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ARTICLE

"Ne les rudoyez pas". Rules and formulae for master-servant directives in nineteenth-century French conduct and etiquette manuals

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Abstract

This study proposes a new qualitative method in historical pragmatics to extract politeness formulae for master-servant directives from nineteenth-century French advice literature. Whereas traditional politeness models study strategic face-saving, this study investigates non-strategic, routinized or conventionalized politeness by mapping explicit linguistic instructions in historical prescriptive metasources. Because etiquette and conduct books targeted middle-class households – typically defined as having at least one live-in servant – they routinely discussed interactions with servants. The self-built corpus comprises 43 sources: etiquette and conduct manuals, alongside servant manuals. Through close reading I manually extract politeness formulae, which are compiled into a formulary. Historians underline servants' harsh conditions and social erasure, typically mirrored by bare imperatives. Advice on a kind prosody is widespread, but politeness formulae (e.g. *voulez-vous? – je vous prie*) only emerge in the 1870s, when the crisis of domestic service begins. This shift suggests that domestic service was increasingly viewed in transactional rather than purely hierarchical terms. Despite these changes, master-servant, servant-master and peer directives remain rigidly compartmentalized. The article addresses a notable gap in French historical im/politeness studies by showing how politeness formulae in prescriptive discourse reveal the persistence of caste-like social structures in nineteenth-century French domestic service.

Résumé

Cette étude propose une méthode qualitative de pragmatique historique pour extraire des formules de politesse associées aux actes directifs maître–serviteur dans la littérature de civilité française du XIX^{e} siècle. À rebours des modèles centrés sur la sauvegarde stratégique de la face, elle examine une politesse non stratégique, routinisée, en relevant des instructions explicites dans des métasources prescriptives. Destinés aux foyers de classe moyenne – pourvus d'au moins un domestique – les manuels de civilité et de savoir-vivre traitent souvent les rapports aux domestiques. Le corpus réunit 43 titres (civilités, savoir-vivre,

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guides de domesticité). Après lecture, les formules sont extraites manuellement et rassemblées dans un répertoire. Les historiens rappellent la dureté des conditions et l'effacement des domestiques, reflétés par des impératifs non atténués. Les conseils de ton bienveillant abondent, mais les formules de politesse (p. ex. *voulez-vous ?, je vous prie*) n'apparaissent qu'à partir des années 1870, au début de la "crise des domestiques". Ce déplacement suggère une conception plus transactionnelle du service. Malgré ces évolutions, les actes directifs maître–serviteur, serviteur–maître et entre pairs demeurent nettement cloisonnés. L'article comble une lacune en montrant que les formules prescriptives révèlent la persistance de logiques de caste dans le service domestique au XIX^{e} siècle.

Keywords: politeness; kindness; discernment; commands; requests; formula; formulary; etiquette; conduct; servants; domestics; masters; French; nineteenth century

1. Introduction

In nineteenth-century France, over one million individuals lived as domestic servants, largely unseen yet omnipresent within bourgeois homes. Imagine thirteen-year-old Marie, a maid-of-all-work in Paris in 1880. Rising before dawn in her freezing *mansarde*, she navigates silently through dark corridors, preparing the household for the day. Her life, dominated by gruelling, endless tasks, is guided by strictly enforced rules, including those meticulously regulating how masters and servants communicate – a reflection of profound social divisions. Despite comprising approximately 3% of the population, this workforce is under-researched, with only four monographs studying the nineteenth century, two of which are from the 1970s, and little linguistic study. This significant scholarly gap leaves crucial questions unanswered about everyday communication practices that upheld rigid class structures.

This article examines an underexplored aspect of historical politeness: politeness *formulae* in master-servant interactions in nineteenth-century France. It hypothesizes that politeness formulae, or *conventionalized linguistic expressions*, grew more common in the last quarter of the nineteenth century due to a crisis in domestic service. As servants increasingly assert autonomy and demand better conditions and pay, contemporary advice literature instructed employers to adopt polite language, not merely to protect servants' dignity but also to secure their services in a competitive labour market. This study traces conventionalized formulae reflecting changing attitudes toward class hierarchy and authority.

The study works with prescriptive literature focusing on servant management. The primary research question investigates the advice to replace or pair traditional imperatives for issuing orders with politeness formulae. Unlike typical quantitative studies on politeness formula, this study adopts a qualitative approach to extract and analyse these expressions, which offer unique linguistic data within a prescriptive metadiscourse on politeness.

The article follows this structure. First, I review the theoretical background, covering three waves of politeness theory: Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) linguistic strategies; discursive perspectives emphasizing negotiation and evaluation; the recent integrative model recognizing politeness as both scripted and context-sensitive. Terkourafi's (e.g. 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b) frame-based approach

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introduced the concept of *conventionalization*, the process whereby a linguistic structure acquires politeness as its default meaning due to frequent use in specific contexts. Next, I justify using prescriptive sources. These texts uniquely reflect the *conventionalization* of politeness formulae: while prescribing behaviours derived from exemplary practices, they simultaneously shape future interactions.

Following this, I present the corpus and methodology, detailing etiquette and conduct books and servant manuals. I discuss their editorial success, historical scope, and present my approach of extracting politeness formulae. The historical context of domestic service in France is then examined, emphasizing the harsh realities servants faced daily and the socio-economic conditions behind the crisis of domestic service. This discussion of broader societal dynamics contextualizes the linguistic analysis that follows.

At the core of this study, I map the prescribed politeness formula. The analysis of the resulting *formulary* identifies a consistency in linguistic patterns, particularly the presence of formulae such as *voulez-vous?*, *voudriez-vous?* and *je vous prie,* in the final decades of the century. Findings show these scripts responded to shifting servant-employer dynamics, reflecting greater recognition of servants' 'face' and autonomy. I repeat the analysis for servant-master and master-master interactions, resulting in three distinct sets of directives.

This study advances historical pragmatics, showing how linguistic practices relate to broader transformations in social structure, labour relations, and class tensions in nineteenth-century France.

2. Theory

2.1 The three waves of politeness theory

Politeness research has developed through three waves. The first treated politeness as a set of face-saving linguistic strategies. The second emphasized how participants perceive and discuss politeness, focusing on metapragmatic commentary and folk conceptions. The current wave integrates both views, balancing conventional meanings with context-dependent interpretations.

The first wave of politeness theory, developed in Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) and Leech (1983), built on Grice's maxims (1975) to conceptualize politeness as a universal strategy for mitigating face-threatening acts. Linguistic forms such as honorifics, indirect speech or diminutives were seen as inherently polite, which were strategically used to preserve social harmony. However, the model was criticized for overemphasizing universality and minimizing cultural and contextual variation. In response, the second wave – influenced by Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003) – adopted a discursive perspective, arguing that politeness is not intrinsic to language but negotiated in interaction based on hearer evaluation, social norms and interpersonal relationships. This wave emphasized metapragmatic discourse, including folk descriptions and explicit (im)politeness commentary (e.g., 'Hey! That was not very polite!'). Second-wave research highlighted the variability and subjectivity of politeness, framing it as socially constructed and emergent in interaction. However, its emphasis on situated and dynamic interpretations made it difficult to identify stable linguistic patterns across communicative contexts.

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Currently, third-wave approaches seek to reconcile the earlier perspectives by emphasising that politeness encompasses both relatively stable, default interpretations and emergent, co-constructed meanings. As Haugh and Culpeper (2018) argue, a comprehensive theory of politeness must account for this dual nature – recurrent and recognizable, but also situated and interactionally negotiated. The third wave revived interest in typical linguistic patterns of language use – on the three waves see Culpeper and Hardaker (2017). Both Coulmas' (1979) notion of conversational routines as prepatterned speech and Watts' (2003) category of 'politic language' – language use conforming to social expectations – closely align with Terkourafi's frame-based model (e.g. 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). Terkourafi argues that politeness derives from repeated linguistic patterns, linking it to predictability within established social contexts, called frames.

The frame-based approach theorizes conventionalization as a three-way relationship between an expression, a context and a speaker. An expression becomes "conventionalised for some use relative to a context for a speaker if it is used frequently enough in that context to achieve a particular illocutionary goal to that speaker's experience" (Terkourafi and Kádár, 2017: 182). The regular co-occurrence of a polite expression with a particular frame in the speaker's direct experience makes politeness its default or "unchallenged" meaning (Terkourafi, 2005a: 248, 2005b). Given regularity, speakers develop pre-existing knowledge of which expressions to use in specific contexts (Terkourafi, 2002: 197). Another term for a conventionalized linguistic expression is a politeness formula (Culpeper, 2011: 120, 126-132). Conventionalization, Culpeper explains, is a historical process where expressions, through repeated use, gradually acquire stable associations with (im)politeness contexts (2011: 127). Over time, their use becomes non-strategic or automatic (Terkourafi, 2024: 114).

