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Separated by a common im/politeness marker: *please* in American and British web-based English[1]

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Comparative speech-act studies have found that British English directives tend to include the pragmatic marker *please* at about twice the rate of American English directives. Nevertheless, lexical *please* is often as frequent in American English corpora as in British ones – indicating that sincere directives are only part of this pragmatic marker's story. This article reports on British and American *please* usage in the *Corpus of Global Web-based English* (GloWbE; Davies 2013). GloWbE shows similar numbers of non-verbal *please* on American and British websites, but also differences in what *please* is used for. This contributes to a larger picture of pragmatic variation in which British English uses a more bleached and routine *please*, whereas American *please* might be more at home effecting im/politeness in contexts of greater face-threat.

Keywords: American English, British English, directive speech act, GloWbE corpus, request

1 Introduction

Several earlier studies (Breuer & Geluykens 2007; Flöck 2016: 139; Murphy & De Felice 2019) have found that British English (BrE) speakers use *please* in directives at twice the rate of American English (AmE) speakers. Those studies have collected instances of request-directives, then counted how many include *please.* Rather than starting with directives, this study starts from a lexical search for the word *please* in the *Corpus of Global Web-based English* (GloWbE; Davies 2013). The aims of this research are:

[1] This research was conducted over several years, a pilot study having first been presented at the International Pragmatics Association conference in 2015. Over that time, I employed student assistants for short periods to help with aspects of data-handling and co-coding. I am very grateful to them. Laura Morbini compiled and co-coded the data for the pilot study, and Sarah FitzGerald and Yasmine Yaguer, in turn, did so for the main study. Rebecca Hunt did corpus searches for alternative spellings, formatted the survey in Qualtrics and began the descriptive statistics on those results. I thank them all for their able work. Some of the funding for that assistance came from the former School of English at the University of Sussex. I'm also grateful to Rachele De Felice, Charlotte Taylor, anonymous reviewers and editor Laurel Brinton for comments on previous versions. I remain responsible for any errors or oversights.

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(a) to identify contexts in which the pragmatic marker *please* occurs;
(b) to measure British and American usage of *please* in these contexts;
(c) to evaluate whether web-based English gives different insights into *please* than have been available from previous studies; and
(d) to hypothesize about the reasons for any differences found in the British and American data.

The lexical-search method and the online dataset give a broader view of the kinds of speech acts *please* occurs in and contribute further insights on why *please* patterns differently in these two major varieties of English. The next section briefly reviews past work on *please.* Section 3 introduces the GloWbE corpus and the frequency of *please* in its US and GB subcorpora. Section 4 describes how we[2] sampled and coded datasets and later used a survey to corroborate parts of that coding process. Section 5 reports on the similarities and differences in the sampled datasets, and section 6 further reflects on the major differences in *please* in British and American GloWbE before summarizing the findings.

2 About *please*

2.1 What is please?

Please is described as a request marker (e.g. House 1989), a discourse marker (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999), a pragmatic marker (e.g. Wichmann 2004) and a lexical mitigating device (Aijmer 1996), among other things. Added to a non-imperative form, *please* resolves ambiguity by forcing a directive interpretation, as in (1) and (2):

(1) (a) Can you raise your arms? [ambiguous: direct information question or indirect request to raise arms]
(b) Can you please raise your arms? [unambiguous request to raise arms]

(2) (a) Salt. [ambiguous: observation of salt or request for salt]
(b) Salt, please. [unambiguous request for salt]

This would seem to indicate that *please* can make non-imperatives into directives – but this is not always the case. *Please* is infelicitous in less conventional, more indirect directive forms, as in (3). As Butler notes, 'the more transparent the speech act, the less restricted are its patterns of co-occurrence with *please*' (1982: 75).

(3) (a) Now would (#please) be a good time to pass the salt (?please).
(b) #This soup is bland, please. [≠ 'Please pass the salt']

[2] I use plural first-person pronouns where appropriate to reflect the involvement of student assistants (see article footnote on opening page).

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This leaves *please* to be categorized as a politeness marker (indeed, 'the most obvious example of a politeness marker in English' – Watts 2003: 83). However, there is little agreement on what being a politeness marker means or what it means specifically for *please.* Brown & Levinson (1987: 101) state that an on-record request 'may be softened by negative-politeness respect terms, or by *please*', skirting the issue of whether *please* addresses negative face. For Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, in a study of American students' emails to faculty, '*Please* indicates some faint possibility that the request might not be granted' but 'does not serve as a strong enough mitigator to soften the force of the Imperative' (1996: 59).

Furthermore, this 'politeness marker' is not always polite. Entries for adverb/interjection *please* in thirteen English dictionaries (surveyed in Murphy 2019) include nine distinct lexicographical senses for it, six of which are noted as marking politeness (e.g. 'used in polite requests for action', 'used in polite acceptance of an offer') and three of which are not (Murphy 2019: 72):

(a) 'used to add force or urgency to a request': *Please shut up already!*
(b) 'used to express disapproval/request to stop an action': *Dana, please!*
(c) 'used to express incredulity/dismissal': *Oh please. No one believes that.*

The (a) 'force/urgency' sense does not seem to stem from *please* being a politeness marker; instead it is better explained if we consider *please* a request marker. As a request marker added to utterances that are already transparently requests, *please* can be seen as adding force to the directive. Senses (b) and (c) can be interpreted as extensions of the 'urgency' usage – though another approach would be to see them as ironic, or mock-polite, usages of 'polite' *please.*

2.2 *Observations on* please *in American and British English*

Pragmatic marker *please* is a Late Modern English development, derived from expressions involving the verb *to please.* While pragmatic marker *please* is clearly not a verb, 'traditional grammars cannot deal with *please* at all, since by all syntactic tests it is unique' (Stubbs 1983: 71). In examples like (1b) and (2b), it is usually considered to be an adverb, though it is also used as an interjection.

The first (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2023) (*OED*) citation of adverbial *please* is from a letter sent from Virginia to London in 1771, a few years before the American Revolution. (See Faya Cerqueiro 2013 for a more complete history.) This timing would easily allow for transatlantic differences in the use and understanding of *please* to arise. Studies that have compared *please* in British and American English have found different rates of usage in requests, but most have not considered whether differences in the meaning or function of *please* might underlie those differences. Some insight into the underlying differences in *please*'s significance come from non-comparative studies of the individual varieties, which make contradictory claims about the use and force of *please.*

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Studies of *please* in American contexts have tended to conclude that *please* marks more 'difficult' requests – those involving discrepancies in social power between requester and requestee and/or notable imposition (e.g. Ervin-Tripp 1976; Leopold 2015). An American study of request compliance found *please* to be counterproductive in a low-imposition context with a stranger (Firmin *et al.* 2004), ostensibly because *please* was perceived as inappropriately formal or 'pleading'. A companion study (Vaughn *et al*. 2009) found *please* much more effective in a higher-stakes context, in line with the expectation that *please* marks non-routine requests in AmE. In US studies comparing spoken and written requests, *please* was almost exclusively found in writing (see Pufahl Bax 1986, on spoken versus office-memo requests, and Carlo & Yoo 2007, on in-person versus online-chat library reference requests).

