interrogatives, i.e. between reference to concepts of ability (can), willingness (will) or permission (may) is unequal in distribution. Of the 26 modal interrogatives, 18 use *can* or *could*, 5 use *would*, and 3 use *may*. The most common strategy in such request is therefore to appeal, if only notionally, to the hearer's ability to comply.

3.2.2 Mitigated Imperatives

After indirect requests, the second most frequent utterance type co-occurring in ICE GB with *please* is a positive or negative imperative, more often the former. Of a total of 30 occurrences in the data, there are 23 cases of positive imperatives with *please,* e.g. [22], but only 7 negative imperatives (4 private 3 public) e.g. [23].

[22] Please interrupt me
[23] Please don't tell me that

3.2.3 Yes please and please

The formulaic response Y*es please* (and variations such as *yes please yes* and *Oh yes please yes*) occurs 7 times in the corpus. (The elliptical response *please do* was included under imperatives.) There are six further occurrences of *please* in the corpus which stand alone, referred to here as isolates; they are either separated from the surrounding utterance by pauses that are marked explicitly in the orthographic transcription, or appear from the transcription to constitute a complete speaker-turn. I do not include tokens that

[18] The A-Z is a comprehensive street map of London.

are clearly attached to a request or imperative, even if by some criteria they could be said to have their own tone groups (see discussion of prosodic independence above).

3.3 Situational constraints

The distribution of the various features of *please*-requests according to whether they occur in 'private' or in 'public' texts is shown in tables 4, 5 and 6. Since there is twice as much public speech as private speech in the corpus, the figures need to be normalised to take this into account. Imperatives are equally frequent in both sections (0.05 per 1000), but 4 out of 10 in private speech are negative compared to only 3 out of 20 in public speech. There may therefore be a distinction, formal or functional, between the kinds of imperative that occur in public and private, but the figures are too low to be certain of that here. Indirect requests occur less frequently in public texts than in private texts, but in both sections indirect requests are more common than imperatives.

Table 4. Request types according to use in private vs. public texts. The first figure is the actual number of occurrences, the second, in brackets, is the number per 1000 words. The 'private' texts consist solely of face-to-face or telephone conversation. The 'public' texts contain both dialogue and monologue

Request type	Private speech 200,000 wds N (per 1000)	Public speech 400,000wds N (per 1000)	Total 600,000 wds N (per 1000)
Imperatives	10 (.05)	20 (.05)	30 (.05)
Indirect requests	17 (.085)	25 (.063)	42 (.07)

There are, however, other more striking differences between the language used in public and in private, and these will be described below.

3.3.1 Choice of verb form in modal interrogatives

The choice of modal verb in modal interrogatives is most frequently a form of 'can', i.e. referring to the notion of ability (see section 3.2.1 above). Table 5 shows that such requests in private situations almost exclusively use the form *can*, while in public situations the *could* form is more common. The only example of *could* in the private dialogue is taken from a university committee meeting, which, while not public, is a more formal affair, and less symmetrical, than chats between family and friends. In public - and thus in situations where there is generally greater social distance between interlocutors - we find only one example of *can* in an indirect request; all others use *could*. Modal interrogatives with *may* (3), and *would* (4) occur only in public speech. The forms *might* and *will* do not occur in this data. *Might* has been shown to be the second rarest (after *shall*) of the modals in English and more often used with epistemic rather than deontic meaning (Biber et al. 1999: 486, 492). Its absence in the data as a request for permission (*might I*) is thus unsurprising, and intuitively such usage would be marked. *Will*, on the other hand, is one of the most frequent modal verbs in English. Its absence here suggests that its use in *please*-requests is rare, and that it occurs more often in other kinds of speech act.

Table 5. Choice of verb form in modal interrogatives.

	private	public
could	1	9
can	8	1
may	0	3
would	0	4

3.3.2 Position of please

A further effect of context is evident in the position of *please* in an utterance (see Table 6 - figures not normalised). First of all, *please* in medial position occurs exclusively in public speech and exclusively in indirect requests. Initial *please* is rare in indirect requests both in public and in private speech. The clear overall preference for initial position in mitigated imperatives, as shown in Table 1 above, turns out to be true only in public speech. In private speech there is an even distribution between final and initial, although the numbers are too low to make robust generalisations.