How can scholars access the conventionalization of language usage? Quantitative, corpus-based studies help map recurrent usages through frequency counts and statistics (e.g., Culpeper and Demmen, 2011; Jucker, 2020; Jucker and Landert, 2023 for historical corpora). Here, I propose a qualitative method, constructing an inventory of politeness formula metapragmatically mentioned (Jucker, 2020: 20) in prescriptive metadiscourse using conduct and etiquette books (the two subgenres are compared in Section 3.1). My method builds on the insight that conventionalization happens not only through direct experience, but also through mediated channels (Culpeper 2011: 131). Metadiscourse, even when not overtly prescriptive, "may enter public consciousness" and create "structured understandings" of language use, not only about what "it is usually like", but also on what it "*ought* to be like" (Jaworski, Coupland and Galasiński, 2004: 3, original emphasis; Culpeper, 2011: 131-132). For instance, the imperative *Portez ceci à monsieur le comte* ('bring this to his Lordship') is presented as normal in such sources for commands from a mistress to a servant.[1] Prescriptive rules of the format 'do not say X; instead, say Y' blur the distinction between the use and the mention of politeness (Jucker, 2020: 20): X and Y are linguistic usages, which are metapragmatically mentioned. These formulaic data are unique because they are both a usage and a mention, almost always embedded in a rule. Rules, as Culpeper (2011: 103-

[1]I acknowledge that advice literature reflects conventionalized norms of interaction and thus is not likely to capture more creative or locally contingent expressions of politeness. The prescriptive nature of the genre inherently prioritizes widely accepted, normative politeness formulae over situated or emergent practices.

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134) explains, are a type of metapragmatic comment – imperative statements or authoritative prescriptions about what should (or should not) happen in a given context, shaped by social norms and conventions. Conduct and etiquette books, indeed, chain together such rules, some regulating verbal behaviour and some containing linguistic formulae.

Given the theoretical relevance of politeness formula for the third-wave model, can we further justify their extracting from conduct and etiquette books? To what extent do these texts reflect real-life usage?

2.2 The theoretical relevance of prescriptive sources

Books on good manners are not purely first-order or folk discourses merely conveying the subjective viewpoint of an author. Examining Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo*, a highly influential Renaissance conduct book from 1558, Culpeper (2017) argues that, while it contains first-order evaluations of politeness – being prescriptive, subjective, moralizing, and elite-biased – it also reflects second-order discourse, the external, objective perspective of the politeness researcher. Authors of such books are not just participants in the practices they rationalize, but also perspicacious observers and interpreters of social norms (Culpeper, 2017: 198). As Culpeper (2017) and Alfonzetti (2023) note, viewing conduct books solely as a participant discourse is reductive. Terkourafi (2011) goes further, asserting that first-order and second-order politeness accounts cannot be kept apart as descriptive and prescriptive norms, linked as they are by a cyclical process:

> Prescriptive norms […] never materialize out of thin air; the process is never an entirely top-down or bottom-up one. Rather, prescriptive norms historically follow and reflect descriptive ones, while at the same time constraining future practices and so feeding back into the descriptive norms that gave rise to them in the first place. (ibid: 176).

Prescriptive norms historically follow and reflect descriptive ones while simultaneously constraining future practices. I align with Terkourafi's view that conduct and etiquette writers reproduce exemplary usage, which they prescribe authoritatively. Their higher social standing legitimizes and helps perpetuate existing usage, a view shared by Taavitsainen and Jucker (2020: 7), who note that conduct writers "employ what they take to be exemplary behaviour of some people as a model for others to follow, and to the extent that people follow this advice, the prescriptive rules become the basis of description of what people actually do" (see also Paternoster, 2022: 16-17).

In sum, I take conduct and etiquette books to both reflect and shape politeness norms. Their value, which is at the same time descriptive and prescriptive, lies in bridging folk and academic understandings of social interaction (see Sifianou, 2024 on epistemic benefits of studying this middle ground).

2.3 Asymmetrical interactions in historical pragmatics

Section 2.1 distinguished between strategic, face-saving politeness (volition) and non-strategic, scripted politeness (*discernment*). Volition, associated with Western

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practices, involves strategic choices based on face imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987 [1978]; Leech, 1983). In contrast, Asian languages tend to rely on pre-negotiated use of honorifics as determined by the social context (Hill et al., 1986; Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989 on Japanese *wakimae* or 'discernment'). Recent scholarship (Kádár and Mills, 2013; Claudel, 2021) challenge this strict dichotomy, viewing it instead as a continuum, given that some Western formal contexts also require discernment politeness and vice versa. Discernment has also been applied to historical (im)politeness. In their founding volume, Culpeper and Kádár (2010) linked historical European deference devices to discernment. However, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011) upheld Brown and Levinson's universalistic claims for the French classical age, although she acknowledged the ceremoniousness of its "over-elaborate formulae", marked by a rigid etiquette "that should be adopted towards one's superiors and subordinates" (ibid: 139-140). Looking further back, Denoyelle (2013a: 154) highlights the link between French medieval hierarchy and directive types, emphasizing the important role of social position – other studies on French historical directives are Kremos, 1955; Frank, 2011; Denoyelle, 2013b; Gerstenberg and Skupien-Dekens, 2021. Likewise, Held (2010) described medieval French and Italian petition-writing as a deferent discernment, reinforcing conformity to social order over individual facework.

The role of social rank in historical politeness is highlighted by Ridealgh and Jucker (2019) for sources from strict hierarchical cultures. They define discernment as quasi-mandatory linguistic behaviour that is appropriate to the context and reflects the speaker-addressee relationship. Similarly, Ridealgh and Unceta Gómez (2020) affirm that in rigid social structures, superior-to-inferior communication – orders, insults, threats – is expected rather than impolite. Their study highlights the structured power dynamic of discernment, where deference is expected from inferiors, while superiors exercise *Potestas*, illustrated e.g. for master-servant interaction in Roman comedy. Both studies present discernment as scripted, rank-and-context-based behaviour rather than face-driven.[2] Simply put, the difference between volition and discernment is the following: volition reduces an imposition (a Face Threatening Act); discernment is dictated by social position and contextual appropriateness. While modern Japanese and historical discernment share a non-strategic and automatic nature, the latter is more mandatory due to stricter hierarchies. The difference, I surmise, is a question of degree, reinforcing the idea that volition and discernment exist on a continuum.

A highly relevant study is Biscetti (2015), who examines the master-servant dynamic in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English conduct books, exploring power asymmetries and tensions. While concentrating on threats and reproaches, which presuppose "wide power gaps", she acknowledges that "commands are the most prototypical speech acts characterising a master's role" (ibid: 288). This research aligns with mine: in the first half of the eighteenth century, Biscetti reports a shift towards greater empathy for servants, driven by an increasingly free labour market and evolving politeness norms. This new politeness aimed to preserve both master and servant face, moving away from strict hierarchical submission. At the

[2]Paternoster (2024) is a terminological study on various (sometimes conflicting) meanings of discernment in politeness theory and cultural history.

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dinner table in front of guests, e.g., imperious commands towards servants are to be replaced with this formula: "Sir, pray let me have a Glass of Beer or Wine, &c." (ibid: 296). According to Biscetti (ibid: 302), citing Leech (1983), indirectness is seen as "milder" because it gives the hearer more options for non-compliance. Below, I explore to what extent the use of politeness formulae affords the servant genuine optionality.

This article focuses on the nineteenth century, a period of transition marked by the rise of the middle classes at the expense of the aristocratic élite, although scholars have noted linguistic change is slow. Culpeper and Demmen (2011: 53) provide a key framework for studying nineteenth-century politeness, linking the perception of the individual self and privacy as positive values in Victorian Britain to increased geographical and social mobility, industrialization, rapid urbanization and population growth, alongside romanticism and liberalism. Their study traces the emergence of ability-oriented conventional indirect requests with *can you* and *could you*. Now the most common formulae to make a request in English, it is absent before 1760 (ibid: 51). While non-imposition formulae developed in the nineteenth century in line with the new ideology of individualism, their rise was modest, a finding confirmed by Jucker for data in American English (2020: 160-183).

3. Sources and Method

3.1 Sources

As mentioned, this study uses conduct and etiquette books, two subgenres of advice literature, usually called *civilités* and *manuels de savoir-vivre* in French tradition (Fisher, 1992; Rouvillois, 2020 [2006]). Conduct books teach basic manners for daily life – church, school, work, visits, dining, conversation – targeting mostly young readers from the lower middle class. To enable this readership to distinguish itself from the working class, they offer an inclusivist discourse on self-improvement through a moralizing, mainly Catholic lens. French etiquette books, in contrast, detail the complex social conventions of the elite, shedding the overt moralizing tone of conduct books. Their intended reader is an adult member of the upper-middle class, who has benefitted financially from industrialization and seeks to acquire the codes of fashionable behaviour to access high society.[3]

Conduct books emerged in early modern Europe. A defining work was Erasmus' *De civilitate morum puerilium*, from 1530, written for the French prince Henry of Burgundy. Conceived as a language teaching manual, it guided children on manners for church, school and family life, emphasizing bodily control and deference to superiors. French Catholic conduct books reinforced this moral and religious framework, notably seventeenth-century Saint François de Sales' *Introduction à la vie dévote,* and early-eighteenth-century Saint Jean-Baptiste de La Salle's *Les Règles de la bienséance*, both enduring bestsellers, with La Salle's work reissued as late as 1875 (Fisher, 1992: 186). For the eighteenth century, Bérenguier (2016) highlights conduct books for girls, with a focus on modesty, limited self-education, marriage

[3]On historical etiquette in nineteenth-century France and other Western cultures, see Paternoster, 2022. Paternoster (2023a: 162-163) compares conduct and etiquette books, regarding author and reader gender, social target (lower vs. upper middle class), and class ideology (inclusivism vs. exclusivism).