Studies in British contexts, on the other hand, tend to conclude that *please* is a 'routine' part of everyday, low-stakes requests (e.g. House 1989; Barron 2008; Wichmann 2004; Leech 2014). In these studies, *please* 'occurs in situations where the imposition is either minimal or socially sanctioned', meaning 'that it only occurs when there is very little "face-work" to be done' (Wichmann 2004: 1544). Culpeper & Gillings (2018) found similar rates of *please* usage in the North and South of England, despite the common perception of different politeness cultures in the two regions.

The 'routineness' of British *please* usage might explain why comparative speech-act studies have found *please* to be twice as frequent in British English as American, whether in experimental discourse-completion tasks (Breuer & Geluykens 2007), in corpora of spoken English (Flöck 2016), or in emails (Murphy & De Felice 2019). In Murphy & De Felice's study, British *please* (in contrast to American *please*) was characteristically found in highly formulaic contexts in which the directive involves very little or no imposition on the recipient (e.g. *Please see attached*, *Please accept my thanks*), indicating usage that is more politic (non-salient behavior 'directed toward the goal of establishing and/or maintaining equilibrium'; Watts 2003: 20) than polite (salient behavior, beyond what is minimally appropriate). In contrast, American *please* showed weaker patterns of usage in the email data, suggesting that AmE *please* might be more sensitive to the social context of use.

In lexical, rather than speech-act, studies, the picture is more mixed. Biber *et al.* (1999) found twice as many tokens of BrE *please* in the *Longman Spoken English Corpus*, but Jucker & Landert (2023), searching the Movie Corpus (1930–2019), found AmE and BrE *please* varies much less overall, with AmE *please* surpassing BrE in relative number in the 2010s. In the Brown family of corpora (published English, 1931–2006), Paul Baker found a 1.2:1 ratio of BrE to AmE im/polite *please*, with increasing use of adverbial *please* in both varieties (2017). He concludes that 'British English appear[s] to have a more complicated relationship to *please*' because he finds more British cases that 'implied (restrained) rudeness, sarcasm or humour' (p. 234) – though notably these seem to involve uses of the verb *please* (in the expression *if you please*), rather than the adverb/interjection studied here. Baker notes that *please* usage in BrE has particularly increased since the 1930s in 'written instructional texts', such

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as instructions on how to contact a magazine publisher: *Please state clearly in the subject line what your email relates to* (p. 233).

Collectively, past studies of British and American *please* usage teach us three things. First, and unsurprisingly, the character of a corpus influences the *please*s we find. Second, while *please* may have the same use-potential across AmE and BrE, *please* seems more 'consequential' in AmE and more 'routine' in BrE. Finally, while more BrE than AmE requests seem to have *please*, transatlantic rates of *please* usage generally vary less in corpus-wide lexical searches than in searches of requests, suggesting that *please* has other, less accounted-for uses.

3 British and American *please* in the GloWbE corpus

As a pragmatic/politeness marker, *please*'s natural habitat is interaction. While corpora of spoken language offer the most interactional types of data, they are typically small and often include only very particular types of interactions. This study requires a large number of instances of *please* from a similar (preferably recent) time frame, in a variety of communicative contexts, tagged for national dialect. The *Corpus of Global Web-based English* (GloWbE; Davies 2013) meets these criteria to various extents, as discussed in section 3.1. The rest of this section gives an overview of *please* and its variants in the GB and US subcorpora of GloWbE (henceforth *GB corpus*, *US corpus*).

3.1 The GloWbE corpus

The GloWbE corpus consists of 1.9 billion words in passages collected from 1.8 million webpages in late 2012. The passages were derived by searching for highly frequent English 3-grams (e.g. *and from the*) and saving 800 to 1,000 links for each (Biber *et al.* 2015: 16–17) in websites from twenty countries. This study concentrates on just two: the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (labeled *GB* in GloWbE), each containing around 386 million words. Nation is the only social variable recorded directly for GloWbE sources and the only one considered here.

A search for *please* in GloWbE gives over 185,000 instances from American and British websites. In comparison, spoken corpora tend to be much smaller and specific to one nation. The *Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English*, for instance, contains fewer than 250,000 words, and only 51 of these are *please* (Du Bois *et al.* 2000–5). ICE-GB has only 88 instances of *please* in its 600,000 words (see Wichmann 2004). The 11.5-million-word *Spoken BNC2014*, which consists of mostly informal conversations, has over 2,000 tokens of *please* (see Islentyeva *et al.* 2023), but a comparable American corpus is not currently available. In contrast, GloWbE allows for direct comparison of British and American English data that were collected at the same time using the same methods.

While web data are not necessarily interactional, GloWbE contains more interactive text styles than most other corpora of written English. (See Biber *et al.*

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2015 for a breakdown.) GloWbE offers online discontinuous polylogues (see Marcoccia 2004) between individuals, for instance on discussion boards, in replies to narrative texts and their authors (e.g. the comment section on a blog), appeals to a readership (e.g. by the author of a blog) and invitations to interact with the site itself (e.g. *Please click here*).

We can question whether GloWbE's national subcorpora reflect the specific Englishes of those nations. GloWbE's architects relied on the availability of region-limited searches through Google for setting up the national subcorpora and report that they 'have yet to find a single website [in GloWbE] whose country has not been correctly identified by Google' (Davies & Fuchs 2015: 5). Of course, locating a site is not the same as locating the English on it. The corpus contains quoted material, and interactional websites might attract international commenters. Writers in either country may have acquired their English elsewhere and/or as an additional language. To try to estimate the extent of international posting on nation-tagged websites in GloWbE, I performed a small spelling experiment, taking advantage of the particular Americanness of *u*-less spellings *color*, *tumor* and *neighbor* (Murphy 2015a); from that I concluded that it is reasonable to assume that 10–15 percent of writers in the GB and US subcorpora are non-nationals. Differences between British and American *please* in GloWbE may therefore be undercounted in the following due to the presence of other-variety writers.

