Who Requests Whom and How They Do It: Use of Request Markers in Late Modern English Letters

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Abstract

The nineteenth century witnesses the competition between courtesy markers in requests, with *please* gaining ground at the expense of older *pray*. In this paper I will account for the situation of these markers in different stages of the 19th and early 20th centuries: 1860-1889 and 1890-1919, using *A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose*. Despite its small size, this corpus, comprising epistolary collections and a diary part, enables us to undertake a sociolinguistic study of the use of the markers. We can explore how the renewal of the courtesy marker took place, paying special attention to who requests whom and how they do it.

1. Introduction

The present study focuses on the situation of two courtesy markers, namely *please* and *pray* (and their different forms) in late Modern English requests. For this purpose I have used *A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose*,[2] which covers the period 1860-1919 and comprises epistolary collections and some diaries from five English families. This corpus enables the adoption of a sociolinguistic approach to the study of the different courtesy markers analysed.

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2. Courtesy markers

Courtesy markers are expressions having politeness functions (cf. Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 569-572 on 'courtesy subjuncts'). *Please* is nowadays the preferred courtesy marker in requests, but markers of this kind have experimented a need for change in English. In this way, the verb *please* was borrowed from Old French in the fourteenth century, but the first instances of the courtesy marker go back to the late eighteenth century (see Faya, 2006, where early examples of the courtesy marker *please* are unearthed in the *Corpus of Late-Eighteenth Century Prose*). This is also confirmed by recent additions of the *OED* (*OED* s.v. *please* adv. and int.), in which the first instance of the adverb *please* functioning as a courtesy marker goes back to 1771. The former default courtesy marker was *pray*. As was the case with *please*, *pray* also goes back to a French verb, which started to be used parenthetically in expressions like *I pray you* or *I pray thee* in the early modern English period (*OED* s.v. *pray* v.). The marker *prithee* goes back to the parenthetical *I pray thee*, and still shows the enclitic T pronoun.

3. Corpus and period

The period selected for the present study may reflect an advanced stage of the courtesy markers considered, since in late modern English the language was nearly established in several respects after a process of standardisation and fixation of the language in previous centuries. The standardization of the language had been encouraged in the eighteenth century through education in the vernacular and the spread of prescriptive norms, and it continued in the nineteenth century (cf. Görlach, 1999: 10).

The corpus used, *A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose*, contains five collections of letters from the period 1860-1919, from five English families: the Amberleys, the Webbs, the Greens, Ernest Dowson and Gertrude Bell's correspondence. Two minor diary collections from the Amberleys and the Greens are also included. All the informants belong to high society backgrounds. Although the total number of words in the corpus is probably low for this type of study (approximately 100,000), the text-type is certainly relevant. If we take a look at a

multigenre corpus like *ARCHER*, only letters, fiction, drama and journal and diaries show examples of the courtesy marker *please*. Letters show a high degree of speechlikeness, and at the same time they may also reflect a more advanced stage of the language. In addition, the interaction in correspondence between writer and addressee makes very likely the occurrence of requests. Therefore, we should expect that an epistolary collection such as this would contain a high frequency of courtesy markers in requests. All the decades in the corpus are represented although two of them contain smaller number of words:

  – 1860-69: 20,000
  – 1870-79: 20,000
  – 1880-89: 6,000
  – 1890-99: 13,000
  – 1900-09: 20,000
  – 1910-19: 20,000

The corpus is further divided in two subperiods: 1860-1889 (L86) and 1890-1919 (L89).[3] The date of birth range of main contributors is narrower: Lord and Lady Amberley (main writers in the collection) were born in 1842, Bell in 1868, Dowson in 1867, Green in 1837 and the Webbs in 1859 and 1858. (Denison, 1994: 8 and *ODNB*).

4. Analysis of the data

The corpus contains letters and diaries, and as could be expected the markers studied appear only in letters. Although the number of instances is very low, the kind of information provided makes possible to extract interesting conclusions. The overall distribution of markers in the whole period is as follows:

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[3] These labels are established by the compilers.

