Language Sciences 108 (2025) 101703

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langsci

The use of *please* in the expression of (im)politeness in the language of London teenagers and adults

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 June 2024
Received in revised form 14 October 2024
Accepted 3 December 2024
Available online 4 January 2025

Keywords:
Teen talk
Pragmatic/deontic reversal
(Im)Politeness
Please

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the expression of (im)politeness in the language of teenagers and adults, looking specifically at cases of so-called 'pragmatic reversal' (Mazzon, 2017; Fedriani, 2019), in which a politeness marker is used with a confrontational meaning to threaten face. We focus on the use of *please*, traditionally a courtesy marker, in contexts where it expresses either positive or negative (im)politeness (Culpeper, 2011; Leech, 2014; Aijmer, 2015; Taylor, 2016), drawing on data from the *London English Corpus* and the spoken component of the *British National Corpus 2014*. Our analysis of teen talk suggests that *please* is sometimes used by adolescent speakers when there is a clear mismatch between polite and impolite formulae (e.g., 'What's that shitty thing *please*?'). Such processes of pragmatic reversal seem to contribute to harmonious relationships among teenagers, consolidating mutual bonds, which is of key importance during the teen years, in that the discourse of these young speakers is governed by socio-pragmatic norms which differ markedly from those of adults. The paper concludes by noting the significant role of speaker age in the study of (im)politeness, and hence the need to address this issue both in terms of definitions of (im)politeness theory and in the application of these to real data.
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1. Introduction

Over recent decades the language of teenagers and young adults has come under increasing scrutiny, with particular emphasis on a number of parameters which tend to operate differently in adult and teen speech. These include the use of intensifiers, quotatives, discourse markers, swear and taboo words, negatives, and vague language (Stenstrom et al., 2002; Stenström and Jørgensen, 2009; Palacios Martínez, 2011; Tagliamonte, 2016), among others. However, the expression of (im)politeness in teen talk has received relatively little attention to date. One notable exception is Aijmer (2015), who analyses the use of *please* by London teenagers with data from *The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language* (COLT; 1990s), and identifies several functions of impoliteness that, she argues, can be attributed to this traditional courtesy/politeness marker: (i) rapport-strengthening impoliteness; (ii) mock impoliteness and (iii) creative impoliteness.

A similar phenomenon to that described by Aijmer (2015), but in the opposite direction, can be seen in the use of taboo vocatives ('you bastard') and swear words ('you look *fucking* good'), that is, negative terms which are generally used to cause offence but which in the language of teenagers (and sometimes that of adults) may serve to express something positive, such

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2024.101703
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as affection, solidarity, the strengthening of in-group bonds, etc. (Palacios Martínez, 2021). In light of the above, our aim is to confirm previous findings, in particular those reported in Aijmer (2015), on the more frequent use of *please* by British/London teenagers than adults in spontaneous conversations recorded in informal settings, interactions that took place mainly at home for both speaker groups, and also at school and in a youth centre in the case of teenagers; moreover, we will seek to expand on existing studies by using more recent evidence, given that Aijmer analysed data from the 1990s and the materials we use here date from the early 2000s and the mid-2010s (2012–2016). Our study will focus not only on the frequency of this politeness marker, but also on the role of the gender variable and on pertinent syntactic and pragmatic features in its production, thus exploring the extent to which differences between the two speaker groups can be identified (cf. Section 3 on aims, data retrieval and annotation).

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2.1 provides a descriptive and (brief) historical account of *please* as treated in general reference grammars and other studies, followed by an overview of the expression of (im)politeness (2.2), and a discussion of pragmatic/deontic reversal processes (2.3). Section 3 addresses the main objectives of the study, together with a number of methodological issues. Findings and results are discussed in Section 4, while Section 5 summarises the main conclusions and offers suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Please in general reference grammars and in other studies

In general reference grammars, as well as in other studies, *please* tends to be classified as a sentence adverb (Wichmann, 2004: 1523), which may function as an adjunct (cf. Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 570) or as a subjunct. More specifically, it is described as a member of the group of 'courtesy subjuncts', that is, 'a small group of adverbs used in rather formulaic expressions of politeness and propriety' (Quirk et al., 1985: 569), such as *cordially*, *kindly*, etc.

While Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 939) refer to *please* as an 'illocutionary modifier', Biber et al. define it as a 'primary polite speech-act formula' (1999: 1098; cf. also Biber et al., 2021: 1087, 1093), as a 'politeness marker' (Biber et al., 2021: 221), and also as a '(politeness) insert' (Biber et al., 2021: 59, 144, 556, 1087, 1093, 1096), in the sense that it is somehow detached from the sentence in which it occurs. Although there is considerable disagreement amongst reference grammars regarding the syntactic function(s) of *please*, they concur as to its use as a sort of request marker, one which occurs 'with a varying degree of politeness and directive force' (Sato, 2008: 250).

In studies such as Wichmann (2005) and Faya Cerqueiro (2013), *please* is considered to be a 'pragmatic marker' with a wide range of expressive functions (cf. Sato, 2008; Mazzon, 2017; Murphy and De Felice, 2018; Woods, 2020; Islentyeva et al., 2023), among which the expression of 'request' seems to be the most recurrent.

Please in general spoken interaction can be found in a variety of sentence types (declarative, interrogative, imperative), and is also attested on its own ('standalone *please*'; Woods, 2020: 126–127, 129, 132, 145) since it can act as a substitute for a whole sentence.

(1) Do you want water? **Please** (BNC2014 adult).

Likewise, Aijmer classifies cases such as 'yes please', 'no please', and 'oh please' as examples of 'free-standing *please*' (2015: 133, 135, 136, 141; cf. also Sato, 2008: 1251), the former two essentially restricted to formulaic responses to offers (Aijmer, 2009: 67), and the latter described as an 'attention-getter' (Sato, 2008). Instances such as 'more coffee, please', 'one moment, please', in turn, constitute what (Sato, 2008: 1251), following Stubbs (1983: 72), calls 'moodless truncated clauses'[1], and Aijmer terms 'elliptical forms', these only being attested in 'recurrent social situations' (2009: 73), e.g., when somebody is asked to wait on the phone.

In the literature special attention has been paid to the relationship between the functions associated with *please* and its position in the clause. Thus, according to Sato, in both American and New Zealand English *please* 'has systematic interactional functions that are position-specific' (2008: 1250): (i) 'directive' initial, associated with demands and pleas; (ii) medial, identified with conventional polite requests and commands; (iii) final, reserved for task-based requests (2008: 1249). Wichmann (2004: 1543) also discusses the position of *please* in relation to its potential functions; it is typically found in initial position in mitigated commands, while commonly attested in final position in indirect requests. In addition, Woods (2020: 121) argues that the position of *please* within the clause is determined by a number of factors, including modality, negation, and clause type, among others.