Table 6 Utterance -position of please in public and private speech. (The numbers have not been normalised. There is twice as much public speech as private speech.)

	final	**initial**	**medial**
private imper	5	5	0
private request	16	1	0
public imper	2	18	0
public request	16	1	8
total	**39**	**25**	**8**

3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Syntactic and pragmatic constraints

These findings appear to support existing observations that there are relatively few syntactic restrictions on the word *please* (Table 2). It co-occurs in this data with all surface forms of sentence structure – interrogative, declarative, imperative and elliptical; it can occur at a variety of different points in the utterance: initial, final or medial; it can also occur in isolation as a complete utterance or even as a complete speaker turn.

The data also supports earlier claims about the pragmatic constraints on *please*. The overwhelming majority of *please* tokens occur in utterances that can be interpreted as requests. Those requests that are in the form of indirect questions tend to be towards the more transparent and conventionalised end of the scale. They are usually in the form of modal interrogatives using the modal verb *can*. More elaborate indirectness strategies do not co-occur with *please* in this data. *Please* is used only in requests where the imposition is socially licensed (such as a court hearing) or where the requested action is trivial (such as passing the salt), or where it is of benefit to the hearer[19]. These different kinds of request are illustrated below:

[19] Such 'invitatory' requests would, of course, have to be given separate consideration in a detailed functional analysis of requests.

Requests with low impositions (e.g. asking for items at table)

Can you pass the sour cream please
Can I have a glass of water please

Requests that are for the benefit of the hearer (e.g. invitations)

And our first question please
By the way if there's anything up here please interrupt me because

Socially licensed requests (asking for things that are the speaker's right to request)

I want to hear what the witness says please
May I have your full name please Miss White
May I have the first slide please

To summarise, -there is a clear preference for *please* to occur with transparent, conventionalised requests such as occur in 'standard' situations.

3.4.2 Contextual constraints

The information in the corpus allows us to make only very broad generalisations about the situational context in which the data was collected. 'Private' speech is usually between friends or family members, and 'public' speech typically in a radio broadcast or a court of law. These situations vary both in the social distance between the participants and in their power relationships, but the data does not allow us to observe these effects independently, since they tend to co-vary. The distinction made here is therefore between relatively intimate and symmetrical situations on the one hand, and more formal and asymmetrical situations on the other.

The findings in this study suggest that these two broad kinds of situation affect the form of *please*-utterances in a number of ways. Firstly the choice of modal verb form - *can* vs. *could* - appears to be strongly situation-dependent, as does the position of *please* in the utterance, at least in imperatives. While indirect requests favour *please* in final position in both contexts, a final *please* in mitigated imperatives seems to be rare and occurs only in private speech. An imperative containing *please* in initial or medial position is far more characteristic of public speech. Since all (but one)[20] of the *please*-requests in this section of the data are spoken by the more powerful participant, it is possible that an imperative with a medial or initial *please* is perceived as a more powerful / forceful request than other forms. The position of *please* in an indirect request, on the other hand, does not appear to be influenced by the situation in which it is used.[21]

3.4.3 Please and politeness

The fact that *please* only occurs in situations where the imposition is either minimal or socially sanctioned means that it occurs only when there is very little 'face-work' to be done. This means that if *please* is a gesture to a hearer's negative face, it is at most only a token gesture, as is the conventionalised indirectness of *can you/ could you*. Given its close association with one speech act, it is understandable that House (1989) redefines it as an illocutionary marker, and yet as such it would be superfluous in almost every case. From a processing point of view, it is difficult to argue that it is a marker of how the

[20] Student to teacher: "What's the question please."

[21] Casual observation suggests that an initial *please* may be characteristic of child to carer speech (e.g. 'Please can I have a biscuit'). There are no examples of this in the data.

utterance is to be interpreted, since such markers usually precede the utterance, whereas *please* more frequently occurs after the request rather than before it. In my view a more unifiying explanation for both the absence of *please* in very indirect requests, and its presence in transparent requests, is to see it as a statement of common ground, a gesture which contextualises the accompanying request as occurring within a known set of rights and obligations. It indicates that this is a licensed, and therefore appropriate, request. In some cases this is consistent with the notion of *please* as a request 'propitiator' (Biber et al. 1999: 1093), where the word *please* is an appeal to the hearer to find the request acceptable or appropriate. In other cases it may be a signal that the speaker believes the request is appropriate. Both the hearer-oriented appeal and the speaker-oriented expression of belief would constitute legitimate felicity conditions for a request (Gordon and Lakoff cited in Levinson, 1983: 271). These two possible interpretations of *please* will be considered again in the light of the prosodic analysis that follows.