3.2 Please *in GB and US GloWbE*

Some key characteristics of GloWbE *please* are immediately clear. As discussed in section 2.2, Biber *et al.* (1999), Breuer & Geluykens (2007), Flöck (2016) and Murphy & De Felice (2019) have all found *please* to be twice as frequent in British English as in American. In contrast, GloWbE shows no such imbalance; each national corpus had over 90,000 instances of *please*, with over 87,000 tagged as adverb. Table 1 shows the raw and relative (per million words) numbers of *please* tokens. The GB corpus has 1.5 percent more *please* than the US corpus and 2.1 percent more that are tagged as adverbs – though it must be noted that GloWbE's part-of-speech tagging is not entirely reliable for this word.

One possible explanation for the GB/US similarity in GloWbE is the lexical rather than speech-act-driven nature of the methodology: the GloWbE data include any

Table 1. *AmE and BrE* please *per million words in GloWbE*

	GB		US	
	N	pmw	N	mw
all *please*	93,356	240.85	91,948	237.71
tagged as adverb	88,863	228.79	87,020	224.97

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usage of *please*, not just those that occur in sincere directives, as was the case for many of the studies cited above. The other possibility is that the data type matters: the similarity of *please* distribution in GloWbE could reflect (a) the broad range of genres found in an internet corpus and (b) the public, rather than personal, nature of the interactions, as compared to spoken and email corpora.

Orthographic variants of *please* are also present in GloWbE: we found 284 instances across the GB and US corpora, representing 81 non-standard forms of four types: pseudo-phonetic (*pleez*), elongated (*pleaaaaasssse*), epenthetic (*puh-lease*) and abbreviated (*pls*). These represent a small proportion the 'please' data, and so they are set aside from the current analysis (but are discussed in Murphy & Cahill, in prep.).

4 How *please* is used in GB and US GloWbE

4.1 Sampling and coding

We used the search tools on English-corpora.org to generate random samples of 1,000 contexts containing *please* from the US and GB sections of GloWbE. (Because many verb *please*s had been mis-tagged as adverbs, we did not make use of the available part-of-speech tagging.) We then took 800 items from each thousand for coding, manually removing items that:

- were duplicates,
- contained verb *please*,
- consisted of biblical, literary, or song-lyric quotations, or
- indicated that the writer was not a user of the target dialect (i.e. referred to their non-target nationality or contained other-variety spellings or lexical items).

As items were removed, we replenished the US and GB 800 with remaining items from the original set of 1,000.[3]

Once the sample had been selected, the items were coded on multiple dimensions. For this article, the relevant dimensions are act-type, whose values are introduced in section 4.2, and grammatical type, negation and lexical verb, discussed in section 5.3. Coding was done by the author and paid student assistants trained by the author. Initially, we coded a random 10 percent of the data from each sample separately and compared outcomes, refining the definitions of the categories where they proved less reliable. From then, where a coder found the example or the category values ambiguous, she marked it for later discussion and decision. These were

[3] GloWbE has 'General' and 'Blog' subcategories, but Biber *et al.* (2015) found that the categories overlap too much to be useful, and so we abandoned our initial effort to balance them in the sample. Their numbers are nevertheless similar: 353 GB Blog versus 361 US Blog.

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reviewed by the author to ensure consistent application of the codes throughout the sample. Where necessary, we sought more context at the excerpt's original website. If that was no longer available, the item was replaced by another from the sample remainder.

4.2 *Act-type categories*

In a pilot project (Murphy 2015b), we tested a range of act-type categories, from which the current category set was developed.[4] The definitions of the twelve act-types relied partly on who benefits from the outcome of the *please* directive: the writer, the addressee, or no one. Table 2 describes each act-type with illustrative examples from GloWbE, as well as showing the benefactor supercategories. These are further described below.

The writer-benefiting category includes the prototypical directive type, the REQUEST, in which the writer directs the addressee to do something for the writer's benefit.[5] The PERMISSION and ACCEPTANCE categories reflect slightly different relationships between writer, addressee and action, but both still relate to actions that benefit the *please*-writer. Some of the PRAYER cases (including the example in table 2) can be read as facetious, in that the writer probably does not sincerely believe that a higher power can or will help them. Still, we categorized these as writer-benefiting because the writer asks for something they presumably want and because determining which prayers were sincere was beyond our means.

The addressee-benefiting categories include ADVICE, where the writer suggests an action the addressee could take to improve their situation, and INSTRUCTION, where the writer spells out steps the addressee should take to do something the addressee purportedly wants to do. The other addressee-benefiting categories involve imperatives with non-directive illocutionary force. In an OFFER, the writer commits their willingness to do something for or give something to the addressee, usually with an expression like *feel free to* or *don't hesitate to*. INFORMATION uses the imperative form of a mental verb (e.g. *know*, *note*, *be aware*) to assert the proposition that follows. POLIMP (POLITE IMPERATIVE) uses the imperative form to offer thanks, congratulations, apology (etc.). This can take the form of requesting permission (*Please allow me to thank you*) or requesting that the addressee receive the polite act (*Please accept my thanks*).

The final supercategory, 'no benefit', includes those items that could not be categorized as sincere or polite directives. The FACETIOUS category includes *please*

[4] The main differences between the pilot-study categories and the present study are: (a) discontinuation of the PROMOTION category (intended to separate advertising directives) and (b) replacement of the pilot PROHIBITION category with treatment of negation as a separate dimension (see section 5.3.2).

[5] Two terminological notes: (i) In everyday language and other studies, *request* can include many of the categories in table 2. The category label REQUEST, presented here in small caps, has a narrower reference. (ii) Because GloWbE collects written text, I refer to *writers* rather than *speakers* (though some of the writing might be quoted or transcribed speech). When I refer to the writer as a benefactor, the benefit may be to some entity that the writer represents (e.g. a company).

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Table 2. *Act-types by benefactor*

Type	Definition	Example
Writer-benefiting		
ACCEPTANCE	accedes to an offer of a thing or action	*YES. PLEASE. xD I'd love it if you could*
PERMISSION	requests permission from addressee to do something	*can I change my mind and go for the first one please!!!!*
PRAYER	requests action/state from unnamed or supernatural power	*Please (please) no injuries to the Arsenal this weekend…*
REQUEST	requests action from addressee to benefit writer	*Please bring the US Waveloch Flow Tour to our facility*
Addressee-benefiting		
ADVICE	requests action from addressee to benefit addressee	*Please invest in yourself and your future and do something else.*
INFORMATION	gives addressee information	*Please note there are no Park & Ride services at any sites*
INSTRUCTION	explains how to do something the addressee wants or needs to do	*Please Click here to submit the Corrections*
OFFER	invites addressee to do something that may impose on writer	*please feel free to use it in any Powerpoint you wish*
POLIMP	expresses thanks, congratulations, etc. with an imperative	*Please accept our sincerest apologies for any inconvenience*
No benefit		
DISMISSAL	expresses disbelief or dissatisfaction toward a proposition	*Oh please. Is he still running?*
FACETIOUS	insincerely requests an action	*Will the real craft beer please stand up?*
PROD	argumentatively directs addressee to do something	*Now, please, in the name of all that's Holy, shut the hell up!*

directives that request (sometimes impossible) actions that are not sincerely expected and that neither benefit nor harm anyone. The other two no-benefactor categories, PROD and DISMISSAL, include mock-polite (Culpeper 1996) uses of *please*, which require particular care in coding.