Another topic that has arisen in the literature on *please* has to do with the different meanings it may convey (whether 'neutral' or 'attitudinal') depending on its intonational realisation (cf. Wichmann, 2004, 2005), that is, how intonation and prosody may contribute to the expression of meanings 'at the more emotional end of the interactional spectrum' (2005: 248). Wichmann's analysis of *please*-requests shows that intonation plays a role in terms of contextual meaning and has 'the power to render a polite utterance both more and less polite' (2004: 1522), e.g., by turning a meaning of 'courtesy' to one of an 'urgent plea' or 'emphatic demand' (2005: 229). In her view, prosody also helps to mark the distinction between

[1] Those in which understood words/phrases are missing, e.g., *(I want/I'd like) more coffee, please*.

speaker-oriented and hearer-oriented *please*-requests (2004: 1521). In the case of the former, a request ends in a fall, thus 'signalling the control of the speaker' (2004: 1547), while in the latter a request ends in a rise. Hence, the difference between *please*-requests that 'assert the will of the speaker' and those that appeal 'to the will of the hearer' is expressed 'largely through intonation' (2004: 1547). More recently, Islentyeva et al. (2023: 305), analysing a sample of 100 tokens of *please* from the whole BNC2014, show how this courtesy marker may convey meanings other than those traditionally associated with politeness, such as urgency, surprise, irritation and irony.

A considerable number of contrastive studies also exist on *please* in different varieties of English (cf. Sato, 2008 above on American and New Zealand English) as well as contrastive work on *please* and equivalent forms in other languages. Among the former studies, (Biber et al., 1999: 1098) show that *please* occurs twice as frequently in British than in American English, a tendency that is confirmed by Murphy and De Felice (2018), at least in terms of requests. Addressing the use of *please* 'as a marker of conventional politeness' in British English and 'as a marker of relationship asymmetry' in American English, Murphy & De Felice (2018: 77) conclude that American English requests including *please* can be interpreted as sounding less polite than the same requests without it. Jucker and Landert (2023) also explore (im)politeness issues in American and British English and tentatively argue that some polite formulae seem to be in decline (*please*), while others are on the rise. Finally, in their comparison between English in the north of England and the southern varieties, Culpeper and Gillings (2018) find higher levels of politeness in the south, contrary to their expectations, which embraced the idea of 'the friendly northerner stereotype'. Their study included the analysis of *please* as 'the "magic word" for achieving successful requests' (Culpeper and Gillings, 2018: 34), and also as a formulaic expression of politeness used to express tentativeness (Culpeper and Gillings, 2018: 39), where the frequency of use in terms of the north-south divide was found to be not statistically significant.

Finally, from a diachronic perspective, *please* as a courtesy marker conveying politeness is a relatively recent phenomenon, as it only occurs as 'a stand-alone pragmatic marker from 1771' (Murphy and De Felice 2018: 91; OED, 2023 s.v. *please* adv. A), although the verb *please* was introduced in the fourteenth century through the French *plaisir* (OED, 2023 s.v. *please* v.). There is no consensus as to the exact origin of *please*, the most frequently cited opinion being that it derives from a reduction of related expressions such as *if you please*, *if it please you*, and even *please you* and *be pleased to*, syntactically close to French *s'il vous plaît* (e.g., Faya Cerqueiro 2013: 221).

2.2. (Im)politeness theory

Even though politeness as such is inherent to human beings, its emergence as a theoretical field of study within linguistics is relatively recent, and has only acquired prominence as a focus of analysis over the last few decades, in which time it has become closely associated with the development of pragmatics as an independent discipline. The expression of politeness has been addressed from a variety of perspectives. In the 1970s, Lakoff's pioneering work proposed that it is more important 'to avoid offense than to achieve clarity' (1973: 297–98), meaning that politeness should always prevail over clarity in conversation. During the 1980s, politeness 'came of age' (Taylor, 2016: 5), especially after Leech (1983) developed his *Politeness Principle* (PP), which complemented Grice's (1975) *Cooperative Principle*, relating politeness to conversation and pragmatics. Also in the 1980s, Brown & Levinson's *Politeness Theory* (1987) proved to be (and still remains) a highly influential, indeed indispensable, model, in which the notions of *positive/negative face*, *face* taken from Goffman (1967), and *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) are key elements.

Different strategies can be adopted by the speaker in order to show positive or negative politeness. In the case of the former, the speaker wants to express their solidarity by using in-group identity markers, avoiding disagreement, etc., as a means of showing their interest in the addressee/hearer. For the latter, the speaker uses indirect strategies, such as the use of indirect speech, to show deference and concern, thus minimising impositions, in order to preserve the addressee/hearer's negative face (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987).

Politeness as such cannot be understood without the study of impoliteness (cf. Culpeper 2005, 2011; Leech 2014), which 'grew into a field of study' in the 2000s (Taylor 2016: 5), although the two should be viewed as complementary, not as 'polar opposites' (Mills 2003: 124). In the same vein, impoliteness should not be treated as the marked term and politeness as the (unmarked) norm, since they exist on the same continuum. According to Culpeper (2005: 38; reformulated in 2011: 239), impoliteness occurs 'when: (1) the speaker communicates a threat to face intentionally, or (2) the hearer perceives and/or constructs behaviour as intentionally face-threatening, or a combination of (1) and (2)'. Culpeper distinguishes 'genuine impoliteness' from 'mock impoliteness', or 'banter', which is a kind of impoliteness that is 'not intended to cause offence' (1996: 352; 2011: 207); the latter arises, for example, when 'intimates insult one another, but do not take offence' (Mills 2003: 123). It has also been described as 'descortesía no auténtica' ('non-authentic/non-genuine impoliteness') by Bernal (2008: 778), and as 'rapport-strengthening impoliteness' by Aijmer (2015: 127), in which strategies are used to create a relaxed atmosphere among interlocutors in order to reinforce group solidarity. Haugh & Bousfield, however, suggest that mock impoliteness or banter should be understood 'as an evaluation in its own right' rather than as a variant form of impoliteness (2012: 1112), i.e., as a distinct and holistic category independent of impoliteness. Culpeper also addresses the issue of 'mock politeness', or 'sarcasm', which he argues occurs when 'the FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere' (2005: 42; cf. also Leech, 2014: Chapter 8), or when 'there is an im/politeness mismatch leading to an implicature of impoliteness' (Taylor, 2016: 3). Some of these categories of non-genuine impoliteness are discussed further in Section 4.5.1 below, in which examples of (im)polite uses of *please* are analysed in the language of adult and young speakers.

Taking these various definitions into consideration, it is clear that (im)politeness is a socio-pragmatic phenomenon built on 'in the interaction between speaker and hearer' (Culpeper, 2005: 38) and can be inferred from language in context, although there is obviously also a linguistic component involved. Recently it has been claimed that (im)politeness may even have a grammar of its own (Knoblock, 2022).

2.3. Pragmatic/deontic reversal

The notion 'pragmatic reversal' (or 'deontic reversal', as found in Mazzon, 2017; cf. also Fedriani, 2019), somewhat similar to Culpeper's (2011: 174) and Aijmer's (2015) 'verbal formula mismatches', is key to the present study. Pragmatic reversal has been defined by Fedriani as 'a pragmatic shift whereby a politeness marker is progressively used with conflictive meanings' (2019: 234). It is called 'reversal' because 'the original value and the new function developed by the markers involved are symmetrically opposite, i.e., reversed' (ibid.). This reversal is termed 'deontic' because it is in contexts where the speaker is contradicting the interlocutor that the new meanings tend to develop, often in terms of prohibition (cf. Mazzon, 2017: 290).