4. Prosody and Intonation

4.1 Introduction

The formal descriptions above are based on the orthographic transcriptions of the spoken text. In this section I turn to the contribution of prosody. After a general introduction of prosodic issues I will present the results of the prosodic analysis.

The term 'prosody' includes a number of suprasegmental phonetic features including pitch, loudness, voice quality and tempo; while they can be described separately, they usually operate together in a complex way to create what is loosely described as 'tone of voice'. I shall deal here mainly with pitch.
Pitch can first of all vary in a gradient manner: an utterance can be overall higher or lower in the speaker's range, or high or low in relation to the surrounding talk. Secondly, pitch patterns can also vary in a systematic and categorical way. The first kind of variation - gradient differences in overall level and range - is very important, but in this paper I will focus on the conventionalised grammatical system of local pitch movements - intonation.

Intonational phonology has received much attention in recent years: the most prominent account is Ladd (1996), which describes intonation in terms of the American autosegmental-metrical (AM) system. It maps fairly closely onto the British system of nuclear tones and tone groups, the main difference, at least superficially, lying in the description of pitch contours. In the British system these contours - falls, rises, fall-rises etc - are the primitives of intonation. In the AM model the contours are decomposed further into individual pitch targets, High (H) or Low (L), and the contour is the result of interpolating between these targets. Thus a fall becomes the interpolation between a high target and a low target, while a rise is the interpolation between a low target and a high target. An accented syllable is captured in the AM system by adding a * to the target most closely associated with the stressed syllable (H* or L*). (Additional diacritics will be explained as they occur.) In the British system a nuclear tone presupposes an accented syllable - the pitch of non-prominent syllables is assumed to be predictable and therefore

not annotated. Both systems share notions of prosodic boundaries that divide an utterance into tone groups. Despite the fact that the AM system reduces contours to a sequence of pitch targets, issues of meaning are generally discussed in terms of target sequences (e.g. H*L) rather than individual targets, and these are broadly analogous to British nuclear tones. (See discussion by Cruttenden 1997: 64-66)

4.2 Intonation analysis

Since intonation is a property of an utterance rather than of an individual word, the intonation patterns associated with *please*-requests are, not surprisingly, closely related to the position of the word in the utterance, and to the position of the utterance in the discourse. Some of the 'requests' in the data are part of a reported speech sequence and the intonation is a function of the matrix clause rather than the request itself. Such cases have been excluded from the analysis here, thus reducing the number of tokens to be discussed. The number is further reduced because, for technical reasons, one or two sound files were not available, and some utterances, although present in the orthographic transcription, were so unclear that the intonation could not be reliably transcribed.

For each remaining request containing *please* the following features were noted:

- the accentual status of *please*
- if accented, what pitch contour is assigned to it

Where *please* is initial, I identify the contour or pitch accent associated with it and then the contour associated with the subsequent nucleus (final accent in a group). In most cases the final accent in the tone group is the final accent in the utterance. A few requests were longer and more complex, and consisted of several tone groups. The nucleus referred to in the table is that of the first tone group, but this inevitably reflects the position of the group in the utterance (i.e. non-final) rather than the shape of the request overall.

For utterance-final cases I indicate the pitch pattern associated with *please* and the contours that precede it. Where the *please* is medial, I indicate only the pitch pattern associated with the word itself. I use the Autosegmental-metrical (AM) notation[22] and for those more familiar with the British system of onsets, heads and nuclear tones I have glossed the contours using British terminology. Finally I indicate the number of times each overall pattern occurrs in the corpus. For this overview I have chosen to use invented utterances, so that comparisons can more easily be made between the different contour types. The real examples themselves are cited in the discussion.