The PROD category includes directives used in an argumentative context that appear to be confrontational rather than indicating sincere requests for things the writer can reasonably expect from the addressee. These include demands that the addressee educate themselves on a matter they have just addressed, that they employ better reasoning than they've just displayed, or that they do something unpleasant to themselves. PRODs are very often accompanied by crude language, as in (4), sarcastic

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use of deferential language or other negative politeness mechanisms, as in (5) and (6), or emphatic markers, such as capitalization or repetition of *please*, as in (7):

(4) **please** remove your head from your ass. (US political discussion site)

(5) **please** spare me the "the surpeme [*sic*] court and John McCain" (US comments section at a news site)

(6) **Please** enlighten us. Who does the system belong to oh wise all seeing one? (GB comments section at a news site)

(7) So **PLEASE** don't try and play morally superior (US comments section at a news site)

The coders were instructed to mark directives as PROD if 'the writer is being rude/argumentative/trolling. The *please* is not an act of politeness.' This makes it the most subjective category, both for the participants in the encounter and for us as coders. We therefore approached it conservatively, coding PROD candidates as REQUEST if we thought a non-PROD interpretation was reasonably available. We followed up with a survey to assess our coding (see section 4.3).

In using DISMISSAL *please*, the writer takes a stance relative to an assertion that ostensibly preceded it. DISMISSAL *please* can reject the content or implication of the interlocutor's previous turn, as in (8), or it may echo or question a previous actual or implied statement, as in (9)–(10).

(8) Oh **please**. Gemma has showcased her horrible nature all series … (GB television discussion forum)

(9) Who the fuck does Sanchez have? Don't say Holmes. Child **please**. Other teams do thing to help their QB… (US sports discussion forum)

(10) Secondly, all this daily nonsense by everyone about ethics and money. **Please**. It's a capitalist world, what else do you expect? (GB sports discussion forum)

PROD *please* is similar to DISMISSAL *please* in that it is often used in rejecting the interlocutor or their argument. We distinguished PROD and DISMISSAL by whether they co-occur with an imperative form. For example, (11) seems to dismiss something in the previous comment (especially because it is preceded by *Oh*); however, we coded it PROD because it is presented as part of the sentence that contains the imperative *spare us the drama.*

(11) […] turn around and support registering gun owners.
Anonymous # Oh **please** spare us the drama. (US local news comment section)

Analysis of these categories in the two datasets begins in section 5. But first, the following subsection presents corroborative evidence for our subjective decisions.

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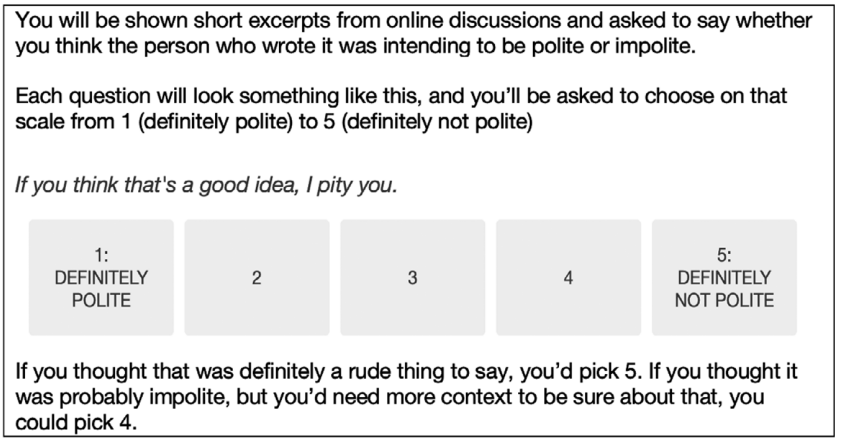


Figure 1. Survey instructions

4.3 Corroborative survey

Notwithstanding the double-coding process described in section 4.1, determining act-types was the most subjective aspect of data-coding. Therefore, to test the act-type categories, we surveyed speakers of the target dialects. Each participant in the online survey received a randomly chosen twelve items from a bank of 78 selected from our corpus sample (39 each from the American and British datasets). They rated each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 'definitely polite' to 5 'definitely not polite'. Figure 1 shows the instructions for using the Likert scale.

The items selected for the survey overrepresent the categories that include insincere or unfulfillable directives (PROD, DISMISSAL, PRAYER) in order to check the reliability of our coding of these decontextualized passages. We were particularly interested in whether participants categorized our REQUEST and PROD items as polite and impolite respectively, since these share the conventional surface forms of request-directives. Selection of sentences was mostly random within those categories, but we replaced some randomly chosen affirmative REQUESTs with negative ones in order to test whether telling people *not* to do things affected perceptions of politeness (see section 5.3.2). In the end, the final set included 55 affirmative and 23 negative examples (across all act-types), including 10 affirmative and 8 negative REQUESTs and 14 affirmative and 12 negative PRODs.[6] Survey participants were recruited via the author's professional and institutional social media channels. In total 1,325 people who identified themselves as American adults and 1,293 who identified as British adults completed the survey over twenty-four days in early 2023, giving about 385 judgments per item.[7]

[6] Where survey items could be traced to their original authors, we anonymized them by substituting proper names or synonyms. The survey design was reviewed and approved by the Cross Schools Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sussex.

[7] While we were not interested in social variables other than nationality, it's worth noting that respondents were fairly evenly distributed by age, with slightly fewer in the youngest [18–34] and oldest [65+] categories. Two-thirds of respondents were female.

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The higher the average score, the more respondents interpreted an item as 'definitely not polite'. The most 'not-polite' category was DISMISSAL, averaging 3.84 (of a possible 5), confirming a default interpretation of impoliteness for DISMISSAL *please.* This was followed by PROD at 3.70.[8] The high scores for DISMISSAL and PROD contrast with all other categories, which averaged 1.80; the REQUEST category averaged 2.02. The survey results therefore support the coders' interpretations of PROD versus REQUEST.

5 Where and why *please* is used on British and American websites

5.1 Act-types and benefactors in the GloWbE sample

What are writers in GloWbE doing when they use *please*? Table 3 shows the numbers of each act-type in each sample, indicating in the second column which benefactor supercategory each belongs to: W(riter), A(ddressee), or N(one). The final column divides the GB count by the US count to give an initial sense of how much each type varies in the sample (above 1 skews British, below 1 skews American).