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and motherhood. During the nineteenth century, *civilités* only evolved slowly, blending Catholic and Rousseauist influences (Fisher, 1992). With the Third Republic's introduction of compulsory primary schooling, conduct books became school texts. Ironically, "most of the books recommended are Catholic", as the schoolbook publishing industry remained dominated by Catholic publishers" (ibid: 200; see Paternoster, 2022: 38-44 for an overview). Conduct authors were mainly men: teachers, headmasters, or catholic priests.

Over 350 books on good manners, split evenly between conduct and etiquette books, circulated in France in the latter half of the century alone, a true "explosion" (Fisher, 1992: 45). Etiquette books are a nineteenth-century innovation, with the first French example published in Paris in 1808. Etiquette books appear sporadically until the 1850s, after which the genre rose exponentially (ibid: 54). Compared to the shorter, affordable conduct books, etiquette books sometimes exceeded 600 pages. Etiquette manuals were typically authored and read by women. Many aristocratic names and pennames signalled a readership from the "established or upper bourgeoisie, if not the aristocracy" (ibid: 80). Both genres were published across France, providing publishers with a steady income. Fisher also identifies a hybrid form blending moral instruction with practical etiquette, particularly in books for young girls. (ibid: 189). The successful guide by Clarisse Juranville (1879) is a typical example, as is Boitard (1851).

Conduct and etiquette books define politeness in fundamentally different ways. Paternoster and Saltamacchia (2017: 269-272) argue that nineteenth-century Italian conduct books frame politeness through the Gospel's Great Commandment "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-34), which underpins the golden rule: "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). French conduct books adopt a similar view, deriving specific rules from this overarching principle (Paternoster, 2022: 104-107). Etiquette books, by contrast, lack a unifying principle and rules need to be memorized for prompt recall. Paternoster (2022: 337-338) defines etiquette as a tendentially amoral system of conventions and rituals governing upper-class behaviour, varying with time and place. Highly compulsory, etiquette serves as a gatekeeping mechanism, protecting access to elite circles and reinforcing social hierarchy through complicated, detailed scripts, which are structured around recurring social events (e.g., visits, dinners, balls, court presentations). Its rigid and intricate nature often induces unease in learners, mitigated by ease and tact.[4]

Nineteenth-century French conduct and etiquette books are both well represented in digital libraries. Most texts were sourced from Gallica.fr, the digital library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.[5] The current study uses 24 etiquette books (1808-1910), a self-built corpus of public-domain texts used in Paternoster (2022: 75-76), with the addition of Baroness Staffe (1891^{25} [1889]), a highly successful publication.[6] The etiquette corpus contains only four sources for

[4]The distinction between etiquette and conduct was adopted in Jucker and Landert (2023) and Jucker (2024a) respectively to separate surface behaviour from underlying morality.

[5]https://gallica.bnf.fr/ (accessed 6.10.2025).

[6]Its importance is such that it enjoyed a present-day edition (Staffe, 2007), with a preface by F. Rouvillois. N.B. in in-text citations, a superscript numeral after the year (e.g., 1880^{3}) marks the edition number; a question mark (e.g., 1880?) signals that the year of publication is uncertain.

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the decades spanning 1800-1870, when this new subgenre was slowly emerging, while 20 sources cover the decades in which it peaked. This is an important imbalance limiting diacronic analysis.

An additional nine conduct books were analysed to assess variation in identified formulae. The results confirmed consistency, though further expanding this corpus may yield additional formulae. Conduct sources span 1806-1904, but the selection is, as for etiquette books, top heavy, with six published after 1870. The same limitation applies. However, the disparity follows the editorial fortunes of the two subgenres, quickly accelerating after 1870.

Complementing the 33 comprehensive guides are ten specialized manuals on domestic service. The distinction between conduct and etiquette applies here as well. Two authors address mistresses on servant management: Dufaux de La Jonchère (1884), who frequently quotes her earlier etiquette book (1878–1884?), and M. G. Belèze (1860), on household management. Two other sources address both servants and mistresses: what the servant needs to know coincides with what the mistress needs to know for the purpose of training: anonymous *Les bons domestiques; Manuel des jeunes ménagères* (n.d.) and Mme Celnart (1836), who also authored an earlier etiquette book (1834[6] [1832]). Anonymous *Le guide du domestique* (1849) and Milon (1873[2]) provide detailed, technical instructions for male and female servants. All of these are etiquette sources contrasting with four conduct guides for the pious servant from the first part of the century.[7] This selection achieves a more even distribution across the century.

3.2 Method

Using corpus linguistics to identify linguistic forms associated with a given speech act is a challenging task, given that speech acts are inherently defined by their communicative function, not by fixed linguistic expressions. Jucker (2024b: 18-25) provides an overview of the two main methods used to search large corpora, both historical or contemporary: searches using typical linguistic patterns or routinized expressions ('sorry', 'please', 'hi') on one hand; searches based on meta-illocutionary expressions mentioning the speech act ('apologise', 'thank', …) on the other. With the former, a list of search items can be obtained, e.g., by manual pilot sampling (or seed sampling) in a small corpus (Landert, 2019). However, identifying genuinely creative or emergent uses in such large datasets requires a different approach: one could search meta-illocutionary expressions in the hope that the actual speech act manifests itself in the immediate vicinity (Jucker 2024b: 24-25). Another method is to apply a fine-grained manual annotation of specific speech acts within a small corpus (ibid.: 17-19). For historical pragmatics, interactive sources are mainly literary, and findings may reflect literary style rather than ordinary language use.

This article proposes a different, qualitative approach to access routine expressions associated with polite orders: the development of a formulary for master-servant interaction based on advice literature. The method builds on Paternoster and Saltamacchia (2017), who inventoried numerous formulae for apologies, disagreement, requests, besides impoliteness formulae, found in

[7]Anon, 1828; Collet, 1838; Busson, 1842; Ozanam, 1865 [1847].

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nineteenth-century Italian conduct books. While not ubiquitous, these formulae appear regularly. Mapping them for different speech acts found in advice literature, both diachronically and contrastively, is a future research goal. This study serves as a pilot, testing a single context, language and century. I introduce the term 'formulary' for the inventory of extracted formulae. The term is not novel. Medieval epistolary handbooks routinely assembled formularies – lists of greetings and closings for different correspondents and situations – that function as inventories of pragmatic routines (Lanham, 2004 [1975]). Classicists use the label in a similar way: *Greek and Egyptian Magical Formularies* (Faraone and Torallas Tovar, 2022) is an edition and translation of papyri consisting solely of incantation formulae. I repurpose the historiographical genre label 'formulary' for analytical use in (historical) pragmatics, to name a scholarly inventory of speech-act formulae extracted from prescriptive sources by a speech-act analyst.

The formulary aims to be exhaustive for master-servant interactions across these 43 sources. It is based on close reading and manual collection of formulae, which are primarily found in chapters on servant management. For the specialisted manuals I read sections on master-servant interactions. To increase recall, searches were performed within the searchable PDFs using meta-illocutionary terms commonly found in the prescriptive rules to refer to the speech act 'order' – such as *commander*, *ordonner* ('to command'), *commandement*, *ordre* ('order'), as well as *demander*, *exiger* ('to demand'), and *demande* ('demand').[8] I also searched by synonymes of *domestique* 'domestic': *serviteur, servante, bonne, valet, femme de chambre* in conduct and etiquette books. These manual searches were conducted in the hope of finding formulae in the vicinity. For the specialized manuals, the searches by synonymes of *domestique* gave too many false positives – in other words, the search was lacking precision. Similarly, a search with *maître* 'master' and *maîtresse* 'mistress' yielded low precision because it gave an excessive number of false positives for the three text genres. These supplementary searches identified a small number of additional formulae located in miscellaneous sections and in chapters on correspondence. Formulae selection followed a straightforward approach: all available expressions were included for three minimal frames: master-servant commands, servant-master requests, and master peer requests. The formulary is available for further verification in large-scale historical corpora like Frantext.