[22] The AM model indicates H (High) and L (Low) pitch targets. The star * indicates that the syllable associated with the H or L target is accented; the percent sign % indicates a so-called boundary tone - the pitch target at the end of a tone group; the exclamation mark ! indicates a High pitch target that is lower than expected, i.e. lower than the surrounding events would predict. Thus the contour !H*L L%, for example, indicates a fall from a low starting point.

5. Findings (2): the intonation of please

In the first part of this paper I established that *please* co-occurs primarily with requests. The rest of the paper will therefore focus on the prosody of *please*-requests, and leave the remaining tokens (isolates, short responses) for future research. For that reason, the intonation patterns discussed here will be those of indirect requests and mitigated imperatives only.

An overview of the intonation contours associated with *please*-requests is to be found in Table 7.

5.1 Formal constraints on intonation contours

5.1.1 Initial please

In initial position, *please* is always accented and constitutes the onset syllable (first accented syllable or pitch accent in a tone group). In exceptional cases the contour on an initial *please* is a falling tone, but in general it is realised with a high level tone:

˙Please open the \ door.

In AM terms, it carries a high pitch accent (H*) after which the pitch may or may not fall.[23] Most commonly, a high level onset is followed by a nuclear fall, but there are also a few occurrences of a fall-rise or low rise nucleus. If the initial *please* is realised as a falling tone it is mostly followed by a low rising nucleus (4 cases) and once by a very compressed low fall.

5.1.2 Final please

In final position, *please* can be accented or unaccented. If it is accented it usually carries a rise:

Could you \ call me /please (H*L L*H H%)

This is the realisation of *please* which has been described by some as independent (i.e. requiring a separate tone group) but by others as a legitimate sequence of two accents in one tone group, the second being perceived as less salient than the first. The data also contain a very few examples where a final *please* is realised with a fall or a fall-rise. In these cases the discontinuity and hence the prosodic independence is more obvious, and these tokens sound more like separate utterances in their own right than integrated parts of the request utterance. In these cases the syntactic and prosodic criteria seem to be in conflict.

If a final *please* is unaccented it forms the tail of the preceding nuclear tone.[24] This is normally a fall.

Could you \call me please. (H* L L%)

In terms of the AM model of analysis the crucial distinction between these various contours is the boundary tone, i.e. whether the final contour ends high or low. In this

[23] In AM terms this means that the intervening Low tones, i.e. between the H* on *please* and the following H*, may or may not be deleted.

[24] (i.e. copies the immediately preceding pitch target, a L tone if part of a fall H*L, or H tone if part of a fallrise H*LH).

data, the high boundary tone is slightly more common (15) than the low boundary tone (12).

5.1.3 Medial please

In medial position, *please* can also be accented or unaccented. If unaccented, it is integrated into the pitch contour, i.e. the pitch is an interpolation between the onset and the nucleus; if *please* is accented it constitutes the onset (first pitch accent) of the tone group, whereby the preceding part of the utterance becomes the 'pre-head'.

Could ¯someone please open the \door vs. Could someone ¯please open the \door. [25]

Table 7 Prosodic patterns (accent and tone choice) found in ICE GB in please-requests, and their frequency of occurrence. In order to show prosodic differences more clearly, the sentences in this table are invented.

Underline = stressed syllable; intonation expressed both as pitch target sequences and as nuclear tones.
Intonation symbols: ¯please = high level; \please = fall; /please = low rise; \/please = fall-rise
H L = high and low tones; * = accented syllable; L% H% = low and high boundary tones; !H = depressed high tone

Initial position (almost exclusively imperatives)	***please***	**following contour AM system**	**overall utterance contour British system**	**no of occurrences**
¯please open the \ door.	H*	(!)H*L L%	high level; fall or low fall	9
¯Please don't open the \/ door	H*	H*L H%	high level; fall-rise	1
¯Please open the /door *	H*	L*H H%	high level; low rise	2
\Please open the / door	H*L	L*H H%	fall; rise	4
Medial position				
Could ¯someone please open the \door	H	(!)H*L L%	unstressed	6
Would you ¯ please ex\plain	H*	(!)H*L L%	level onset	2
Final position (mostly modal interrogatives)	**preceding contour**	***please***		
Could you \ call me /please	H*L	L*H H%	rise following a fall	15
Can you ¯open the \door please.	H*L	L%	unstressed 'tail' of a fall	12
Total				**51**

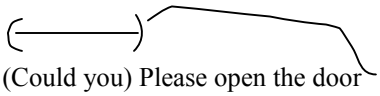
* both form part of longer, more complex requests.