The top three act-types in table 3 dominate the three benefactor supercategories, while those at the bottom are too small on their own to draw many conclusions from. Figure 2 recasts the numbers for the top three categories as percentages of the 800 items in each variety's dataset.

Table 3. *Prevalence of act-types for the British and American* please *tokens*

Type	Ben	Total	GB	US	GB/US
REQUEST	W	682	323	359	.90
INSTRUCTION	A	385	236	149	1.58
PROD	N	205	82	123	.67
INFORMATION	A	98	56	42	1.33
ADVICE	A	95	42	53	.79
OFFER	A	41	20	21	.95
DISMISSAL	N	29	9	20	.45
PRAYER	W	24	12	12	1.00
FACETIOUS	N	23	10	13	.77
POLIMP	A	9	5	4	1.25
PERMISSION	W	6	3	3	1.00
ACCEPTANCE	W	3	2	1	2.00

[8] Only one item outside the 'impolite' categories scored higher than 3 (3.16): *Please don't text unless you want something.* Only one PROD item scored less than 3 (2.79), which can be attributed to over-editing in the item preparation; survey respondents only saw the bold part of this example, while the coders had seen the whole item:

(i) I am asking you what you will do when I show you examples? **Please make a commitment.** Otherwise it is pointless for me to prove that you are …

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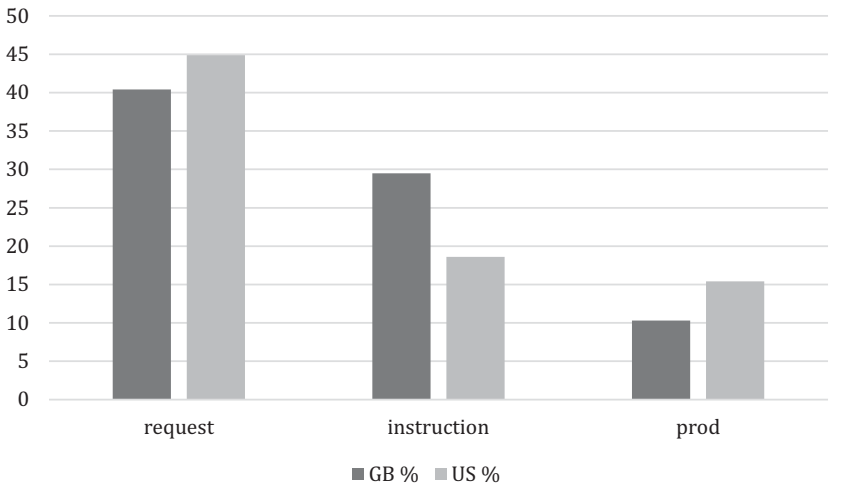


Figure 2. Top-ranking act-types in GloWbE sample

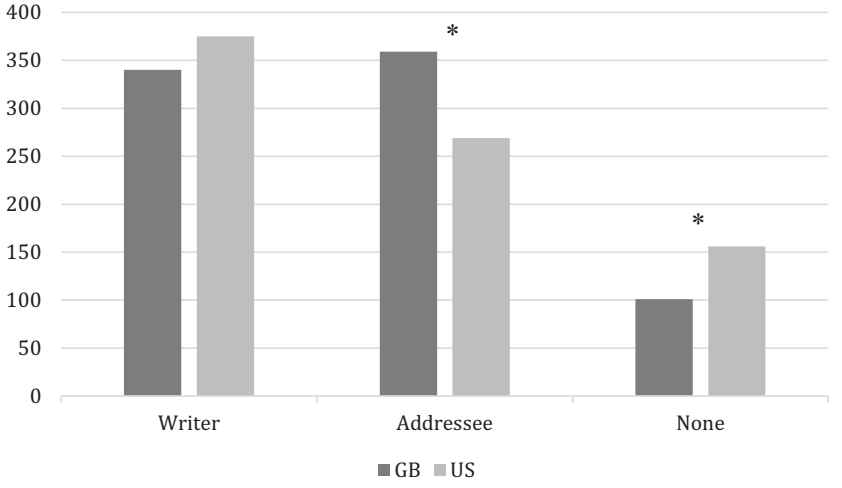


Figure 3. Prevalence of act-types for the British and American *please* tokens

Figure 3 collapses the act-types into benefactor supercategories. A Pearson Chi-square test showed that the relation between these categories was significant (X^2 (2, N = 1600) = 26.672, p = <.001). The standard residual of X^2 showed that the addressee-benefactor and no-benefactor categories contributed most to the difference (mirroring each other with scores of -2.5 and 2.5, respectively). These are therefore marked * in the figure.

5.2 *Imposition and* please *in transatlantic context*

We did not code for the level of imposition or inherent face-risk in each *please* directive – to do so would have introduced much more subjectivity into the coding

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Table 4. *Classification of act categories by face-risk potential*

High stakes (potentially)	Low stakes (potentially)	
REQUEST	INSTRUCTION	ACCEPTANCE
ADVICE	INFORMATION	POLIMP
PROD	OFFER	PRAYER
DISMISSAL	PERMISSION	FACETIOUS

scheme. We also did not account for issues like power differential and social distance because the information was unavailable. (Most web interaction involves people unknown to one another, and so power differential would be difficult to judge in any case.) But as a rough-grained approach, the categories themselves can be graded for their face-risk *potential*, as in table 4.

The 'potentially high-stakes' categories may threaten positive face, negative face, or both. Asking someone to do something they were not already doing (REQUEST, ADVICE) is a threat to their negative face – and potentially their positive face, if the directive implicitly criticizes the addressee for not having acted already. Others are explicitly intended to damage face (PROD, DISMISSAL). The potentially low-stakes categories may:

- ask the reader to do something they wanted or were expecting to do anyhow (INSTRUCTION, ACCEPTANCE, OFFER),
- use imperative forms to achieve non-directive (and not impolite) aims (POLIMP, INFORMATION),
- ask for very little (e.g. PERMISSION[9]),
- not expect the reader to act on the directive (PRAYER, FACETIOUS[10]).

That approximation of face-risk potential aligns with the statistically 'more British' and 'more American' *please* act-types. The statistical difference between the British and American datasets is significant overall for the high versus low risk-potential categories: $X^2(2, N=1600) = 27.911$, $p < .001$. Table 5 orders the act-types by standardized residuals of the Chi-square test. This measure indicates the strength of the category's contribution to the result. (Standardized residuals ≥2 indicate categories that are more than two standard deviations from the mean.) For the purposes of these statistics, the very small low-risk-potential categories (PERMISSION, ACCEPTANCE and POLIMP) are combined.

The high-risk-potential categories skew American (in keeping with the findings of Murphy & De Felice 2019). The differentiation of risk categories might indicate why

[9] The PERMISSION examples all ask permission to say something that follows immediately. For example, *please let me rephrase the question* (followed by a rephrased question).