Table 1. Distribution of markers used

Marker used	function	instances	L86	L89	no. of informants who use it
please	courtesy marker	18	10	8	6
	attention getter[4] ?	1	0	1	1
pray	courtesy marker	11	8	3	3
prithee	courtesy marker	5	5	0	1
if you please	courtesy marker	1	0	1	1

If we observe the overall instances, *please* is the most numerous marker in the corpus, but *pray* is still quite common. In fact, in the period 1860-1889 the figures do not differ that much (10 vs. 8), while in the period 1890-1919 we witness a clear decrease in the figures of *pray* (8 vs. 3). This indicates that the competition between the two markers took place all through the nineteenth century and that *pray* had not been completely abandoned at the beginning of the twentieth century. Last quotation of *pray* in the *OED* with this use goes back to 1875 (*OED* s.v. *pray* adv.).

Let us now focus on the distribution analysis of both writers and addressees. In Table 2 below the informants are placed chronologically by date of birth, and we observe the markers they use:

Table 2. Authors by date of birth and marker(s) used

Author	Date of birth	marker(s) used
Lady Russel	1815	*pray* (2)
John Richard Green	1837	*pray* (6); *please* (1)
Lord John Amberley	1842	*please* (4)

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[4] An 'attention getter' is a type of 'alerter,' which serves the function of "alert[ing] the Hearer's attention to the ensuing speech act," such as a request (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989: 277).

Sydney Webb	1859	*pray* (3); *please* (1)
Ernest Dowson	1867	*please* (5); *prithee* (5)
Rachel Russel	1868	*please* (1)
Gertrude Bell	1868	*please* (6); *if you please* (1); *please* (alerter?) (1)

Four writers make use of only one of the markers. Thus, Lady Russel —the oldest informant— uses *pray* twice, whereas her son, Lord Amberley, and her granddaughter, Rachel Russel, use only *please*. This is also the case of Gertrude Bell. On the other hand, we find three authors using more than one marker: John Richard Green, Sydney Webb and Ernest Dowson. The case of Ernest Dowson deserves special attention since he is the only author who uses *prithee* (see section 5 below). As for the other two informants *please* is used only once and *pray* is more common in both cases. As regards the addressees of the letters, there are no differences in the selection of the marker depending on this factor. The three informants using more than one marker address always the same person, whereas those using only one marker —more than once— address different people, so the selection of the marker does not depend on the addressee.

In the case of the Amberleys, Lady Russel addresses her son, Lord Amberley, and her daughter-in-law with *pray* whereas the next generation (Lord Amberley and his daughter Rachel) uses *please*, as in (1) below:

(1)   I shall let you know tomorrow. **Please** don't telegraph. Yours ever affly. (1874, Lord Amberley to mother-in-law)

In most of the examples recorded in this corpus *please* functions as a courtesy marker, as in (1) above, in which the request is expressed with an imperative form. *Please* is placed at the beginning of the utterance, its typical position with imperatives. Only Gertrude Bell uses *please* in middle position in the request. In this case, the request does not surface as an imperative, but as a question introduced by the modal *would*, as in (2) below:

(2)   Oh would you **please** send me a pair of plain tortoiseshell combs. (1917, Gertrude Bell to stepmother)

The only remarkable exception in the use of *please* is another instance by Gertrude Bell in which *please* in initial position seems to introduce a question, probably a request.

(3)   BAGDAD, May 3rd, 1917. .... **Please** will Mother have sent to me by post six pairs of thin white thread stockings, and the same of brown - rather dark brown. (1917, Gertrude Bell to father)

Although *please* as a courtesy marker in initial position is typically followed by an imperative construction (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 471), in this case it occupies the typical position of an attention getter. This use is similar to instances of *pray* as an attention getter found in the *Corpus of Late-Eighteenth Century Prose*, as in (4) below. The present corpus does not contain instances of *pray* with this use, which is not found with *please* in the *Corpus of Late-Eighteenth Century Prose*:

(4)   **Pray** have you done anything Conserning John Merser as time is going on to little or no Purpass for him, (1774, John Orford)

In all the instances in the corpus pray functions as a courtesy marker followed by a request in the imperative, as in (5) below:

(5)   the action of bowels he was glad of, as giving a hope that the attack may have been caused by indigestion, torpid liver, or some such cause –wch wd. be a very great relief - **Pray** make the doctor investigate this well. (1873, Lady Russel to daughter-in-law Kate)

The clausal courtesy marker *if you please* appears only once in the corpus. This expression, still available in present-day English, has always shown a lower frequency with respect to other markers in requests (Faya, 2006). *If you please* presents a higher degree of deference towards the addressee, as is clear in (6):