NB. Of the 72 requests in the data (excluding Yes, please and please) 11 have been excluded here: five were embedded in indirect speech and the intonation was therefore a function of the main utterance rather than of the speech act 'request'; one was present in the transcription but too unclear to transcribe prosodically, and for five tokens the sound files were not available for technical reasons.

[25] The accented version does not seem to be possible if it occurs after the main verb: e.g. **Could you tell me please what would happen.* This is an argument in retrospect for analysing such tokens of *please* as utterance-final.

At this level of detail the frequencies are quite low, and generalisations become more difficult. However, the figures here suggest three common patterns:

1. an imperative with a high level tone on an initial *please,* or a modal interrogative with medial *please*, and ending with a fall [a].

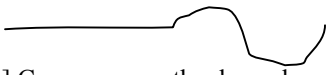


[a] (Could you) Please open the door

2. a modal interrogative, with final *please* unaccented and low (the nuclear tail of a fall) [b].

[b] Could you open the door please

3. an indirect request with final *please* accented and carrying a low rise [c].



[c] Can you open the door please

5.2 Situational constraints on intonation contours

The public / private distinction between corpus texts allows us to observe to what extent these two broadly defined contexts of situation affect the intonation contours of requests.

First of all, the imperatives; there are too few imperatives in private speech, and their syntactic and intonational form too varied, to make any generalisations about them. There is no way, therefore, of claiming any particular pattern as characteristic of private speech. The most frequent contour co-occurring with imperatives, illustrated in the previous section, can only be said to be characteristic of public speech. Modal interrogatives with medial *please* occur exclusively in public speech.

Modal interrogatives with utterance-final *please*, on the other hand, occur frequently in both formal and informal situations. Table 8 shows, however, that the two possible patterns for requests with utterance-final *please*, [b] and [c] in the previous section, are closely constrained by situation. Private speech favours a final rising contour (high terminal), while the public speech favours a final falling contour (low terminal). Table 9 shows

Table 8: Modal interrogatives with final *please*

	end high (H%)	end low (L%)
private	6	2
public	2	9

NB.These figures are not normalised. Since there is twice as much public speech as private speech in the corpus, these figures suggest that requests with utterance-final *please* are altogether less common in public speech, but the proportional distribution of high and low boundary tones is unaffected.

5.3 Summary of findings

From the results reported in sections I and II above we can make the following general observations about the data:

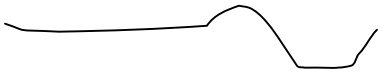
5.3.1 Syntactic patterns, semantic choices, situational constraints

- *Please* co-occurs mainly with indirect requests and with imperatives.
- The most common form of request with *please* is a modal interrogative.
- Imperatives with *please* are mostly positive imperatives and occur more frequently in 'public' speech. Negative imperatives occur proportionately more in 'private' speech
- The most common semantic strategy for indirect requests containing *please* is a reference to ability (*can* or *could*).
- In imperatives, *please* is most commonly utterance-initial
- In indirect requests, *please* is most commonly utterance-final

5.3.2 Prosodic realisation

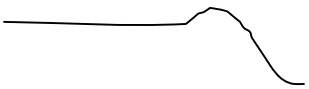
The most common realisations of *please*-requests (combining grammatical form, choice of verb and prosody) appear to be as follows (invented examples):

1. In final position carrying a rising tone (High boundary tone H%)



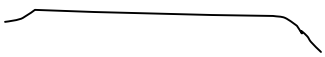
Could you open the \door /please

2. In final position, as unstressed 'tail' of a low falling contour (Low boundary tone L%)



Can you open the \door please

3. In initial position on high level tone followed by a falling nucleus (High onset H*)



ˉPlease open the \door.