[10] The FACETIOUS category could be argued to involve higher risk, in that it requires more cognitive effort from the addressee, who must judge whether the apparent request is sincere or not. See table 5 for results.

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Table 5. *Prevalence of act-types for the British and American* please *tokens*

Act-type	Risk-potential	GB	US	Std res.
INSTRUCTION	**L**	**236**	**149**	**3.1**
INFORMATION	L	56	42	1.0
PERM/ACC/POL	L	10	8	0.3
PRAYER	L	12	12	0
OFFER	L	20	21	–0.1
FACETIOUS	L	10	13	–0.6
ADVICE	H	42	53	–0.8
REQUEST	H	323	359	–0.9
DISMISSAL	H	9	20	–1.3
PROD	**H**	**82**	**123**	**–2.1**

ADVICE was the exception to the generalization that addressee-benefiting categories skew British (table 3): advice-giving is not the kind of routine, no-risk context typical of most addressee-benefiting categories.

5.3 *Formal contexts of* please

This section examines the clauses that accompany *please* (or not) in terms of their grammatical form (section 5.3.1) and negativity and other markers of 'prohibition' (section 5.3.2) and whether these interact with nationality or act-type.

5.3.1 *Clause types*

The grammatical contexts of GloWbE *please* contrast sharply with *please* directives in Murphy & De Felice's email study (2019). There *please* occurred exclusively in imperatives and interrogatives, although the 1,350 email requests in that study also included declaratives, conditional statements and sentence fragments. In contrast, the GloWbE data has *please* in a broader range of grammatical contexts, exemplified in table 6 and compared (with some collapse of similar categories) in table 7.[11] While the GloWbE sample shows more variety in grammatical type, it has more homogeneity in grammatical tokens. Around 88 percent of GloWbE *please* occurs in imperatives, and only about 6 percent in questions – unlike in email where more than a third appeared in questions.

Though each study concerns asynchronous, written, computer-mediated communication, the text-type effects are remarkable – and explainable. The email corpora contain messages from individuals to other individuals with whom they had an existing relationship or hope

[11] Clause types were determined by grammatical structure, regardless of final punctuation. So, for example, we categorized *Will the person in the Obama administration who is telling the truth please stand up and identify yourself.* as a question even though it ended with a period/full stop. Grammatical 'stand-alone' status was determined by punctuation. However, in determining act-type we counted *please* as part of the directive act it abutted, even if punctuation interceded. So, *let me see it one more time. Please?* was counted as a stand-alone REQUEST.

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Table 6. *Grammatical types*

Values	Example
Declarative	*Please I really need your help*
Imperative	*Please keep control.*
Interrogative: *yes/no*	*Could you please help us?*
Interrogative: *wh-*	*What are your thoughts, please?*
NP PP	*Evidence, please. In English, please.*
Stand-alone	*I would love to win!!! Please!!!!*

Table 7. *Percentage of grammatical contexts for* please*: GloWbE versus email*

	GloWbE			Email (Murphy & De Felice 2019)[12]		
	GB n=800	US n=800	All	GB n=373	US n=183	All
imperative	86.5	89.1	**87.8**	59.2	67.8	**62.1**
interrogative	8.0	4.3	**6.2**	40.8	32.2	**37.9**
stand-alone	1.9	2.8	**2.2**	—	—	—
NP/PP	2.5	1.3	**2.0**	—	—	—
declarative	1.1	2.6	**1.9**	—	—	—

of a future one. *Please* is thus used in asking acquaintances to do something and expecting they will probably do it; not doing the action would have interpersonal and/or professional repercussions. The mitigating effect of the interrogative form is therefore useful. *Could you please come to my office?* is more natural and gentler than the imperative *Please come to my office* – a message that might sound threatening if it came from your boss or presumptuous if it came from your assistant. But on a website, the author is often an organization or an anonymized individual and the addressee is often an unknown public, often without means to respond verbally. For that reason, *Please click here* is more appropriate on websites than *Could you please click here?*

Figure 4 shows how grammatical form relates to some act-types. It omits the smallest categories (PERMISSION, ACCEPTANCE, POLIMP, PRAYER), as well as those that were found only or almost only (99 percent) in imperative form (ADVICE, INSTRUCTION, OFFER, INFORMATION). The GB corpus has more interrogatives in all act-type categories than the US corpus does. This aligns with Murphy & De Felice's (2019) observation that BrE uses *please* in modal questions at much higher rates than AmE does, with greater formulaicness.

[12] Percentages are derived from Murphy & De Felice 2019, table 4 (p. 86).

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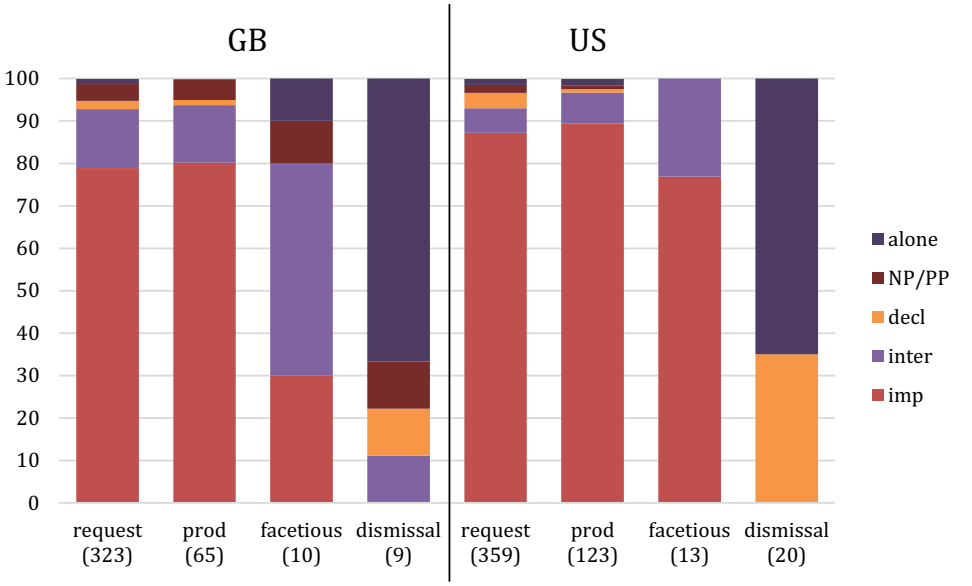


Figure 4. Proportion of *please* clause type by act-type

Of particular interest in figure 4 are REQUEST and PROD acts and whether grammatical context could help distinguish them. The answer, for this data, is 'no'. REQUEST and PROD occur in imperative and non-imperative forms at similar rates within each national variety. This supports the view that PROD is a mock-polite version of REQUEST, with speakers of each variety accurately echoing sincere requests in their sarcastic ones.