According to this definition, traditional politeness markers such as *please*, initially used to reduce friction and conflict, seem to shift in their politeness value and appear more and more in conflictive contexts, thus increasing confrontation (Mazzon, 2017: 290). Fedriani has explored impolite values developed by the Italian politeness markers *per favore*, *per piacere* and *per cortesia* (all variant forms of 'please' in Italian) in conflictive contexts. These formulae are said to undergo processes of pragmaticalisation and pragmatic bleaching, after which their original meaning shifts in the 'opposite' direction, so that polite expressions acquire impolite, even confrontational, functions. It seems that colloquial registers and informal contexts are the breeding ground for the emergence of reversal processes, 'which may eventually spread to larger contexts' (Fedriani, 2019: 243). It could also be the case that these formulae and markers are addressed to a third party of a generic nature, one who has an indirect social bearing on the utterance. This is what Tantucci (2017: 88–89) refers to as 'extended intersubjectivity', which contrasts with 'immediate intersubjectivity', where the participants in the conversation are mutually aware during the ongoing speech event.

3. Aims, data retrieval and annotation

In light of the preceding discussion, the main aims of this paper are as follows: (i) to examine the extent to which *please* is more common in the language of teenagers than adults, as Aijmer (2015) claims, and to see whether these two speaker groups use *please* differently. We assume that differences in frequency of use between the two sets of speakers may hint at possible divergences in the status of *please*, especially in terms of negative or impolite meanings of the form; (ii) to investigate the effects of gender, in that previous studies such as Aijmer (2015) postulate a more frequent use of this courtesy marker in the language of females over males; (iii) to consider the syntactic features which are related to *please,* such as the type of discourse (reported versus non-reported) where it is most frequently found, its position in the clause, and the type of clause where it is most frequently attested; finally, (iv) to identify and discuss the pragmatic functions of *please* with special attention to some of its impolite uses, since it is generally defined in the literature as a courtesy or politeness marker (Quirk et al., 1985; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002; Biber et al., 2021).

To this end, we use data from the *London English Corpus* (LEC) and the spoken component of the *British National Corpus 2014* (Spoken BNC2014; McEnery et al., 2014). The LEC was compiled by Cheshire and her team in London between 2004 and 2010 (Cheshire et al., 2011) and includes the *Linguistics Innovators Corpus* (LIC) and the *Multicultural London English Corpus* (MLEC; Cheshire et al., 2010). The data of the LIC, collected between 2004 and 2007, include over a million words from the speech of 121 speakers, both teenagers and adults. The MLEC, compiled between 2007 and 2010, contains 621,327 words from 137 speakers, from small children to adult speakers. In both cases the material was obtained through individual and group interviews in which participants discuss mainly family and school affairs. By contrast, the spoken component of the BNC2014 contains 11.5 million words corresponding to transcripts of conversations from members of the UK public recorded between 2012 and 2016. A total of 1251 spontaneous conversations were taped in informal settings among friends and family members. There are 61 speakers in this BNC2014 London subsample, 45 adults and 16 young people. To make the corpora used as comparable as possible, searches of the BNC2014 were restricted to the data from the London area, so as to avoid as far as possible potential effects of regional vernacular uses. It should be borne in mind that although the compilation dates of the LEC and the BNC data differ by 10–12 years (2004–2016), in this study we are not interested in investigating the evolution of *please* over time but how this courtesy marker behaves in the current expression of adults and teenagers, with the aim of identifying potential differences in use between these speaker groups.

To retrieve and classify the working data we used *Sketch Engine* (cf. https://www.sketchengine.eu//, last accessed 19/09/2024), and *CQPweb* (Corpus Query Processor, cf. http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/BNCweb/, last visited 19/09/2024), for access to the LEC and BNC2014, respectively. A database was built which took into account a number of parameters and factors, including the corpus in question (LEC/BNC2014), the speaker's age (young 13–20 years/adult +20 years) and gender, the type of discourse (reported versus non-reported) and the reporting verb (SAY, BE (LIKE), Zero, THINK, TELL, etc.), position of *please* in the clause (initial, medial, final, on its own), the type of clause in which *please* is attested (declarative positive/negative, interrogative, imperative, semi-free standing, free standing), polarity (positive/negative), and main pragmatic functions including 'polite' uses (weak/strong request, giving an affirmative reply, attention getter and begging somebody to do something) as well as 'impolite' functions (banter/mock, emotional narrative, exclamative disapproval,

exclamative disbelief, exclamative irritation, exclamative sarcasm, expression of negative attitudes or feelings, mock dispute, and verbal formula mismatches). While some of these functions can be attested in the literature on (im) politeness theory (cf. Culpeper, 2011; Aijmer, 2015; Taylor, 2016; De Felice and Murphy, 2017), others were identified in the results of a previous pilot study conducted with a limited sample extracted from LEC. Since in certain cases it was difficult to draw a definitive line between some of these categories, all the tokens of the final sample were coded independently by the two authors, and any discrepancies were reconsidered when necessary. This process is explained in further detail in section 4.5.

To ensure the replicability of our study, the data retrieval and annotation processes included a number of stages, and involved the adoption of some specific criteria: (i) the use of comparable corpora in which both young and adult language was well represented; (ii) data retrieval from the corpora using the online tools cited above, after controlling for speakers' demographic origins (London), age and gender; (iii) data filtering, so that knock-out tokens were disregarded, mainly cases in which *please* was used as an adjective or as a verb; (iv) overall manual review and analysis of the data, in order to become acquainted with the material; (v) design and creation of the database with the various fields and parameters, as mentioned above, in keeping with the main findings in the literature; (vi) pilot study with a small sample of tokens to see whether the database functioned efficiently and in line with the objectives of the study; (vii) implementation of the database (with slight modifications introduced according to the preliminary results obtained); (viii) analysis by the authors of each of the tokens of the sample and incorporation of the corresponding information into the database.

In the process of data analysis and coding some difficulties arose, in that the corpus transcriptions were not always clear and audio files were not always available. This made the interpretation of some examples problematic since, as noted above, intonation and prosody play an important role in the pragmatics of *please* (Wichmann, 2004, 2005; Sato, 2008); in addition, speakers and speaker turns were not always easily identifiable from the written transcriptions of the corpora. It is also important to bear in mind that the nature of the LEC corpus, consisting of interviews, may have some bearing on our findings, since it is assumed that a higher number of cases of *please* would emerge in regular conversations and spontaneous interactions than in more controlled settings such as interviews. The data where the highest number of *please* tokens occurs was, as expected, of a dialogic nature, and hence special attention was also paid to the context in which the exchanges were taking place, the role and contribution of the participants in the interactions, and the possible effect of reciprocity (Culpeper and Tantucci, 2021; Tantucci, 2021). Clearly, certain contexts and situations favour specific functions of *please* independently of age, and this was taken into consideration in the analysis. The main conversation types in the data were anecdote telling, discussions, expression of requests, telling jokes, inquiring and making arrangements, and for this reason the analysis was not restricted to the turn where a specific token of *please* occurred but it was expanded to the rest of the conversation, in order to obtain a better understanding of how an instance of *please* was used in an exchange.