5.3.3 Contextual effects: public vs private

Typical of a modal interrogative in a private situation is the use of *can*, the word *please* in final position, and ending high; typical of a modal interrogative in a public situation is the use of *could*, the word *please* in final position, and ending low. Mitigated imperatives occur in private speech but vary in form and realisation; in public speech they are more uniform, usually positive imperatives, with an initial *please*, and the pitch usually ends low. Typical intonation contours of indirect requests and mitigated imperatives according to situation are summarised in **Figure 1.**

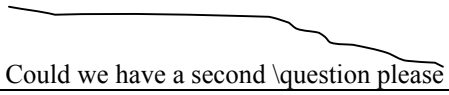
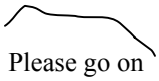
	private	**public**
indirect requests	 Can I have a glass of \water /please.	 Could we have a second \question please [26]
mitigated imperatives	(No typical pattern identified)	 Please go on

Figure 1. Summary of the typical forms and contours of indirect requests and mitigated imperatives in public and private speech. (Real examples from the corpus)

6. Discussion

The contextual constraints on the utterance type and position of *please* were discussed in Section I with reference to surface form only. Both mitigated imperatives and indirect requests occur in private and public speech. Imperatives seem to be more usual in formal situations, especially if they begin with *please*, but indirect requests (almost always with final *please*) occur equally in both public and private speech. However, if we take into account the way in which they are spoken, there is a clearer division between the kind of request to be expected in private and that in public.

Requests in 'public' speech, whether using strategies of indirectness, or mitigated imperatives, tend to be spoken with a final falling contour. In this data that means that where social distance is greater, and the power relationship asymmetrical, a request (spoken by the more powerful) is likely to end low, regardless of the type of utterance chosen. In the 'private' texts, where power relations are more symmetrical and the social distance between participants is smaller, we can predict a higher frequency of requests ending high (with a final rise).

This is entirely consistent with what is known about the discoursal effects of terminal contours. Falling intonation contributes to what has been described as 'a feeling of

[26] The same contour occurs with modal interrogatives with medial *please*, which are restricted to public speech.

closure' (Croft 1995).[27] A final fall is typical of a 'citation' - a word, phrase, sentence read aloud in isolation: in other words the intonation signals the closure of a complete text. In interactional terms the sense of closure or finality can signal the end of a turn, and in some contexts it can convey the sense that there is no more to be said on the matter, the matter is closed or non-negotiable. A final rise, on the other hand, signals 'openness' (Cruttenden 1997) or 'non-finality' (Wichmann 2000), and when it occurs at a point of syntactic completion it can mean that a response is possible or that there may be more to be said on the matter.

The notions of openness and closure relate to the speech act 'request' as follows: the public requests are mostly the kind where the hearer does not have the right to refuse because of the social roles and power relationships involved. The private requests are the kind where the hearer is unlikely to refuse because the imposition is minimal but has the choice to comply or not. Speakers distinguish prosodically between these situations. A falling tone, with its inherently low endpoint, assumes compliance; a rising tone, with its inherently high, or at least non-low[28], endpoint, does not. This contour suggests that the matter is still 'open', if only notionally, e.g. for negotiation or for non-compliance. Brown et al.(1980: 30) observe a similar distinction:

> "Low terminals are regularly associated with the end of topics, with the end of a turn when a speaker has no more to say on a topic, and with conducive questions where the speaker has a high expectation of the correctness of the assumption that lie behind his question. …. Not-low terminals are associated with more to come on the same topic, in the same turn, and with non-conducive questions."

Brown et al. make an explicit connection here between intonation and speech acts - in this case conducive and non-conducive questions. The conducive question, in which the underlying proposition is assumed to be correct and only requires confirmation, is realised with a 'closed' intonation pattern. The non-conducive question, whose underlying proposition the hearer may choose to confirm or deny, is realised with an 'open' contour.

My account of requests is directly analogous to this. Just as there is an expectation of correctness in conducive questions, so there is an expectation of compliance in requests spoken with a low terminal. This applies both to mitigated imperatives, which we might in any case intuitively associate with a more powerful directive, and to indirect requests (Can you.., Could you..) which contain structures which notionally leave the requestive force to be inferred, but in practice are so conventionalised that any other interpretation is unlikely. Requests in the corpus that have a low terminal are spoken by more powerful participants in asymmetrical discourse, e.g. the chairman of a radio programme:

> And our first \question please,

a magistrate to a witness:

> please go \on,

or a lecturer to the person whose task it is to provide technical assistance:

> Could I have the slides \on please and the lights \down.