The DISMISSAL category stands apart by design: non-imperative status differentiated DISMISSAL from PROD (section 4.2). In both samples, DISMISSAL *please* most often stands alone: separated (by period, exclamation mark, or turn break) from the sentence it dismisses and/or the writer's explanation of their dismissiveness. Leech (2014: 162) notes that the use of stand-alone *please* 'can be an insistent reinforcement of the directive'. In the GloWbE samples, stand-alone *please* is hardly used in directives at all.

5.3.2 *Prohibition with British and American* please

A request to *not* do something might feel more face-threatening than a request to do something, in that a request like *Don't do that* or *Stop doing that* may presuppose that the addressee is already committing some disapproved-of act. In the Spoken BNC2014, Islentyeva *et al.* (2023) found that *please* frequently co-occurred with *don't* when it was used to express sincere urgency or ironic irritation. In the spoken ICE-GB corpus, Wichmann (2004) found proportionally more negated commands in the private sphere, where social distance and power differences were smaller, indicating that negated directives might be riskier to perform. Since AmE *please*

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seems to align with riskier situations, it makes sense to ask whether 'prohibiting' directives differ transatlantically.

To investigate this, we noted any cases where the *please*-modified action was negated, as in (12), and any directives where the lexical verb had an inherent sense of 'stop' or 'avoid', as in (13). Collectively the contexts containing negation or lexical-prohibition verbs can be called *prohibitions.*

(12) (a) Just please, do**n't** ask me.
(b) Cross it and **never** come back. Please.
(c) Please, **no** spam.

(13) (a) PLEASE **STOP** TELLING US THAT WE'RE EXAGGERATING
(b) Please **avoid** the use of "Mormon Church"
(c) Let's please **scotch** this particular rumour

Table 8 shows the total numbers of ostensibly 'prohibitive' directives in each corpus. While the US has a higher proportion of negated contexts, the relationship between corpus and prohibition is not significant on a Chi-square test (p=.189). The table also shows proportions of prohibition in the benefactor-type and risk-potential supercategories and the three most frequent act-types.

In both corpora, prohibition is more common in high-risk categories and no-benefactor categories. Among the act-types, PROD is most often prohibitive, and so the US sample's overall greater proportion of prohibitions can be attributed to its greater proportion of PROD contexts. Prohibition may have been a factor in the coders labeling the act as PROD, though it's worth noting that negated PRODs and REQUESTs were not judged as less 'polite' than non-negated in the corroborative survey (section 4.3).

Table 8. *Percentages of* please *with prohibitive directives*

	GB *n*	GB %	US *n*	US %
All act-types	**78**	**9.8**	**101**	**12.6**
prohibition by negation	60	7.5	78	9.8
prohibition by lexical verb	18	2.3	23	2.9
By benefactor category		**%**		**%**
writer–benefactor prohibitions	45	13.2	49	13.6
addressee–benefactor prohibitions	9	2.5	15	5.5
no-benefactor prohibitions	24	23.8	37	23.7
By risk-potential category		**%**		**%**
high	72	15.5	86	15.2
low	9	2.4	8	3.4
In most frequent act-types		**%**		**%**
REQUEST	42	13.0	47	13.0
INSTRUCTION	0	–	0	–
PROD	22	26.8	30	24.4

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6 Discussion and conclusions

Our knowledge about interactional words like *please* is only as rich as the range of contexts in which we examine them. The GloWbE corpus allows for new observations on transatlantic *please* use. Previous studies have tended to report that BrE directives include *please* twice as often as AmE ones do (section 2.2). This might have predicted that GloWbE GB would have more non-verb instances of *please* than GloWbE US, but instead we found similar numbers of *please* in the two varieties (table 1). In samples of these corpora, the prototypical directive type, the speaker/writer-benefiting REQUEST, accounted for 44.9 percent of US *please* usage versus 40.4 percent in the GB sample (figure 2), indicating that the primary use of *please* in both varieties is as a request mitigator.

We furthermore saw that on the web, *please* is primarily used with imperative forms (figure 4), in all act-types except DISMISSAL, which is non-imperative by definition. While imperatives attract *please*, not all imperatives express prototypically negative-face-threatening requests, and such non-prototypical imperatives are where we find the greatest AmE/BrE differences. The story they tell falls in line with, and expands on, suggestions in our email study (Murphy & De Felice 2019).

6.1 Politic please

In Murphy & De Felice's email study (2019), *please* was nearly mandatory in BrE imperatives, and half as common in AmE imperatives. Much of the difference could be found in 'low- or no-imposition' speech acts, which included the addressee-benefiting act-types from the present study: INSTRUCTION, INFORMATION, POLIMP (*please accept my thanks*) and OFFER, which includes extensions of permission (*please feel free to ask*). This multiplicity of functions of *please*-imperatives contradicts Fraser's claim that '[w]hen *please* occurs before an imperative structure, it signals that the speaker intends the utterance to be taken as a request, and only a request' (1996: 174) as well as Stubbs' claim that *please* 'cannot co-occur with statements, promises, offers, invitations, threats, and so on' (1983:72).

For instance, in the relevant contexts, it is natural to interpret the imperative in (14) as an act of informing, in (15) as an act of congratulating and in (16) as an invitation (in our coding, an OFFER):

(14) Please note: these guides are subject to change (GB medical provider)

(15) …please allow me to commend you on your fair capture of the moment. (US journalism-blog comment)

(16) please join us […] for the official after-party (GB professional organization blog)

Please is only appropriate in these contexts because of the use of the imperative form (cf. #*These guides are subject to change, please*). The present lexical study did

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Table 9. *Twograms accounting for at least 5 percent of* INSTRUCTION *contexts*

GB (n=236)		US (n=149)	
please contact	41	please contact	25
please visit	27	please read	9
please click	17	please see	9
please e(-)mail	17	please send	8
Total	**102**	**Total**	**51**
Percentage of INSTR	**43.2%**	**Percentage of INSTR**	**34.2%**

not examine *please*-less forms, and it's important to keep in mind that the greater presence of *please* in such contexts in one culture does not entail more *please*-less imperative alternatives in the other. For example, Murphy & De Felice (2019) found *Please find attached* twenty times in their BrE email corpus, but only twice in the AmE corpus. The equivalent *please*-less imperative (*Find attached*) was not found at all, and non-imperative alternatives (such as *I've attached the report*) are available.[13]

That said, the second largest category of *please* in the GloWbE samples was the INSTRUCTION act-type, which is directive in nature and therefore commonly expressed in imperative form. This act-type accounts for most of the difference between GB and US in the potentially-low-stakes and the addressee-benefiting supercategories. The greater rate of BrE INSTRUCTION *please* on the internet echoes Baker's finding of increased use of *please* in published written instructions in BrE since the late twentieth century (2017: 233).[14] Table 9 shows the *please*+verb combinations that account for 5 percent or more of the INSTRUCTION examples in the GloWbE samples. This repetitive, politic use of *please* in particular website contexts might be considered a type of ritual-frame-indicating expression (Kádár & House 2020).