(6)   May I ask you to oblige very kindly with 4 shirts? '(\Crˆpe de chine\)' **if you please**, 2 ivory and two pink. I enclose some

advertisements of Harrods which look nice, specially the cross one. (1917, Gertrude Bell to stepmother)

In this instance negative politeness is increased by the co-occurrence of several politeness strategies[5]. On the one hand we find a 'syntactic downgrader', namely an interrogative introduced by modal *may* (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989: 281). On the other hand the question contains two 'lexical downgraders' the verb *oblige*, 'to bind or make indebted [...] by conferring a benefit or kindness' (*OED* s.v. *oblige* 6.a.), and the adverbial phrase *very kindly* functioning as a 'downtoner' (Blum-Kulka *et al.*, 1989: 283-284).

5. Usage of *prithee* in this corpus

Among the markers used in this corpus we also find the old-fashioned *prithee*. Although the *OED* gives some nineteenth century examples of this marker, it is worth noting that not a single example was recorded in the *Corpus of Late-Eighteenth Century Prose*, a relatively large epistolary collection (c. 300,000 words) from the period 1760-1790 (Faya, 2006). Therefore, the fact that this marker is still used in late nineteenth century letters deserves special attention.

Only one writer makes use of *prithee*, namely Ernest Dowson. Dowson was born in 1867, which makes him one of the youngest contributors to the corpus, and at the same time an odd user of the form. Instances of *prithee* occur only in letters from 1889 and 1890 and in all five cases the addressee is the same, Arthur Moore. Ernest Dowson was a poet associated to the Decadent movement and Arthur Moore was his friend and collaborator, with whom correspondence was customary (*ODNB*). The Decadent movement took place during the late nineteenth century, influenced by French artists and in direct connection with Aestheticism. One of the illustrious members of this movement was Oscar Wilde (Baugh, 1967: 1475-1484). The Decadents contributed to several genres, especially poetry, and their style was characterized by an excessive "taste for artificiality" (Weir, 1995: 61).

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[5] Negative politeness involves the assumption of a great degree of imposition. There is usually a detachment from the addressee, which is made explicit showing more deference and more respect, generally through more indirect strategies.

Akimoto comments on the use of *I pray thee* by Wilde in the nineteenth century as a "conscious use of archaism" (2000: 76). *Thou* had already disappeared in the eighteenth century (Denison, 1998: 106), and these forms of *pray* had fallen into disuse after the decay in use of the pronoun.[6]

According to Akimoto, *prithee* seems to have been common from the seventeenth century onwards, and have fallen into disuse by the nineteenth century (2000: 77). However, its usage was probably regarded as archaic in common language already in the late eighteenth century since the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth Prose* yields no instances, as mentioned above. The last entry for *prithee* in the *OED* dates back to 1994, although "[i]n some modern instances [may be] used humorously or to convey ironic politeness" (*OED* s.v. *prithee*). Akimoto finds several instances in the eighteenth century (not any in private letters, which are supposed to reflect spoken language closely) and none afterwards.

This deliberately archaic use of the marker in Dowson's private correspondence could perfectly be a sign of irony or even pedantry from the poet towards another writer with whom the level of intimacy was high. It is worth noting that in one of the letters containing *prithee* we also find the archaic use of T pronouns, as in (7) below:

(7)   What news of **thee**, **thou** unconscionable? [...] Write speedily to inform me thereof or give an account of your silence. Yes: (\la grippe\) has gripped me & I stay here wrapped in tarpaulin jackets, consuming handkerchiefs by the score & reading all the trash the Woodford Cirng Library contains. I **prithee** write. (1889, Ernest Dowson to Arthur Moore)

Therefore this use of *prithee* in the late nineteenth century could even be related to the author's membership to a particular literary movement, as was the case of Wilde's archaic use of *I pray thee*.

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[6] The disappearance of *thou* seems to be related to the avoidance of a Quaker 'shibboleth' (Busse, 2002: 206), although Sönmez points out that "it could not be a shibboleth if it were not already rarer in other speakers" (2005: 17).

6. Conclusion

In spite of the low number of instances found in the corpus, we can sketch general tendencies. *Please* was in the late nineteenth century the most common courtesy marker in requests, although the use of *pray* was still considerably high by the older generations. Taking as a starting-point the first instances of *please* as a courtesy marker from the late eighteenth century, the present study would indicate that the consolidation of *please* as the default marker took place more than one century later.

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