[27] Varieties of English, especially Northern, which appear to reverse this pattern, have yet to be thoroughly investigated but seem to incorporate a low point in a terminal contour which has the same 'closure' effect.
[28] Some final rises do not rise very much, and end at what sounds a mid rather than high point.

Requests spoken with a non-low terminal, on the other hand, are made in more intimate, symmetrical situations where the imposition is small but the hearer still has the right to refuse.

pass the \sour cream[29] /please
Can I have a glass of \water /please.

At this point let us return to the notion of what exactly *please* 'means'. I said above that in some cases it has a propitiatory meaning – inviting the hearer to be well-disposed, and/or to agree that the request is acceptable. This is a hearer-oriented gesture. However, in cases where the hearer has no choice but to comply, this description seems incongruous, and I suggested that *please* is a speaker-oriented gesture conveying the speaker's view that the request is appropriate. The possibility that polite requests can be both speaker and hearer oriented is supported by diachronic evidence. Early polite imperatives were prefaced by *I pray you/ pray/ prithee,* as found in Shakespeare. These politeness formulae "put the focus on the speaker and assert his/her sincerity: speaker sincerely wants X to be done" (Busse 1999: 497). Expressions with 'please' (*if you please, if it please you*), on the other hand, which gradually superseded *pray/prithee*, he claims "ask for the willingness of the listener to do X (willingness on the part of the speaker being a felicity condition for imperatives to be successful)" (ibid). Busse interprets the shift from one kind of politeness formula to another as reflecting a general pragmatic shift diachronically from hearer-oriented to speaker-oriented felicity conditions. The literal meaning of the expressions certainly supports this: the 'pleasure' in *if it please/pleases you* is certainly the hearer's. However, one of the effects of grammaticalisation is that lexical meanings become 'bleached' and the procedural meaning (discoursal or interpersonal) is more salient. It is, therefore, in my view, perfectly possible that the modern *please* is no longer processed literally as referring to the hearer's 'pleasure' but as a procedural formula. The possible local meanings - speaker-oriented or hearer-oriented - are signalled by prosody. In all the situations where *please* could be interpreted as speaker-oriented (e.g. mitigated imperatives with an initial *please,* occurring mainly when the hearer is constrained to comply), the request ends in fall - an intonation pattern signalling the control of the speaker. Where the *please* is a gesture towards the hearer (propitiatory, seeking co-operation), the request ends in a rise, a more deferent, other-directed pattern. The cumulative evidence suggests therefore that, despite etymology, some *please*-requests assert the will of the speaker rather than making deferent gestures to the hearer.

The intonation of *please*-requests clearly adds a further important dimension to their meaning in context. The contours can signal the difference between directives[30] that are virtually commands in that they assume compliance, and more tentative requests, which at least notionally cede the power to the hearer. Differences in realisation of *please*-requests needs to be taken into account when assessing to what extent such utterances are 'polite'.

[29] Sic. The speaker treats 'sour cream' prosodically as a compound.
[30] I am using this as a superordinate term for the whole scale of speech acts which include command and request.

These local differences in focus (hearer- or speaker-oriented), however, are not inherent in the particle *please* itself. *Please* can be seen as an expression of the full range of deontic attitudes (rights and obligations).[31] In other words it is simply a signal that the speaker is operating within a licensed range of rights and obligations.

6.1 Future directions

In this study of the use of *please*-requests I have excluded a number of important issues. First of all, *please* occurs both in isolation and in short responses (e.g. *Yes please* in a response to an offer, *Please do* in granting permission). Although these are minority occurrences in the data, their distribution, function and prosody needs to be examined to see if the claims made here can still be accommodated. Secondly, the less common intonation contours should be examined to see if there is some particular reason to depart from the 'norm'. Low frequency items (collocations, structures and intonation contours) are often as interesting and informative as the high frequency ones. Thirdly, the intonation analysis cannot be complete without reference to the more gradient aspects of variation such as overall level and range. Initial observation suggests that this, too, is an important distinguishing characteristic of different kinds of request. Finally, we need to consider whether the distinctions apparently made by the speaker are relevant to and perceived by the hearer. All these issues need to be addressed in future research.

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