Overall, the greater GB proportion of *please* use in addressee-benefiting categories like INSTRUCTION and INFORMATION is consonant with past work (section 2.2) characterizing *please* in BrE as marking 'routine' requests with little need for face-work.

6.2 *Confrontational* please

Studying *please* in a web corpus gives insights into its insincere and impolite uses, which are understandably missed in the speech-act literature. Like any 'polite'

[13] I have done some full-GloWbE searches on *please*+verb versus verb following a period (full stop), using the verbs in table 9. Different verbs show different patterns. For instance, *Please click here* occurs twice as much in GB as in US, and *Click here* shows the inverse: occurring about twice more in US than in GB. (The number of *please*-ful forms is dwarfed by the number of *please*-less in both varieties.) *Please visit* versus *Visit*, on the other hand, does not show a reciprocal GB/US relationship.

[14] Islentyeva *et al.* (2023: 307–8) found only one instance of *please* 'politely giving instructions' in 100 *please* contexts from Spoken BNC2014. However, their 'instruction' example (*please help yourself to spinach if you want some*) would have been counted as OFFER in our taxonomy. Their 'polite request' category may have included cases of what we called INSTRUCTION.

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expression, *please* can be used ironically to communicate something other than politeness. Aijmer (2015), for example, finds ample use of impolite and mock-polite *please* in the COLT corpus of London teenage speech, where it is used for rapport-building and to distinguish teen communicative styles from adult styles. The world-wide web, however, offers a context of less-direct interaction, where writers interact with people they don't know in person (and perhaps cannot identify). The paralinguistic and contextual cues are more limited, and the writers may have anonymity. Thus insincere uses of *please* in GloWbE are often used to denigrate others rather than to build rapport, although playful insincerity is also found. These uses can be considered mock-polite: 'the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere' (Culpeper 1996: 356) 'leading to an implicature of impoliteness' (Taylor 2016: 3). Fedriani (2019) reports very similar use of *per favore* in an Italian web corpus – though with much higher rates of dismissive and impolite usage than found for English *please* here.

The argumentative PROD usage was the third-largest category overall in both samples but occurred one-third more in the US sample. The other mock-polite use of *please* is DISMISSAL, in which *please* expresses 'incredulity or exasperation' (*OED*).[15] This act-type is formally distinguishable from other uses of *please*, in that it accompanies or reacts to non-imperative utterances and is often prefaced by *oh* (and in AmE, following African American English, also *child* cf. (9) above).[16] This act-type is therefore the least ambiguous. Examples of it were found in both samples and were assessed as most 'definitely not polite' by survey respondents of both countries (see section 4.3). For this act-type, the US sample has more than double the instances of the GB (table 3). Studying the characteristics of blog writing, Myers (2010) found that adverbs, especially in sentence-initial position, 'can signal a contrastive relation to previous comments' (p. 270), that conversational particles 'can be used to enact disagreement' (p. 271) and that ironic quotation was often used to undermine opposing positions (p. 273). DISMISSAL *please*, as a conversational particle derived from an adverb that often precedes ironic quotation, is thus a 'triple threat' in marking online disagreement.

These numbers indicate that Americans are more likely than Britons to encounter *please* in argumentative contexts, at least on the web.[17] The greater rate of mock *please* usage in the US sample seems in line with *please* marking greater face-threats in AmE than in BrE. As discussed in section 2.2, American sincere 'polite' use of *please* seems more at home with greater power differentials, formality (writing rather than speech),

[15] The earliest *OED* citations for this sense are British in origin, starting in 1908. It cross-references to an alternative spelling, *puh-leeze*, as 'chiefly' American (first citation 1931). Murphy & Cahill (in prep.) find a range of such alternative spellings that are highly associated with DISMISSAL *please*, some British and some American, but with greater numbers again in US GloWbE.

[16] Similarly, Fedriani (2019) reports that dismissal *please* in Italian is often marked with a discourse marker, in this case *ma* 'but'.

[17] Islentyeva *et al.* (2023) find just nine ironic uses in their sample of 100 spoken BrE *please* contexts. The two examples they discuss would have been counted as FACETIOUS and DISMISSAL in the present study.

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or greater imposition. Using *please* to 'prod' or 'dismiss' an interlocutor involves assuming an authoritative stance in performing a highly face-threatening act. Mock usage of *please*, then, seems to echo sincere AmE polite usage in implying a power differential.

6.3 *Summary and conclusions*

While *please* occurs most in high-risk-potential contexts in both datasets, the gap between high and low is greater in the US sample: about 58 percent high in GB and 70 percent in US. Although Murphy & De Felice's study (2019) categorizes *please* uses differently, the finding is the same: using *please* in low-risk contexts is more characteristically British than American.

In contrast, previous studies of American requests, particularly those that have considered power relations or request compliance, have found that *please* may be more apt in AmE where the interaction is riskier. American *please* seems less bleached of its ability to address face wants, and therefore the US corpus has greater proportions of *please* in those categories where the writer intends to affect face: in the mitigation of true face threats in REQUESTS and ADVICE and in attacks on face in PRODS and DISMISSALS.

Despite the observed differences, the potential for transatlantic miscommunication involving *please* is slight; the differences lie in the relative proportions rather than the types of acts involving *please.* British and American survey participants agreed on which *please* contexts were polite or not-polite (section 4.3) and dominant uses of *please* (REQUEST, INSTRUCTION, PROD) were the same.

Still, it is not uncommon to find complaints (or simply puzzled observations) from non-Americans that 'Americans don't say *please*' – which is to say, Americans don't say *please* in contexts where it is conventional in other varieties of English.[18] Meanwhile, American observations that '*please* no longer feels like a polite word' seem to be on the rise. For instance, American cultural critic Walker Mimms (2023) wonders 'How please stopped being polite': 'The word can brilliantly convey anger, irony, passive aggression, condescension, formality, or desperation – all without a hint of true politeness.' (See also Trawick-Smith 2012.) The observations of *please* in this study of GloWbE confirm that there is something in those lay (first-order politeness) beliefs about *please* and politeness.

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[18] See, for example, Reddit forums like: www.reddit.com/r/NoStupidQuestions/comments/7qenlk/why_dont_americans_say_please_and_thank_you/. See Murphy & De Felice (2019) for related examples and discussion.

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