4. Servants in Nineteenth-Century France: From Self-Effacement to Face?

The study of nineteenth-century French domestic service was pioneered by Guiral and Thuillier (1978) and Martin-Fugier (1979), who highlighted the harsh realities of domestic labour and employer-servant dynamics, though relying heavily on

[8]Manual searches are inevitably time-consuming. Although the sources were uploaded to Sketch Engine (https://www.sketchengine.eu/, accessed 6.10.2025), I found that searching within the PDFs themselves was ultimately more efficient. The PDF allows for immediate access to a much broader context, whereas the concordance context panel in Sketch Engine is limited in size. This experience highlights a trade-off between the specialized search capabilities of corpus tools and the practical advantages of direct document navigation.

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anecdotal and literary sources.[9] More recent work by Piette (2000) and Beal (2019, 2022) incorporates archival records and quantitative analysis.

The scholarship agrees on the harsh conditions endured by domestic servants. Bourgeois households depended on them to escape material drudgery yet were uneasy about their intimate presence, leading to tight control over their lives: Beal (2019: 99-130) describes this as *quadrillage*, a grid-like, capillary regime of surveillance: emotional (forced smiles), bodily, and moral. Live-in servants worked from dawn to late at night, often beyond, with every hour accounted for. In Paris, strict spatial separation confined servants to tiny, unheated attic rooms (*mansardes*) on the sixth floor – cramped, poorly ventilated, with no running water or privacy. Those in less wealthy households often slept in broom closets. The scarcity of resources in many families led to tensions over food. Hygiene was a constant struggle as servants were denied bathroom access. Their bodies were also controlled: women wore uniforms with caps to cover their hair; men had to shave (Martin-Fugier, 1979: 27-32). Servants were expected to be nearly invisible, even losing their first names to generic replacements like Marthe or Marie (ibid: 55). Without workplace rights, dismissal was often instantaneous and devastating, pushing many young women into destitution or prostitution. Fear of losing employment forced many to endure harsh discipline, humiliation, and even corporal punishment (Beal, 2022). The sick were rarely cared for and usually dismissed outright. In sum, servants were defined by total self-effacement, being effectively treated as mere machines (see also Section 5.1), a view implicitly reinforced by the rules that take the imperative mode as self-evident. Given the immense workload, the lack of privacy, and the need for absolute obedience, Guiral and Thuillier (1978: 13) claim that from the perspective of domestic service, the social hierarchy in France was, "in some ways, similar to a caste-based society".[10]

This began to change with the so-called crisis of domestic service or *crise de la domesticité*, when rapid servant turnover became a central concern for employers. For Beal (2019: 112) a climate of increasing tension began to emerge from the 1870s, caused by a republican discourse advocating democratisation with the events of 1870-1871. In the 1880s, it was a constant topic in social discourse. By 1900, employers perceived the industry to be in crisis; even in 1910, complaints about recruitment and retention persisted (Martin-Fugier, 1979: 33-38; Piette, 2000: 329). Piette (2000: 328-367) analyses servant shortage for a Belgian context, with strong parallels to France. Traditionally, young rural women filled these roles, but by the 1880s migration from the countryside was slowing as rural working conditions improved – an effect compounded by a surge in demand (also discussed by Martin-Fugier, 1979: 36). This surge was fuelled by the growing aspirations of the petty bourgeoisie (artisans, shopkeepers, office clerks…), eager to mimic wealthier households, making a servant a status symbol rather than a necessity. Many stretched their finances to hire at least one maid-of-all-work, who was then overworked and underpaid, prompting frequent resignations. Aware of their leverage, domestics began negotiating higher wages. Many also left for factories or

[9]The next decade saw a flurry of monographs on the eighteenth century: Gutton, 1981; Fairchilds, 1984; Maza, 1984; Petitfrère, 1986.

[10]All translations are mine.

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shops, which offered defined hours, legal protections, better pay and greater independence.

The crisis changed workforce dynamics. Servants were increasingly unwilling to accept substandard conditions. Beal (2019: 131-150) describes this shift as *Eigen-Sinn*, a growing sense of self (after Lüdtke, 1993), akin to workers' search for autonomy and individuality on the factory floor through forms of resistance and obstinacy (see also Beal, 2021 on servant grumpiness as a challenge to dependence). Through *Eigen-Sinn*, servants developed a positive sense of self, which may be interpreted as the acquisition of an individual 'face', in the broad meaning of the socio-cultural constraint by which people want to be treated in accordance with the way they see themselves as a person (Held, 2025).

Frustrated with the present, employers romanticized the past, longing for the ideal servant – faithful, obedient, and devoted (Piette, 2000: 262-264). While Catholic writings had long promoted this ideal, the clergy now framed it as a solution to the crisis, urging domestics to see their work as a moral duty requiring humility and sacrifice benefitting superiors whose status was divinely ordained (Martin-Fugier, 1979: 139-144). This model-servant ideal extended beyond religious discourse, permeating advice literature, which historians often quote as evidence of a shifting interpersonal dynamic. Employers were encouraged to play a moral and educational role toward their servants. A form of maternalistic authority emerged, where mistresses were urged to treat domestics with kindness (*bienveillance*), Christian charity and fraternal love: "The duty of politeness towards inferiors is now among the obligations of the mistress of the house." (Piette, 2000: 375). Piette posits a causal link between the crisis of domestic service and this new emphasis on politeness as a solution. The perfect mistress – polite and patient – would keep good servants: "The mistress of the house has only herself to blame if she is not well served" (ibid: 376).

The analysis demonstrates that sources with politeness formulae overlap with the years of the so-called crisis.

5. Rules and Formulae

An important premise in this analysis is that, while gender often shapes patterns of discourse, no noticeable gender-based differences were observed. The rules consulted make no explicit distinction between male and female speakers or recipients, suggesting a shared normative framework. Accordingly, when I use the term 'master', it should be with 'mistress' subsumed under it. Similarly, 'servant' is used inclusively to refer to both male and female domestics.[11]

5.1 Generic rules for master-servant interaction

Servant management for masters followed two distinct principles: one based on moral justification, the other on an instrumental approach.

[11]For orders, only once did I notice gender differences, and only regarding closing formulae in notes: "'*Croyez à mes bons sentiments pour vous.' Cette dernière phrase de maître masculin à serviteur mâle ou de maîtresse à domestique du sexe féminin.*" ('"Believe in my good feelings towards you." This closing phrase is used by a male master writing to a male servant or by a mistress to a female domestic', Staffe 1891[25] [1889]: 234).

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Throughout the century, conduct sources – rooted in Catholic ideology – consistently invoked the Golden Rule for all social interactions, including those between masters and servants. L'Abbé Busson (1842: 128), an abbot, underscores this in his chapter *Devoirs envers les maîtres*, urging servants to be loyal in accordance with "*le précepte de la charité du prochain*" ('the precept of charity towards one's neighbour'). Later works continue to emphasize fraternity and shared humanity between masters and servants. Catholic priest Champeau (1877[4]/1864: 142) instructs masters to treat their servants as "*vos frères en Jésus-Christ*" ('your brethren in Jesus Christ'). Raymond (1873[8]: 79-80), a secular author, similarly invokes the Golden Rule, condemning mistresses who "*ne se font pas faute de tourmenter, souvent même d'humilier*" ('do not hesitate to torment, often even to humiliate') those in their service: servants are not "*une machine à servir*" ('a serving machine') but "*une créature*" ('a creature of God'). Juranville (1879: 78) reinforces this, describing servants as "*nos frères, pétris du même limon que nous*" ('our brethren, fashioned from the same clay as ourselves'). By the late nineteenth century, as the crisis of domestic service intensified, this discourse persisted. Salva (1898: 131) insists that all are equal before God.

Etiquette books, though less explicitly religious, echo similar sentiments. For Mme de Waddeville (1887[7]: 289) servants are our equals for both civil and religious law. Hence, while education, luck, or wealth create social distance, "*il est de notre devoir de ne point aggraver ce que cette condition a de pénible*" ('it is our duty not to aggravate the hardships inherent in this condition'). Clément (1879: 43) and La Marquise de Pompeillan (1898: 118) also frame inequality as circumstantial rather than essential.

Conduct books and etiquette books, thus, share a common premise: servants deserve respect because they too are human. While most sources frame this as a moral obligation, a minority take a transactional view, treating politeness as a tool for securing better service. This goal-oriented reasoning appears primarily in texts published after 1870, aligning with the domestic service crisis. Boissieux (1877:16) directly links the need for politeness formulae (Table 1) to the goal of good service:

> Si vous voulez être bien servi et toujours obéi, évitez toute familiarité avec ceux qui vous servent. Parlez-leur toujours poliment, et, en leur donnant vos ordres, soyez clairs et précis. ('If you want to be well served and always obeyed, avoid all familiarity with those who serve you. Always speak politely to them, and when giving your orders, be clear and precise.')