A total of 326 sample tokens were drawn from the two corpora, although 73 tokens were removed, these including repetitions (26), hesitations (4), unclear examples (8), and cases in which *pleased* is an adjective (25), or functions as a verb (10). Thus, 253 examples remained for further analysis. In light of the limited size of the sample, then, our findings should be treated with a degree of caution and any conclusions taken as tentative.

4. Data analysis

4.1. General frequency of please according to speaker age group and gender

As noted above, an analysis of the frequency of use of *please* in the two groups of speakers of our study, adults and teenagers, will shed light on any marked differences here, which in turn will serve as a first step in asking what reasons might underlie such differences. In her 2015 paper, Aijmer unexpectedly found a significant number of tokens of *please* in the language of teenagers, especially when comparing her results with those from earlier studies, which, in her opinion, was directly related to the presence of exaggeration, humour and other entertaining uses of language. Aijmer also found more cases of *please* in the language of female teenagers, although she clarifies in a footnote that 'the gender of the speaker could not always be identified in the recordings' (2015: 133).

Table 1 below provides an overview of the figures reported for a variety of corpora, including our own findings from LEC and BNC2014 for both adults and teenagers, and will serve as a starting point for the present study.

Table 1
Frequency of please in different corpora per 100,000 words.

Corpus	Raw figures	NF
COLT (Aijmer 2015), young	369	74
London Lund Corpus (LLC; Aijmer, 1996, 2015) adults	75	15
International Corpus of English-Great Britain (ICE-GB; Wichmann, 2004) adults	84	14
LEC young	129	10.6
LEC adult	65	14.1
BNC2014 young	29	22.5
BNC2014 adult	30	13.8

The results from the analyses of COLT and BNC2014 (young speakers) indicate that teenagers use *please* more frequently than adults, with frequencies 74 in COLT and 22.5 in BNC2014 young (normalised per 100,000 words); this compares to lower frequencies in two adult corpora, 14 for ICE-GB and 13.8 for BNC2014 adult. However, the opposite tendency is observed in LEC, in that the normalised frequencies are 10.6 for the younger speakers and 14.1 for adults. Thus, Aijmer's hypothesis is only partially confirmed. Moreover, the above figures illustrate that across the different corpora the normalised frequencies for adult groups do not vary greatly, at around 14 per 100,000 words; on the other hand, notable differences are indeed attested in the teen and young speaker groups, with normalised frequencies ranging from 74 in COLT, 22.5 in BNC2014, and 10.6 in LEC young.

The lack of conclusive findings here led us to consider the data in LEC and BNC2014 in greater detail; we therefore conducted a more fine-grained analysis of the results by considering not only the effects of the age variable but also that of gender, which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been addressed in detail in the literature and could therefore provide further insights into the use of *please*. Tables 2 and 3 and Figs. 1 and 2 show the distribution of tokens in the groups of male/female adults and male/female teenagers in the two corpora (percentages, raw and normalised frequencies per group included). For the interpretation of the data in Tables 2 and 3, it should be borne in mind that the percentages provided for the different groups indicate the corresponding proportion of tokens with respect to the total number of cases, while normalised frequencies were calculated per 100,000 words. Thus, for example, in Table 2, the number of tokens recorded for male and female adults in LEC was 6 and 59 tokens, representing 3.1 % and 30.4 %, respectively, and amounting to 33.5 % of the total (194 instances). The same is true for the teenager group, in which we find 51 and 78 instances, that is, 26.3 % and 40.2 % for young male and female speakers, respectively, amounting to a total percentage of 66.5 %. NF columns stand for normalised frequencies per 100,000 words for each group of speakers, namely adults and teenagers, males and females (cf. also Table 3 for information on BNC2014).

Table 2
Distribution of please according to speaker age and gender in LEC.

	Adults (460,022 words)			Teenagers (1,208,909 words)			Total *LEC* (1,668,931 words)		
	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF
Male	6	3.1	1.3	51	26.3	4.2	57	29.4	3.4
Female	59	30.4	12.8	78	40.2	6.4	137	70.6	8.2
Total	65	33.5	14.1	129	66.5	10.6	194	100	11.6

Table 3
Distribution of please according to speaker age and gender in BNC2014 (London subcorpus).

	Adults (194,768 words)			Teenagers (168,472 words)			Total *BNC2014* (363,240 words)		
	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF
Male	14	23.7	7.1	25	42.4	14.8	39	66.1	10.7
Female	15	25.4	7.7	5	8.5	3	20	33.9	5.5
Total	29	49.1	14.8	30	50.9	17.8	59	100	16.2

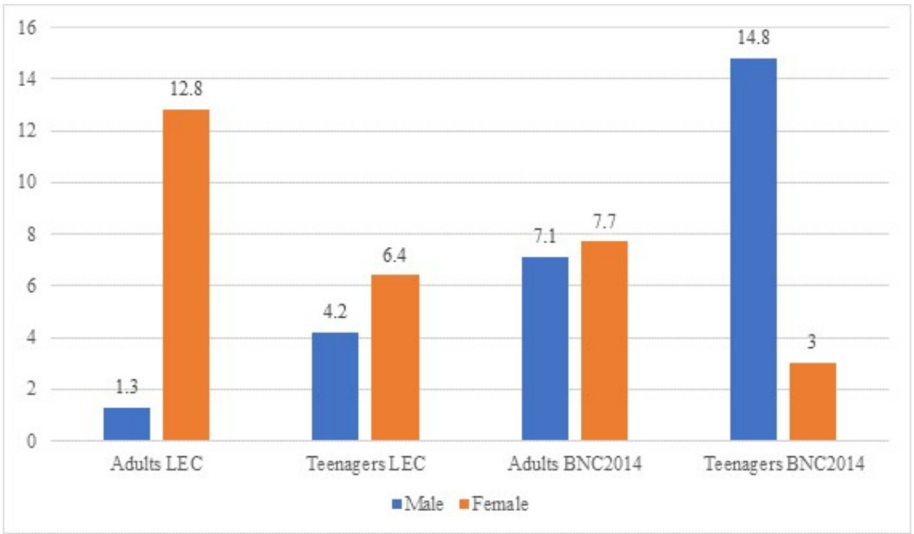

Fig. 1. Distribution of please according to age and gender in LEC and BNC2014 (normalised frequencies per 100,000 words).

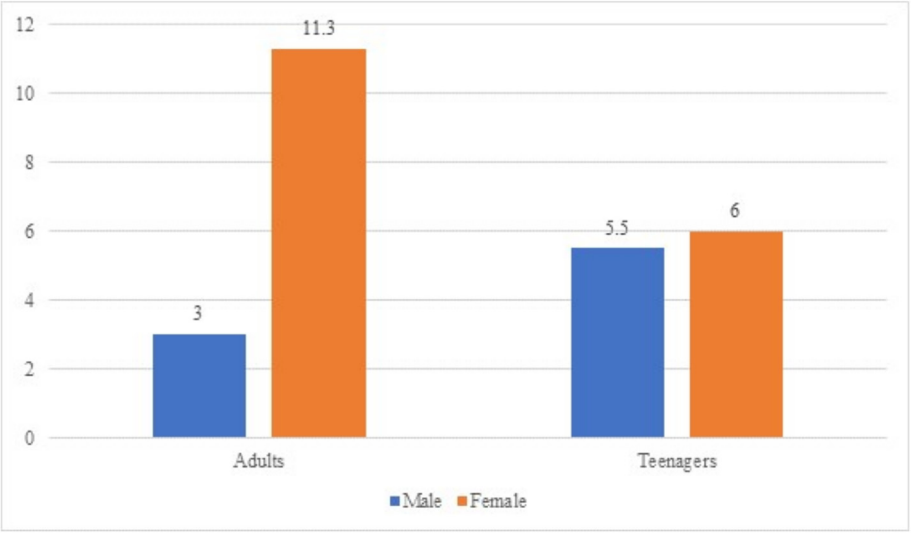

Fig. 2. Distribution of please according to age and gender considering LEC and BNC2014 together (normalized frequencies per 100,000 words).