Dufaux de la Jonchère (1878–1884?[6]: 45) advises: "*Ne les rudoyez pas; l'ordre donné avec douceur est toujours mieux saisi et mieux exécuté.*" ('Do not be rough with them; an order given with kindness is always better understood and better executed.'). She reiterates this in her servant management manual (1884: 225), adding that politeness has a greater impact than one might assume. Staffe (1891[25] [1889]: 206) argues that respect elicits respect: "*Nous ne pouvons donc exiger leur respect que si nous les traitons avec bienveillance et considération.*" ('We can only demand their respect if we treat them with kindness and thoughtfulness.'). Similarly, Madame A. de La Fère (1889[7]: 132) – notably a male etiquette author using a female pseudonym – claims: "*Plus vous serez bienveillants envers vos subordonnés, mieux*

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Table 1. Politeness formulary for master commands to servants

Source	*Voulez-vous?* ('do you want to?') / *voudriez-vous?* ('would you want to?') / *veuillez* ('be willing to')	*S'il vous plaît* ('please / if you please')	*Je vous prie (de)* ('I pray you [to]') / *prière à … de* ('request to … to')	*Je vous serai obligé de* ('I will be obliged if you would')
Celnart, 1834[6] [1832]: 65	*voudriez-vous me montrer tel objet?* ('… show me this object')		*je vous prie de me montrer* ('… show me')	
Raymond, 1873[8]: 298	*voulez-vous / voudriez-vous m'apporter?* ('… bring me')			
Boissieux, 1877: 16, 23	*voulez-vous bien? / voudriez-vous ? / veuillez*	*s'il vous plaît*	*je vous prie*	
Salva, 1898: 132	*voulez-vous faire telle chose, je vous prie*[18] ('… do this thing…')		*voulez-vous faire telle chose, je vous prie* ('…do this thing…')	
Staffe, 1891[25] [1889]: 206, 234	*voulez-vous bien faire ceci?* ('… Would you be willing to do this') / *Veuillez faire ceci*	*apportez-moi cela, s'il vous plaît.* ('bring me this, …')	*Je vous prie de vouloir bien m'envoyer* ('…to be willing to send me')	*je vous serai obligé d'exécuter ce travail.* ('… carry out this job')
Vinet, 1891 : 276	*veuillez, je vous prie,*[19] */ veuillez préparer la voiture pour tel jour, telle heure* ('… have the carriage ready for this day, at this time')		*veuillez, je vous prie*	*je vous serai obligé de vouloir bien nettoyer mon fusil* ('…to be willing to clean my rifle')
Maryan et Béal, 1896 : 148	*voulez-vous?*	*s'il vous plaît*	*je vous prie*	
Mayaud, 1904 : 105		*s'il vous plaît*	*je vous prie*	
Chambon, 1907: 196			*je vous prie de faire ceci* ('…do this')	*je vous serai obligé de m'envoyer cela* ('…send me this')
G.-M., 1908: 234	*Veuillez, mon bon Joseph, préparer la voiture pour telle heure* ('…, my dear Joseph, to have the carriage ready for this time')		*Prière à Jacques de préparer la voiture pour telle heure.* ('… to Jacques to have the carriage ready for this time.')	
Magallon, 1910 : 55		*s'il vous plaît*		

vous serez servis par eux." ('The kinder you are to your subordinates, the better they will serve you.'). The idea is repeated by George Vinet (1891: 214): "*La politesse vis-à-vis d'eux est encore le meilleur moyen […] du moins de s'en faire respecter et servir*

[18]The formulae are not presented as two options. *Voulez-vous* is the main verb, which is accompanied by parenthetical *je vous prie*.

[19]As above, *je vous prie* is parenthetical, while *veuillez* is the main verb.

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selon son goût, […]." ('Politeness towards them is still the best way […] at least to be respected by them and served according to one's taste.'). Note that La Fère sees the use of kindness as an effective means to attach one's servants to the household since a good one is precious: "*Un bon domestique est chose précieuse; vous vous les attacherez par des égards.*" ('A good servant is a thing most precious; you will secure their loyalty through considerateness.') (La Fère, 1889[7]: 132; quoted *verbatim* in Vinet, 1891: 215).

This transactional approach reflects the shift in power dynamics discussed above. As servant turnover increased, politeness was no longer exclusively seen as a moral duty, but also as a means to secure loyalty.

5.2 Language rules for master-servant interaction

Many sources go beyond generic calls for politeness, outlining specific language rules. Although specific formulae are often lacking, prosody plays a key role in these rules. Some manuals formulate the rules negatively. Mme Celnart (1834[6] [1832]: 28) warns against issuing commands "*avec hauteur et dureté*" ('with haughtiness and harshness', similar in Dash, 1868[2]: 48). Burani (1879: 27) also advises that orders should not be given "*d'une voix brusque ni d'une façon emportée*" ('in a brusque or impulsive manner'). Other sources combine proscription with prescription. Orval (1901[6]: 306) instructs that orders should be given "*d'un ton bienveillant, sans hauteur ni morgue ridicules, mais avec précision*" ('in a benevolent tone, without haughtiness or ridiculous arrogance, but with precision'). The advice for a kind prosody is common in later sources; however, some sources abundantly precede the 1870s, the decade when the crisis of domestic service emerges: Celnart 1836; Busson, 1842; De Meilheurat, 1852; Belèze, 1860. A few go even further, advocating not just a gentle tone but also the use of polite formulae. Raymond (1873[8]: 214) insists that children must be taught to issue orders "*non seulement avec un ton doux, mais en employant des formules polies*" ('not only with a gentle tone but also using polite phrases'). She specifies the formulae in a subsequent chapter on improper language usage.

Across the century, the message is consistent: there is a widespread expectation that masters modulate their tone when issuing commands.[12]

5.3 Formulae for master-servant interactions

The imperative remains conventional. Two reeditions of La Salle's famous conduct book in the latter half of the century (1857: 91, 1875: 91) assert that "*les termes impératifs, qui indiquent l'ordre, ne peuvent être à l'usage qu'à l'égard des domestiques*" ('imperative terms, indicative of commands, may properly be employed only towards servants). La Salle's (1857: 91, 1875: 91) examples are: "*Faites cela, allez en un tel endroit, donnez-moi cela.*" ('Do this, go to such-and-such

[12]The role of prosody in conveying politeness is surprisingly understudied, with the notable exception of the work by Arndt and Janney (e.g. 1985, 1987). Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992) includes prosody in her notion of *taxème*. The term (from Greek *taxis* "position") is particularly apt here as it encompasses all semiotic – rather than strictly linguistic – phenomena that both signal and enact hierarchical relationships. See also Culpeper 2011 on prosody and impoliteness.

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a place, give me that'). Note that the verb uses the formal second-person plural, which I take to signal social distance (see also below). Likewise, La Fère evaluates imperatives as conventional for 'inferiors' and equals:

> *Évitez les impératifs qui ne conviennent qu'avec les inférieurs et quelquefois avec les égaux: Donnez-moi, par exemple*; Veuillez me donner, est encore un ordre; […]. ('Avoid imperatives suitable only for inferiors and occasionally equals: "Give me," for instance; even "Be willing to give me" remains a command.'). (La Fère, 1889[7]: 235)

This twentieth-century source lists formulae with the imperative as the appropriate form for an order: "*Portez ceci à monsieur le comte*"; "*Demandez ses ordres à madame*" ('Carry this to his Lordship'; 'Inquire as to madam's commands', Orval, 1901[6]: 148).[13]

Others recommend specific politeness formulae. The following quotes include formulae within rules to show the immediate context. This conduct book emphasizes a kind prosody and advises either pairing the imperative with a politeness formula or replacing it with *voulez-vous?* ('do you want?'):

> *Une femme bien élevée ne donnera jamais un ordre sec et bref, sur un ton de commandement, sans l'accompagner d'un*: je vous prie, – voulez-vous, – s'il vous plaît. ('A well-bred woman will never give a short, curt order in a commanding tone, without accompanying it with: "I pray you – do you want – if you please".'). (Maryan and Béal, 1896: 148)

The next source considers the imperative impolite, recommending its replacement with a question, followed by *je vous prie* ('I pray you'):

> *C'est ainsi qu'un homme poli ne commandera qu'avec des formules polies. Il dira à son domestique:* "Voulez-vous faire telle chose, je vous prie", *et non:* "Faites ceci ou cela." ('Thus, a polite man will only command with polite formulae. He will say to his servant: "Do you want to do this thing, I pray you", and not: "Do this or that".'). (Salva, 1898: 132)

This later source also advises the use of *s'il vous plaît* ('if you please'), noting that a politeness formula (alongside *merci* to thank) does not weaken authority:

> […] *un* "s'il vous plaît" *n'atténue pas la valeur d'un ordre et un* "merci" *ne rabaisse nullement celui qui le prononce pour reconnaître un petit service*. ('an "if you please" does not diminish the value of an order, and a "thank you" in no way diminishes the one who uses it in recognition of a small service.'). (Magallon, 1910: 55)

Finally, some slightly more elaborate formulae are recommended for written notes, here specifically to an artisan:

[13]The translation respects rules for title reference in British Victorian etiquette.