Table 4 presents the findings derived from the analysis of the whole sample, that is, by taking the LEC and BNC2014 data together.

Table 4
Distribution of please according to speaker age and gender in LEC and BNC2014.

	Adults (654,790 words)			Teenagers (1,377,381 words)			Total *LEC* and *BNC2014* (2,032,171 words)		
	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF	Raw	%	NF
Male	20	7.9	3	76	30	5.5	96	37.9	4.7
Female	74	29.2	11.3	83	32.9	6	157	62.1	7.7
Total	94	37.1	14.3	159	62.9	11.5	253	100	12.4

As discussed above, the findings in LEC (NF 10.6 in LEC young vs. 14.1 in LEC adult) do not confirm Aijmer's (2015) results regarding the higher frequency of *please* in the language of teenagers than adults. A multivariate (or multiple) logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine the effect of age and gender on the use of *please*. The dependent variable was the normalized frequency (NF) of the use of *please* per 100,000 words, while the independent variables were age group (adult vs. young) and gender (male vs. female). The coefficient values obtained were as follows: $\beta = 0.28$ for age group and $\beta = 1.25$ for gender. However, the p-values were not statistically significant in either case, in that they exceeded the threshold of 0.05 ($p = 0.998$ for age group and $p = 0.993$ for gender). Thus, based on the data from LEC, we do not find compelling evidence that either age or gender plays a notable role in the use of *please* in British English.

In BNC2014 the normalized frequencies were higher for young speakers (NF of 17.8 versus 14.8 for adults), but these differences were also not statistically significant, and thus Aijmer's hypothesis could not be confirmed regarding this pattern. We ran a similar multivariate regression analysis on this dataset, obtaining the following coefficient values: $\beta = -0.18$ for age group and $\beta = -0.72$ for gender. Again, the p-values were above the 0.05 threshold ($p = 0.999$ for age group and $p = 0.995$ for gender), indicating a lack of statistical significance.

When combining the results from both corpora (LEC and BNC2014), the normalized frequencies for adults were higher than those for young speakers (NF = 14.3 vs. 11.5, respectively), and female speakers outperformed males (NF = 7.7 for females vs. 4.7 for males). However, these results were not statistically significant either. The coefficient values were $\beta = -0.19$ for age group and $\beta = -0.70$ for gender, with p-values of 0.999 for age group and 0.996 for gender.

Although no statistically significant differences in the use of *please* according to age or gender were observed in any of the analyses, there seems to be a general tendency for female speakers to use this courtesy marker more frequently than males. This pattern aligns with findings reported by Aijmer (2015: 133).

All these findings should be interpreted with caution, since the methodologies used for the compilation of these two corpora were quite different: whereas LEC was compiled mainly using individual and group interviews, BNC2014 consists of more spontaneous material. However, in both cases we are dealing with natural dialogic language produced in conversations and interactions by speakers who, for both age groups, were of similar profiles, and who essentially chose the same topics for discussion. Moreover, the time span covered by the two corpora is not excessively dissimilar: 2004–2010 (LEC) and 2012–2016 (BNC2014). Finally, as discussed in Section 3, the BNC2014 sample selected for our analysis is restricted exclusively to the area of

London, this in order to make the two samples as comparable as possible, although it is thus quite limited in size (59 tokens) and does not allow for firm conclusions to be drawn.

4.2. Discourse type

Table 5 sets out the distribution of tokens in reported and non-reported speech in the two corpora. Of the total of 253 *please* tokens in the data, some 188 (74.3 %) are of *please* in non-reported speech: 151 out of a total of 253 tokens (59.7 %) from LEC, and 37 out of 253 tokens (14.6 %) from BNC2014. In turn, there are only 5 instances of *please* in reported speech in BNC2014, which correspond to 2 % of the total (253), while in LEC we find a much higher number, 60 examples, representing 23.7 % of the total.

Table 5
Tokens found in reported and non-reported speech.

	Non-reported		Reported/quoted		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
LEC	151	59.7	60	23.7	211	83.3
BNC2014	37	14.6	5	2	42	16.7
Total	188	74.3	65	25.7	253	100

Please is found in a significant proportion of examples in reported or quoted speech (65/253, or almost 26 % of the total), as (2) and (3) below illustrate.

(2) I was like, "**please** don't say you got it". (LEC young)
(3) we had those and she said "does anybody want anymore" so Mouthy here said "yes **please**". (LEC adult)

Similar figures of *please* for quoted speech were recorded by (Sato, 2008: 1255) in both American English (27 tokens vs. 73 in non-reported speech) and New Zealand English (28 tokens vs. 72, respectively). Our results, then, confirm previous findings. The high proportion of cases of *please* found in quoted speech, i.e., when speakers are reproducing somebody else's words verbatim (or even their own thoughts) may indicate that its presence is relevant in this type of discourse, as *please* is very often used to express the speaker's stance and attitude towards what is being reported and towards the other participants in the interactions.

Such reported examples do not seem to be associated with any particular position of *please* in the clause or to any specific pragmatic function; indeed, they show a symmetrical distribution according to these two parameters. As regards the quotative or reporting verbs used (cf. Table 6), SAY (ex. 4), BE LIKE (ex. 5), GO (ex. 6) and ZERO (ex. 7) are the most common, while THINK (ex. 8), TELL (ex. 9), WHISPER (ex. 10) and REPLY (ex. 11) are far more marginal.

Table 6
Reporting verbs used to introduce utterances containing please.

Reporting verb	N	%	Example
SAY	17	26.2	(4) The security guard **said** to me "can you take your hat off **please**?" (LEC young)
BE (like)	15	23.1	(5) I **Was like** "oh my gosh **please** no one see me". (LEC young)
GO	13	20	(6) And she **was going** "**please** may I have more wine?" (LEC young)
ZERO	13	20	(7) she's call me mhm she's I sometimes I xxx "name **please** "xxx (LEC adult)
THINK	4	6.2	(8) you'**re thinking** to yourself "**please please** let there be people coming out of x". (LEC young)
TELL	1	1.5	(9) And the doctors **is telling** me "**please** uh I am doctor from eyes yeah". (LEC adult)
WHISPER	1	1.5	(10) **Whispers** "can I have fake id **please** mate". (LEC young)
REPLY	1	1.5	(11) And the alien **replied** "oh yes **please** darling". (LEC young)
TOTAL	65	100	

In line with previous studies on the use of quotatives in spoken English (Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, 2004; Buchstaller, 2014), BE LIKE is used exclusively by young speakers in our corpora, GO is more frequent in the expression of teenagers, while SAY and ZERO are present in the interactions of members of both age groups.