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> *Quand on écrit à un ouvrier qui a l'habitude de travailler pour vous,* […] *on commencera ainsi:* Monsieur Lombard, Veuillez, je vous prie, *ou:* je vous serai obligé de vouloir bien nettoyer mon fusil pour tel jour; […]. ('When writing to an artisan who is used to working for you, […] one starts as follows: "Mr Lombard, Be willing, I pray you, or: I will be obliged if you would be so good as to clean my rifle for such and such a day"; […]'). (Vinet, 1891: 276)

Other language advice regards the use of the formal *vous* pronoun and the use of the servant's first name:

> *Ne tutoyez pas vos domestiques; cet usage n'est plus dans nos moeurs. Appelez-les par leur nom de baptême.* ('Do not address your servants with *tu* 'thou'; this custom is no longer in our manners. Call them by their Christian name.'). (Boissieux, 1877: 16).

Table 1 shows the formulary for polite commands to servants. Note that Celnart's (1834[6] [1832]) formulae address a shop assistant, those in Vinet (1891) and Chambon (1907) regard written notes to artisans, tradespeople and servants, as well as these in Staffe (1891[25] [1889]: 234): "*Je vous prie de vouloir bien m'envoyer*"; "*Veuillez faire ceci; je vous serai obligé d'exécuter ce travail*". The ones found in Raymond (1873[8]) are said to be for equals and unspecified inferiors.

Eleven out of 43 sources contain one or more politeness formulae, in total 30 separate ones. While the imperative remains conventional, politeness formulae appear in a non-negligible number of sources. The 30 single occurrences cover only four types of politeness formulae – only three for spoken interaction. This high degree of consistency suggests a link to real-life, descriptive rules: if the formulae were purely invented, I would have expected more variation. All formulae identify as non-imposition politeness, which Brown and Levinson (1987 [1987]) called negative politeness aimed at preserving face wants linked to autonomy. For the first-wave model the indirect phrasing would make an utterance intrinsically polite: the more indirectness (using a question instead of an imperative), the more polite. Before turning to an analysis of these linguistic expressions as instances of conventionalized usage, I first consider their strategic dimension, that is, their potentially mitigating function.

1. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 54–55) identify *voulez-vous?* and *voudriez-vous?* as conventionally indirect requests that question the hearer's willingness to act, noting that this is characteristic of French. However, Ruytenbeek (2020) argues that 'can/could you?' in French is also highly conventionalized for requests. The conditional *voudriez* appears three times and introduces greater optionality. According to Leech (1983), phrasing a request as a question increases optionality, offering the hearer an apparent choice and minimizing imposition. Two sources reinforce this effect by adding *bien*, also to verify willingness.[14] Expressions with *vouloir* appear in eight sources, making them

[14]Both *vouloir bien* and *bien vouloir* mitigate requests. However, *vouloir bien* (found three times in table 1) tends to appear in more ritualized, epistolary contexts and fixed expressions, whereas *bien vouloir*

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the most frequently recommended politeness formulae for this context alongside *je vous prie*. The imperative *veuillez* does not express optionality, acting more like an entreaty, like *je vous prie*. It is also widely used in correspondence, particularly in closing formulae.

2. *S'il vous plaît* appears in five sources, either with a comma or as a standalone formula. While not always explicitly paired with an imperative, it is understood to soften an otherwise impolite imperative. Held (2023) traces the evolution of polite requests with *plaire à quelqu'un* ('to be agreeable, pleasing to someone; to suit someone'). Like *voulez-vous?, s'il vous plaît* (literally 'if it pleases to you') reduces imposition by verifying willingness in order to obtain agreement (ibid: 57). Originally expressing submissiveness in a dependent person, the conditional clause was then pragmaticized as a parenthetical mitigator (ibid: 57). Gerstenberg and Skupien-Dekens treat it as a politeness marker for a mid-seventeenth-century corpus of diplomatic letters, where it "is, syntactically, deletable, which supports its interpretation as a pragmatic marker" (2021: 18). The expression is already parenthetical in the seventeenth century.
3. *Je vous prie* appears in eight sources and is as frequently recommended as *vouloir*-based formulae. Mainly used parenthetically (with a comma or as a standalone formula), it also appears three times as a main verb, in an early source, 1834, and in later sources, 1891 and 1907. This suggests its pragmaticalization was still in progress. Gerstenberg and Skupien-Dekens (2021) identify *je vous prie* as the most common introduction of a directive in their corpus of diplomatic letters. However, due to its syntactic embedding in *prier de* ('pray to [do something]'), it does not yet function as a fully pragmaticized politeness marker (ibid: 18). *Prier* originally meant 'to beg'. To signal the distinction with fully impositive performatives like 'to command' and 'to order', Culpeper and Archer (2008) classify verbs such as 'to beg', 'to beseech', 'to entreat' as hedged performatives, given a power dynamic where "the speaker is 'requesting' from a position of powerlessness, relative to the hearer" (Fraser, 1975: 197). Thus, *je vous prie* expresses humility. It is also frequently recommended in letter closings, where it is used both parenthetically and as a main verb. The nominal construction *Prière à … de …* 'request to … to …' is recommended for written notes to a servant who is new in service, as opposed to the other formula found in G.-M. (1908), which is specifically recommended for a dedicated, long-serving servant.
4. *Je vous serai obligé de* appears in three sources, where it is consistently recommended for written notes to servants, artisans or tradesmen, which explains its more elaborate form. Typical of administrative language, the formula is conventionally indirect and conveys speaker humility. The future tense strongly and pre-emptively expresses the speaker's awareness of a future debt, creating indebtedness, which puts the speaker under the obligation to reciprocate. Note that *obligé* 'obliged' comes from Latin *ob-ligare* 'to bind, tie' and carries the sense that the speaker is metaphorically bound to the hearer.

(not found here) is commonly used in administrative or service-related interactions with a greater expectation of compliance.

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5. Finally, some expressions accumulate formulae: *voulez-vous faire telle chose, je vous prie* in Salva (1898); *veuillez, je vous prie* and *je vous serai obligé de vouloir bien*, both in Vinet (1891).

Overall, the first two formulae are hearer-orientated, emphasizing optionality by verifying the hearer's willingness to act, while the latter are speaker-orientated, expressing relative powerlessness. In the master-servant context, these formulae paradoxically verify the willingness of the *servant* – as if compliance were optional – and imply the powerlessness of the *master*, a counterintuitive dynamic given the historical context (Section 4). From a discernment perspective (Section 2.3), commands in the imperative represent traditional *Potestas*, where high-power rank determines linguistic choices without the need for face negotiation. However, the formulae in Table 1 show that face concerns have been acknowledged at some point in time. What initially would have been an *ad hoc*, strategic use to mitigate an order, which was increasingly perceived as a face-threat, has developed into a more stable, conventional use (to the point of being included in an instructional manual). For the formulae in Table 1 politeness has become a default meaning: they are, so to say, moving into a more automatic, discernment usage. My approach cannot be used to capture these earlier, strategic usages (it can only claim they must have existed before a certain date), but Table 1 contains an embryonic outline of a potential pathway.

In Table 1, early formulae appear in service encounters (Celnart, 1834[6] [1832]), while the examples with *je vous serai obligé de* appear in written notes to tradespeople and artisans.[15] This may indicate a diachrony whereby formulae that may already have been conventionalised as requests in external service interactions entered private homes once servants came to be viewed as paid service providers: while a master has direct authority over his own servants, with external tradespeople, the interaction is more of a transactional nature, with possible refusal and negotiation. All the same, expressions with *vouloir* ('to want') are conventionalized for service interactions in small shops in present-day France (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2008: 118). More research is needed to confirm this derivation. That said, this raises the question of the type of directive involved: do politeness formulae transform the command into a request? I argue that they do not, because the servants have no right of refusal.

From a Cognitive Linguistics perspective, Ruytenbeek (2019) examines the relationship between directive forms and the ontology of the speech act. Briefly, just as not every imperative is a command (it can be an offer), not every politeness marker (e.g. optionality expressions) turns an order *ipso facto* into a request. Ruytenbeek (ibid: 217) illustrates this with a conventionally indirect request: "Could you bring us something to wipe up the mess?". In a high-to-low-status interaction –

[15]I am grateful to Reviewer 3, who points out that politeness formulae with *obliger* emerge towards the end of the century, quoting this example from the lemma *obliger* in the *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*: "*À Georges Sand. Paris, mi-février 1872. Chère bon maître, Pouvez-vous, pour* le Temps, *écrire un article sur* Dernières chansons? *Cela m'obligerait beaucoup. Voilà* (Flaub., *Corresp.*, 1872, p.350)." ('To George Sand. Paris, mid-February 1872. Dear good master, Could you, for *Le Temps*, write an article on *Dernières chansons*? It would oblige me greatly. There you have it.') (éhttps://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/obligé, last accessed 7.10.2025). The context indicates a shift from a strictly professional exchange to a more personal one.