4.3. Position of please in the clause

As noted in the literature (Quirk et al., 1985; Wichmann, 2004; Sato, 2008; Woods, 2020), *please* shows great flexibility in the clause, being found in initial, medial, and final position, as well as on its own, which can be regarded as one of the special properties of this courtesy subjunct as compared to other members of the category, such as *cordially*, *graciously*, and *kindly*.

In our findings (cf. Table 7 below), final position seems to prevail (49.4 %), followed by initial (24.1 %), on its own (14.6 %) and medial (11.9 %).

Table 7
Position of please in the clause.

Position	N	%	Example
Initial	61	24.1	(12) Do you know when we write xxxx. **please** when you write what (LEC young)
			(13) "**please** don't I'm begging you please" (LEC young)
			(14) I Was like "oh my gosh **please** no one see me" (LEC young)
Final	125	49.4	(15) Can I use your card then **please**? (LEC young)
			(16) I'll have water **please**. (LEC adult)
			(17) okay sit down properly **please**. (LEC adult)
Medial	30	11.9	(18) I'll have some wine **please** beer and wine and meatballs (BNC2014 young)
			(19) Wahid **please** come on talk (LEC young)
			(20) Can you text me back **please** or ring me. (LEC young)
On its own/Standalone	37	14.6	(21) And she said "does anybody want anymore" so mouthy here said "yes **please**". (LEC adult)
			(22) okay do you want me to help you? yes **please**. (LEC young)
			(23) we come back but brother weren't there I'm like "humpfh **please**". (LEC young)
Total	253	100	

It is important to consider the position of *please* in the clause because it is directly related to its pragmatic function, given that some systematic interactional functions are position-specific (Sato, 2008: 1250).

In our data from LEC and BNC2014 in both young and old speakers, *please* in initial position, amounting to almost 25 % of all cases, may play the role of an attention-getter (Sato, 2008), as in (12), although this is not the only function it can perform in that position. *Please* can also initiate strong requests, demands or pleas, as in (13), where it is repeated and placed in final position to reinforce the message. In addition, we also find some cases of initial *please* as part of an exclamative structure through which the speaker expresses a strong wish (14). This will be discussed further in Section 4.5.

Please in final position represents almost half of the total cases (49.4 %) and is very often associated with indirect requests, as in (15). These requests generally imply a minimal imposition on the interlocutor and are usually introduced by a modal verb, principally CAN, COULD and WOULD, although similar cases are recorded in simple declaratives, such as in (16), in which the inclusion of *please* often indicates that the speakers have changed from a general statement to a request or order. Likewise, when the stronger imperative form occurs, as in (17), *please* is used to tone down the petition so that the interlocutor does not feel that their face is being threatened.

The proportion of cases of *please* in medial position is only 11.9 %, a total of 30 tokens, and is often associated with pleas and polite commands, as in (18), where it occurs in a declarative; however, it can also be found with an imperative (19) and in an interrogative introduced by CAN (20). Finally, 37 tokens, almost 15 % of the total, are recorded in which *please* stands on its own, that is, as an independent turn. The most frequent functions in this group are those of accepting something (21), giving an affirmative response to a request or giving permission (22). However, there are also a few marginal examples in which *please* shows disapproval or even irritation (23). This will also be discussed further in Section 4.5.

From the above, we can confirm both the flexibility of *please* in the clause, and its multifunctional nature. Our findings also bear out Woods's claims (2020: 121) regarding the influence of several linguistic factors that condition its position, e.g., clause type, modality, and negative polarity, all of which will be considered below, in Section 4.4. In addition, position has a direct bearing on the pragmatic function of *please* as has just been shown.

4.4. Clause types containing please

Our findings from the two corpora (cf. Table 8 below), and for all the speakers therein, confirm previous results (House, 1989; Wichmann, 2004; Sato, 2008; Aijmer, 2015) that imperatives (40.7 % in our data) and interrogatives (33.7 %) are the preferred types of clauses for *please*, followed by declaratives (11.1 %) and semi-free standing (11 %), i.e., cases in which *please* occurs together with a NP or after the affirmative *yes*. The number of free-standing/standalone cases is quite limited, at just 3.5 % of cases.

Within the group of examples containing questions, modal interrogatives, that is, those introduced by CAN (ex. 24), COULD (ex. 25), WILL (ex. 26), WOULD (ex. 27) and MAY (ex. 28), which very often express requests, or sometimes ask for permission (ex. 24), are the most numerous; those initiated by CAN are by far the most frequent (26.4 %). There are 3 cases starting with COULD and 3 with WILL, while 2 examples are recorded with WOULD and 1 with MAY. In interrogatives of this type, *please* occurs mainly in final position (82 % of cases) and the pronouns *you* and *I* are generally the subjects of these questions.

Table 8
Distribution of please according to clause type.

Clause type	N	%	Example
CAN *yes/no* interrogative	67	26.4	(24) yeah can I do that **please**? (BNC2014 young)
COULD *yes/no* interrogative	3	1.2	(25) Could you stop **please**? (BNC2014 young)
WILL *yes/no* interrogative	3	1.2	(26) he just says "**please** will you smoke your outside" (LEC young)
WOULD *yes/no* interrogative	2	0.8	(27) Would you get it for me **please**? (LEC young
MAY *yes/no* interrogative	1	0.5	(28) she was going "**please** may I have more wine?" (LEC young)
Yes/no interrogative	5	2	(29) And you say "excuse me have you got change **please**? (LEC young)
WH-interrogative	4	1.6	(30) What's that shitty thing **please**? (LEC young)
Declarative positive	22	8.7	(31) I'll have a drop of cheese **please** (LEC adult)
Declarative negative	6	2.4	(32) I Was like "oh my gosh **please** no one see me". (LEC young)
Free standing/standalone (*please* used alone in a turn)	9	3.5	(33) Do you want water? **please** (BNC2014 adult)
Semi-free standing (*yes please*, NP *please*)	28	11	(34) Coffee **please** … (LEC young)
Imperative *let*	4	1.6	(35) let me go first **please** (LEC young)
Imperative positive	75	29.6	(36) Come here come here **please** (LEC young)
Imperative negative	24	9.5	(37) **please** don't point at me (BNC2014 adult)
Total	253	100	

The number of declarative clauses with *please* (positive and negative) is quite limited, a total of 28 cases (exs. 31 and 32). The pragmatic functions expressed by *please* in declarative sentences vary considerably from requests and pleas to strong wishes or disapprovals, as we will see later.

Please can also appear on its own (free standing) as a substitute for a full sentence (3.5 %), as in (33), or may co-occur with one other word (semi-free standing; 11 %), as in (34). Turning to imperatives, we find 4 cases (1.6 %) introduced by *let* (ex. 35), while the remaining examples are canonical: 75 (29.6 %) are found in the positive (ex. 36), but a notable number (24, almost 10 %) are in the negative (ex. 37). *Please* in these negative imperative sentences is often found at the beginning of the clause, and only very rarely at the end.