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a boss addressing an employee – the sentence functions as a command rather than a genuine request (ibid: 217). The key factor is corporate hierarchy, where the employee is expected to comply: the presence of a certain "degree of optionality" in a directive does not necessarily diminish "the degree of obligation" placed on the addressee (ibid: 215). After listing politeness formulae Staffe (1891[25] [1889]: 206) assures that linguistic politeness, actually, ensures obedience, stating: "*Le domestique obéit toujours avec empressement et bonne volonté quand on lui ordonne de faire une chose en prenant un ton de douceur et de politesse*." ('The servant always obeys with alacrity and good will when commanded to perform a task in a tone of gentleness and courtesy.'). She labels the speech act as *ordonner* ('to order'). Other rules containing politeness formulae (see examples above) use the metalabels *commander, ordonner* ('to command'), *commandement, ordre* ('order'), as well as *demander, exiger* ('to demand'), and *demande* ('demand').[16] Magallon (1910: 55, quoted above) also states that a politeness formula does not reduce the force of an order. Note that most of the sources in Table 1 are from 1873 onwards, the decade in which the crisis of domestic service develops.

Pinto's (2011) distinction between truth-based sincerity (here, the master's goal of being obeyed) and a procedural, rapport-based sincerity (about conveying politeness) helps further clarify the relation between obligation and optionality. Even if masters are not sincerely offering optionality, they can still be sincere in using politeness to preserve the face of the servant and their own face, that is, to manage the servant's feelings and being seen as considerate (Jucker [2020: 191] uses Pinto's [2011] distinction in the context of dissimulation). The servant, bound by contractual obligation, will perform the task, but politeness ensures he/she feel valued for it – a win-win dynamic.

Piette's (2000) hypothesis – that politeness towards servants emerged in response to the service crisis – is supported by linguistic data. However, recommendations for a kind prosody go back further in time. This suggests additional factors beyond labour dynamics, such as broader socio-cultural shifts: the emergence of the middle class is marked by an increasing valorization of individualism, which goes hand in hand with a move away from rigid class distinctions. Thus, attributing politeness formulae solely to the service crisis somewhat oversimplifies their development. The crisis may have accelerated a process already underway.

At this point, it is useful to compare the top-down directives in Table 1 with two closely related contexts, servants' speech to masters and masters requesting favours from peers. Both contexts use very different formulae to issue directives and it shows an enduring *compartmentalization* of formulae according to contexts and social status.

5.4 Formulae for servant-master interactions

Table 2 lists formulae for servant-master interaction. While a commonly recommended formulae for master-servant interaction is the conventionally indirect question *voulez-vous?* or *voudriez-vous*?, formulae for servants requesting information regarding their masters' wishes also use *vouloir*, though

[16]These metaterms were used as search terms to find formulae (see Section 3.2).

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Table 2. Politeness formulary for servant requests to masters

Source	*Vouloir* ('to want', 'to wish'); *demander* ('to ask'); *désirer* ('to wish'); *avoir besoin de* ('need'); *permettre* ('to allow')
Celnart, 1834[6] [1832]: 30	*Madame veut-elle quelque chose?* ('Does Madam wish for something?') *Que demande Monsieur?* ('What does Sir require?')
Celnart, 1836: 136, 177, 178	*Madame, ou Monsieur, voudra bien attendre un peu: je vais avertir Madame.* ('Madam, or Sir, will be so good as to wait a moment: I shall go and inform Madam.') *Monsieur veut-il m'écouter?* ('Does Sir wish to listen to me?') *Madame veut-elle venir là?* ('Does Madam wish to come here?') *Madame permet-elle que je l'entretienne de telle chose?* ('Does Madam allow that I speak to her of this matter?') *Monsieur veut-il me donner un avis?* ('Does Sir wish to give me an opinion?')
Anon, 1849: 135	*Monsieur veut-il?* ('Does Sir wish?') *Madame désire-t-elle?* ('Does Madame wish?')
Milon, 1873[2]: 6, 114, 115	*Monsieur désire-t-il?* ('Does Sir wish ?') *Monsieur voudrait-il me dire son nom?* ('Would Sir be willing to tell me his name?') *Madame voudrait-elle me dire son nom?* ('Would Madam be willing to tell me her name?') *Monsieur ou Madame, voudra bien attendre un peu; je vais avertir Monsieur ou Madame.* ('Sir or Madam will be so good as to wait a moment; I shall go and inform Sir or Madam.')
Dufaux de la Jonchère, 1884: 362, 371, 411,412	*Monsieur voudra-t-il me dire cela?* ('Will Sir be willing to tell me that?') *Madame voudra-t-elle me dire ceci?* ('Will Madam be willing to tell me this?') *Monsieur voudrait-il venir un instant?* ('Would Sir be willing to come for a moment?') *Monsieur voudra-t-il prendre la peine d'attendre un peu, je vais prévenir Madame?* ('Will Sir take the trouble to wait a little? I shall go and inform Madam.') *Madame veut-elle me permettre de lui servir de ceci ou de cela?* ('Does Madam wish to permit me to serve her with this or that?') *Que désire Monsieur ou Madame?* ('What does Sir or Madam desire?')
Vinet, 1891: 323	*Monsieur veut-il prendre son café?* ('Does Sir wish to have his coffee?') *Madame voudrait-elle me donner des serviettes?* ('Would Madam wish to give me towels?')
Magallon, 1910: 55	*Monsieur veut-il…* ('Does Sir wish…') *Madame prendra-t-elle…* ('Will Madame have…')
Anon, n.d.: 24, 33	*Monsieur (ou Madame) veut-il (ou veut-elle) quelque chose?* ('Does Sir or Madam wish for anything?') *Monsieur a-t-il la bonté de me permettre de sortir?* ('Has Sir the kindness to allow me to go out?') *Madame a-t-elle besoin de quelque chose?* ('Does Madam need anything?')

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with a key difference. Servants use the verb in the third person, with the titles *Monsieur* and *Madame*:

> *Les domestiques ne parlent à leurs maîtres qu'à la troisième personne; en d'autres termes, ils ne disent jamais* "Monsieur, voulez-vous me permettre cela? Madame, voulez-vous m'expliquer ceci?" ('Servants address their masters only in the third person; in other words, they never say "Sir, do you want to alllow me this?" or "Madam, do you want to explain this to me?"'). (Dufaux de La Jonchère,1884: 363)

The formulae in Table 2 appear mainly (but not exclusively) in the specialized manuals, which provide a better coverage of the nineteenth century.

Celnart (1836: 177) forbids imperatives in servant speech, even when not used as commands: servants must avoid "*employer des tours de phrase qui ressemblent au commandement, tels que:* Écoutez-moi. Venez-là. – Il faut venir déjeûner, dîner, *etc.*" ('employing turns of phrase resembling commands, such as: "Listen to me. Come here. – One must come to breakfast, to dinner", etc.'). Similarly, Champeau (1877[4] [1864]: 127) states: "*L'impératif ne convient point dans la bouche des inférieurs et rarement dans celle des égaux.*" ('The imperative is not fitting in the mouth of inferiors and is seldom appropriate even among equals.'). Imperatives are the master's prerogative. As a result, master-servant and servant-master formulae for directives were mutually exclusive. Masters used imperatives, while servants used questions (with *vouloir, désirer, demander, avoir besoin de*) to request information about their master's wishes and needs, with *vouloir* appearing in the present, future, and conditional. *Permettre* is hedged by the question format, asking permission to make a request benefiting the servant. Requests for guests to wait are further mitigated with *un peu, bien, prendre la peine*, and the grounder *je vais avertir/ prévenir monsieur ou madame*. Even from the 1870s, when some sources recommend masters and servants use both *vouloir*, the formulae remain distinct because of title use and verb form.

The politeness formulae for peer requests in Table 3 (prototypical due to the symmetrical relationship) largely differ from the asymmetrical ones in Tables 1 and 2.

Note that Raymond's formulae in Table 1 were intended for both equals and inferiors. Otherwise, aside from *je vous prie* (common, also, as letter closing), peer request formulae are preceded by preparatory interrogatives: conventionally indirect hearer-elevating commitment-seeking devices, which are mostly in the conditional, presuppose willingness. The imperative *ayez* appears twice. The hearer is elevated by a compliment: he/she is good, indulgent, amiable, obliging, which make refusal harder. As for Tables 1 and 2, the consistency between the formulae, especially with *bonté*, convincingly points towards a good degree of conventionalisation. Only G.-M. (1908) diverges, using speaker-orientated, humility-expressing formulae.[17] While *voulez-vous?, voudriez-vous?,* and *veuillez*

[17]The author adds a reference to his formulae, "*Bienséance et civilité chrétienne*", the famous conduct book by de La Salle, *Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne* from 1703. Later editions contain the following formulae for peer requests: "*Voudriez-vous bien aller; Trouveriez-vous à propos de dire; Je ne sais si*

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Table 3. Politeness formulary for master peer requests

Celnart, 1834[6] [1832]: 172	*Voulez-vous avoir la bonté; veuillez me faire le plaisir, seriez-vous assez bonne*[20] ('Would you be so kind; be willing to grant me the pleasure; would you be so good')
La Salle, 1857: 91 and 1875: 92	*Je vous prie de faire cela; ayez la bonté de me donner cela.* ('I pray you to do this; have the kindness to give me that.')
Champeau, 1877[4] [1864]: 217	*Auriez-vous la bonté de me donner; je vous prie, vous supplie* ('Would you have the kindness to give me…; I pray you, beg you.')
J. B. C., 1882: 26-7	*Ayez la bonté de me donner; Auriez-vous la bonté de me donner.* ('Have the kindness to give me…; Would you have the kindness to give me…')
Salva, 1898: 81	*Auriez-vous la bonté… voudriez-vous être assez aimable….* ('Would you have the kindness…; Would you be so kind…')
La Fère, 1889[7]: 235	*Auriez-vous la bonté de me donner; Je vous prie* ('Would you have the kindness to give me…; I pray you…')
G.-M., 1908: 150	*Oserais-je vous prier de…? Voudriez-vous me rendre ce service?… Vous m'obligeriez en vous donnant la peine de…* ('Might I dare to pray you to…? Would you want to do me this service…? You would oblige me by taking the trouble to….')