4.5. The expression of (im)politeness in the language of teenagers and adults

As discussed in Section 3, after a consideration of the literature on (im)politeness theory (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996, 2005, 2011; Watts, 2003; Haugh and Bousfield, 2012; Leech, 2014; Taylor, 2016) and previous studies that focussed specifically on the pragmatics of *please* (Wichmann, 2004, 2005; Sato, 2008; Aijmer, 2015; Murphy and De Felice, 2018; Islentyeva et al., 2023), as well as findings derived from a pilot study of our own conducted with a small dataset, we were able to distinguish two broad groups of pragmatic functions of *please*. These can be placed on a continuum, with the category of politeness at one end and that of impoliteness at the other; several subcategories or subtypes can be established along this continuum, since both politeness and impoliteness can be treated as scalar categories. Thus, within the category of politeness we included the following pragmatic functions: *please* used to accept something, as an attention-getter, expressing requests/pleas and also strong requests or orders. The second set of negative or impolite meanings comprised banter/mock impoliteness, emotional narrative, exclamative disapproval/disbelief/irritation/sarcasm, the expression of negative attitudes/feelings, mock dispute, and verbal formula mismatches. Some of these are illustrative of 'non-genuine impoliteness' rather than 'genuine impoliteness' (e.g., insults), and can have a range of functions and be perceived in different ways by participants in the interactions. Thus, banter/mock impoliteness can be 'a signal of solidarity and camaraderie' (Leech, 2014: 239) and usually 'takes place between equals, typically friends, and is reciprocal' (Culpeper, 2011: 215); the same can be said of most cases of verbal formula mismatches, which, despite the clash between polite and impolite items (*will you fuck off please?*), express no real offence, in that the lack of politeness here is used 'to emphasise values such as solidarity and intimacy' (Aijmer, 2015: 137). However, some emotional and exclamative uses of *please* do convey negative feelings such as urgency, anger, annoyance, irritation, etc., and 'the speaker's behaviour can therefore be perceived as impolite or face-threatening' (Aijmer, 2015: 141), although this is not always the case. This type of emotionally-driven impoliteness has been referred to as 'affective impoliteness' by Culpeper (2011: 59; 221-25), and is said to be 'the targeted display of heightened emotion' (2011: 223).

This general taxonomy allowed us to obtain an overview of the (im)polite uses of *please* in our data (cf. Table 9). As mentioned above (Section 3), the analysis of the data was conducted by the two authors separately, and involved a meticulous reading of the examples, paying close attention to the context and the participants' reactions in the exchanges, since it was necessary to discern both the speaker's intention in the expression of their message and the interlocutor's perception of and reaction to it. Additional information provided by the corpus transcribers regarding participants' responses and their behaviour in the conversation (gestures, laughter, mimicking, silence, hesitations, overlappings, etc.) proved to be very useful in the interpretation of the interactions, especially so since we did not have access to audio files. There was a large degree of agreement in the classification of instances according to each of the categories distinguished. Where this was not the case, the

examples were reconsidered by both authors together, looking at the whole interaction in which *please* was used, towards a final decision regarding the pragmatic function. Despite such careful reconsideration, 8 tokens of *please* (2.5 % of the total) remained unclear or were not interpreted similarly by the two authors, and thus were removed from the general count. The annotators' agreement, as measured by Cohen's kappa, was k = 0.94, which is considered to indicate almost perfect agreement (cf. Landis and Coch, 1977).

Table 9
Polite and impolite uses of please in the data.

POLITENESS			
	N	NF[2]	%
Accepting something	22	1.08	8.7
Attention-getter	7	0.34	2.8
Request/plea	100	4.92	39.4
Strong request/order	78	3.83	30.9
Subtotal	207	10.17	81.8
IMPOLITENESS			
Banter/mock	7	0.34	2.8
Emotional narrative/mimicking	3	0.14	1.2
Exclamative disapproval	9	0.44	3.6
Exclamative disbelief	2	0.09	0.8
Exclamative irritation	5	0.24	1.9
Exclamative sarcasm	4	0.19	1.6
Exclamative strong wish	8	0.39	3.2
Expressing negative attitudes	5	0.24	1.9
Mock dispute	1	0.04	0.4
Verbal formula mismatches	2	0.09	0.8
Subtotal	46	2.2	18.2
TOTAL	253	12.37	100

As expected, our findings confirm that *please* is more frequent as a courtesy/politeness marker, at a proportion of almost 82 % of total cases (207/253); however, it is also present in contexts of impoliteness (46/253; 18.2 %). As a politeness marker, *please* is most frequently attested in the expression of requests and when asking for permission (39.4 %; ex. 38) and orders (30.9 %; ex. 39), and to a lesser degree when accepting something or as an invitation (8.7 %; ex. 40), as well as an attention-getter (2.8 %; ex. 41).

(38) Can I wear it **please**? (LEC adult)
(39) stop it **please** stop it I think that's all tight (BNC2014 young)
(40) do you want some rice "yes **please**". (LEC young)
(41) if I want a pair of trainer i'm gonna beg my mum for 2 weeks like "mum **please** there's this sale in JD and I need some trainers I beg you mum please". (LEC young)

By contrast, when expressing impoliteness, *please* may serve to convey disapproval (3.6 %), a strong wish (3.2 %), banter (2.8 %), irritation (1.9 %), sarcasm (1.6 %), emotion in a narrative (1.2 %), disbelief (0.8 %), verbal formula mismatches (0.8 %) and mock disputes (0.4 %); in all of the latter cases speakers get carried away when recounting their stories and become very emotional. We will deal with these negative or impolite meanings in further detail in Section 4.5.1, where examples of each of these functions are provided.

When classifying our findings according to the age variable (cf. Table 10 and Fig. 3), clear differences are observed between adults and teenagers.

[2] As before, normalised frequencies (NF) were calculated per 100,000 words.

Table 10
Polite and impolite uses of please according to age.[3]

POLITENESS	ADULTS			TEENAGERS		
	N	NF	%	N	NF	%
Accepting something	13	1.98	13.7	9	0.65	5.7
Attention-getter	5	0.76	5.3	2	0.14	1.3
Request/plea	30	4.58	31.6	70	5.08	44.3
Strong request/order	40	6.1	42.1	38	2.75	24
Subtotal	88	13.42	92.7	119	8.62	75.3
IMPOLITENESS						
Banter/mock	2	0.3	2.1	5	0.36	3.2
Emotional narrative/mimicking	–		–	3	0.21	1.9
Exclamative disapproval	3	0.45	3.1	6	0.43	3.8
Exclamative disbelief	–		–	2	0.14	1.3
Exclamative irritation	2	0.3	2.1	3	0.21	1.9
Exclamative sarcasm	–		–	4	0.29	2.5
Exclamative strong wish	–		–	8	0.58	5
Expressing negative attitudes	–		–	5	0.36	3.2
Mock dispute	–		–	1	0.07	0.6
Verbal formula mismatches	–		–	2	0.14	1.3
Subtotal	7	1.05	7.3	39	2.79	24.7
TOTAL	95	14.47	100	158	11.41	100