– found in Table 1 for master-servant interactions – also appear in Table 3, they do so within longer commitment-seeking formulae. While more indirect than the findings in Table 1 given the accumulation of formulae, they are not more polite: they are conventionalised for a different context. Nowadays, such formulae are considered formal and business-like.

Voulez-vous, recommended for masters addressing servants, is the object of an intriguing ban for peer usage in formal dining. Anais, comtesse de Bassanville (1867: 240-241), forbids it for food offers:

> *Si un homme offre quelque chose à sa voisine, il ne doit pas lui dire Madame, voulez-vous telle chose? mais Me permettrez-vous, madame, de vous offrir telle chose? car la première formule est réservée aux domestiques.* ('If a gentleman offers something to his neighbour, he must not say, "Madam, do you want such a thing?" but rather, "Will you allow me, Madam, to offer you such a thing?" for the former phrasing is reserved for servants.').

vous trouveriez à propos; Oserai-je vous prier; Pourrai-je espérer cette grâce de vous. […] Voudriez-vous me rendre ce service ; Voudriez-vous me faire cette amitié ; Vous m'obligerez de vous donner la peine, etc." ('Would you want to go…; Would you deem it appropriate to say…; I do not know whether you would deem it appropriate…; Will I dare to beg you…; Will I be able to hope for this favour from you. Would you want to do me this service…; Would you want to grant me this kindness…; You would oblige me by taking the trouble to…, etc.') (La Salle, 1806: 255 is the last edition containing these formulae). Frère Gabriel-Marie (see Paternoster, 2023b for biographical notes) has clearly been inspired by these older formulae, and that may explain the difference with the other formulae in Table 3.

[20]The 1849 edition adds "*assez obligeante*" ('so obliging') (Celnart, 1849 [1832]: 116).

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Table 4. Formulae for asymmetrical and symmetrical speaker-benefitting directives

Master to servant	Servant to master
Donnez-moi cela, Marie (voulez-vous me donner cela, Marie? in some later sources)	*Monsieur ou Madame veut-il/elle me donner cela?*
Master to master	
Auriez-vous la bonté de me donner cela?	

As *voulez-vous* is reserved for superiors addressing servants, it would risk offence with a female guest. Though the banned formula pertains to a food offer, the rule underscores how certain formulae are deeply tied to class distinctions, making their misuse a social blunder (on the stigma of etiquette blunders see Paternoster, 2022: 235-280).

In sum, directive formulae benefitting the speaker (commands, request) reflect rigid class distinctions as if compartmentalised in sealed caissons – Paternoster (2023b) also uses the term *compartmentalization.* Traditionally, linguistic formulae for masters and servants remained rigidly distinct: imperatives were reserved for masters – softened by kind prosody – while servants were strictly banned from using them. Only from the 1870s do politeness formulae emerge, yet differences in pronouns, address titles and verb forms keep the two sets strictly apart. Moreover, the two sets of asymmetrical formulae remain also distinct from the ones routinely used among peers. Table 4 visualises the compartmentalization.

Table 4 shows three distinct sets of formulae for three different contextual frames reflecting discernment politeness where linguistic choices are dictated by context and power dynamics. This supports Guiral & Thuillier's characterisation of nineteenth-century France domestic service as reflecting a "*société des castes*" (1978: 13), but extending it to language use.

Last, but not least, the very presence of prefabricated formulas in conduct, etiquette, and specialized advice literature supports the frame-based theory (Terkourafi, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). Frame-based theory posits that speakers navigate social interactions through prepatterned linguistic choices, where default politeness emerges from repeated contextual use. The internal consistency of these formulae across sources provides strong empirical support for their real-life conventionalization for three different contextual frames. Since their pedagogical goal is to codify existing norms, authors would have had little reason to introduce arbitrarily invented formulas. They observed linguistic regularities, incorporating them into prescriptive discourse, because they understood that these formulae had the potential to facilitate social life for their readers. In 1890, a mistress struggling with rapid servant turnover could have raised wages or/and turned to various manuals for guidance on retaining her staff. Some recommended kindly spoken imperatives, others politeness formulae. But if she leaned towards the latter, she would have found consistency across sources (as we now know), reinforcing the idea that these formulae were the norm. This perceived uniformity may have encouraged her to adopt the polite forms, further cementing their codification and spread.

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6. Concluding Remarks

This study has introduced a new method: extracting politeness formulae from prescriptive literature, providing a structured approach to the study of conventionalized language use in historical pragmatics that does not rely on large-scale linguistic corpora alone. I have shown that etiquette books, conduct books and specialized guides contain rich metapragmatic data – politeness rules alongside conventionalised expressions. The introduction of the term "formulary" provides a way to conceptualise and categorize these linguistic formulae, distinguishing them from politeness strategies by anchoring them in discernment and frame-based theory.

One key takeaway is that politeness formulae for master-servant interactions in nineteenth-century France reflect a shift in asymmetrical discourse, which appears to have been accelerated by the domestic labour market becoming increasingly free. While previous research (Piette 2000) has linked the rise of politeness in domestic service to its crisis years, my sources confirm this for politeness formulae, but they also suggest that the call for a kind prosody was emerging a lot earlier. Rather than reflecting a genuine reduction in social stratification, these formulae operated more as paying lip service to equality: by masking *Potestas* ('authority') under a veneer of politeness, they allowed employers to frame their authority in more palatable terms while still maintaining control. I have argued that these politeness formulae do not change the command in a prototypical request, and the imperative remains largely conventional, even though the recommendation is for a kind prosody. Discernment is upheld thanks to compartmentalization of formulae for different power dynamics.

By applying recent theorization on discernment and conventionalization, this study has further demonstrated that etiquette and conduct books are useful tools for historical (im)politeness research. These sources contain numerous formulae not just for commands, but also for offers, apologies, advice, assertions, compliments, greetings and so on, making them highly valuable linguistic repositories. Given their prescriptive nature, they provide an explicit account of what was perceived as normative language use in various social contexts.

At the same time, this study acknowledges the limitations of corpus selection. The overrepresentation of sources from the later decades of the nineteenth century reflects the editorial success of the genre, but it limits diachronic analysis, making it difficult to precisely trace the diachrony of politeness formulae. Additionally, while conduct and etiquette books offer prescriptive norms, early conventionalization of the formulary (which here was inferred from consistency) requires further corroboration with other historical corpora.

While such a comparison lies beyond the scope of the current study, I fully agree that this is a fruitful avenue for future research, which would offer a valuable complementary perspective. By establishing an inventory of politeness formulae, the formulary introduced in this study provides a ready-made list of search terms for future corpus-based research, allowing scholars to systematically investigate the spread and evolution of these formulae over time. One advice text confirms a descriptive use of a prescriptive formula noted in Table 1. The formula is used in a conduct book by La Comtesse Dash (1868[2]), whose rules for master-servant interaction only concern a ban of a harsh and haughty tone (Section 5.2). In a chapter called *L'étiquette* ('Etiquette') the author advises concealing frustration

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when servants make clumsy mistakes. She illustrates this with a story. At an informal dinner, the servant accidentally spills a dark sauce on a young officer's brand new and costly white uniform. Furious and ready to strike with his napkin, the officer catches his colonel's eye, realizes the consequences, and instantly composes himself. He calmly hands his napkin to the servant, saying in a charming manner: "*Voulez-vous bien essuyer mon dolman, – s'il vous plaît?*" ('Would you be so kind as to wipe my dolman, please?') (Dash 1868[2]: 104). Everyone laughs while his wit and restraint impress the colonel and his wife, who later gifts him a beautifully embroidered new uniform. This anecdotal example, though drawn from a conduct book, illustrates the kind of descriptive evidence that frequency-based corpus research can offer.

Combining qualitative extraction methods in prescriptive politeness metadiscourse with theoretical models of discernment, *Potestas*, and frame-based conventionalization, this approach furthers the integration of pragmatic theory with historical accounts of what politeness is and does.

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