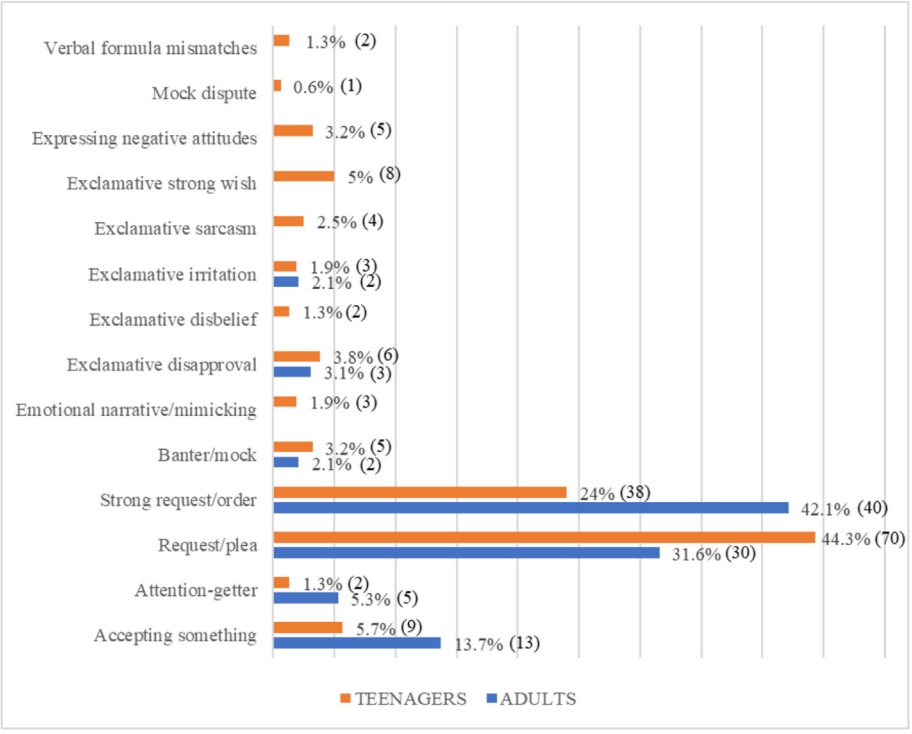

Fig. 3. Polite and impolite uses of please according to age.

While adult speakers tend to conform to the expected pattern, that is, 'the accepted norm' (cf. Leech, 2014: 224), mainly using *please* as an expression of politeness (92.7 % of the total), young speakers do so to a markedly lower degree (75.3 %). Conversely, examples associated with various types of impoliteness amount to 24.7 % in the language of teenagers versus 7.3 % in adult speakers, just 7 examples in the latter group.

[3] N columns indicate raw numbers for *please* expressing politeness and impoliteness in adults and teenagers. % columns, in turn, make reference to the corresponding percentages out of the total number of tokens of *please* recorded, 95 in the case of adults and 158 in the case of teenagers. Normalised frequencies (NF) were again calculated per 100,000 words.

A binary logistic regression was conducted to assess the effect of age group (young vs. adult) on the use of polite vs. impolite forms of *please*. The independent variable was age group, while the dependent variable was the binary outcome of the use of *please* (polite vs. impolite). The logistic regression model found a significant effect of age group on impolite uses of *please* ($\beta = 1.42$, $p = 0.001$). The positive coefficient indicates that young speakers are significantly more likely to use it in an impolite manner compared to adults. These results suggest that impolite or negative uses of *please* are statistically more frequent in the speech of young speakers than in that of adults, which is in line with (Aijmer's, 2015: 127, 146) claim that these impolite uses or functions of the term are found frequently in teen talk.

Within the politeness categories some additional differences were observed between the two age groups. Thus, whereas requests are higher in frequency in teen talk (44.3 %) than in adults (31.6 %), the opposite is true for orders, where 42.1 % were found in adult speech but only 24 % in the case of teens. This may be accounted for by the patterns of use of the speakers of the two groups in their everyday conversations, where adults are perhaps more likely to give orders and directives, and teens more likely to obey them. It may also be related to the fact that teenagers in general tend to have fewer opportunities to construct sentences with *please* in their daily conversations when interacting with peers and friends.

Given that the proportion of negative meanings or impolite uses of *please* is far higher for teenagers than adults, and that these differences are statistically significant, it seems appropriate in what follows to explore some of the impolite uses found in teen talk in more detail. Among these uses are banter/mock impoliteness (4.5.1.1), mock disputes (4.5.1.2), emotional narratives (4.5.1.3), verbal formula mismatches (4.5.1.4), negative attitudes (4.5.1.5), as well as different uses of exclamative *please* (4.5.1.6).

4.5.1. Impolite uses of please

4.5.1.1. Banter/mock impoliteness. Within this category we find cases of requests with *please* which may be regarded as apparently impolite but which are used for the purposes of teasing or in humorous contexts. Mock impoliteness or banter, as Culpeper (2011: 208) argues, can be regarded as the opposite of genuine politeness or, as (Taylor, 2016: 16) claims, the 'counterpart to mock politeness'. According to Leech (2014: 239), banter is one of the distinguishing features of camaraderie, a central element in the lives of teenagers, where solidarity and the feeling of belonging to the group are very important.

In (42) Michelle is encouraging her friend Sandra to *grind* (dance in a sexual way) with a boy who seems to feel confused or under the effects of drugs. The episode occurs in an informal context and the two girls seem to be continuously teasing and challenging each other. There is a kind of banter associated with the whole exchange, this confirmed by the fact that the other participant, Rebecca, perceives that her friends are not speaking seriously, in that she reacts with laughter. The addition of *please* to the directive *go on* serves to add a mocking tone to the contextual frame. The exchange closes with a categorical negative, *no way*, from Sandra, although this is expressed with laughter, which again confirms the presence of banter.

(42) Michelle: he's got to be on some form of drug cos he just just not know what he's doing. He's not even like.
Rebecca: I don't I don't think he can/see us/
Michelle: aware that people < Sandra sings > I don't think he's aware that people can see him go on (name = Sandra) get out there and start grinding with him go on **please** (name = Sandra).
Sandra: you're joking < Rebecca laughs > yeah alright.
Michelle: go go on now go on go {unclear} him up start dancing next to him.
Sandra: no way <laughter> (LEC young).

4.5.1.2. Mock dispute. This is a somewhat similar category to the previous one, although here the apparent dispute between the participants in the conversation extends over a longer period of time, yet all within a humorous atmosphere. In (43) Maria and Sulema are teasing and criticising each other about where in the city they come from. Everything that they mention about each other's neighbourhood is negative. Sulema then imagines herself walking around the area of the town where Maria lives, and as part of this she narrates how she greets somebody, after which there is an unexpected use of *please* that serves to add a more humorous tone to the false dispute. Maria, rather than becoming angry, laughs at this, as if she were challenging Sulema.

(43) Maria: right I haven't seen where you live and you've never seen where I live so you can't judge where I live/no don't try it no no no no it's the own town it's the own towns it's the own town the only place I've been through where you live/all I see is monkey shit < laughing and clapping > all I see is cow pats and shit.
Sulema: hello **please** and when I go to see what do I see red and white roads yeah follow/the white brick road//
Maria: yeah at least we got a road blad/# #1 yeah so do we. (LEC young).

4.5.1.3. Emotional narratives. As we discussed in relation to the type of discourse (Section 4.2), *please* is quite often found in reported speech where a speaker tells a story or anecdote, or recounts an imaginary game or a hypothetical situation. In these reported accounts teenagers often assume a role and mimic or imitate the way another person speaks, perhaps by adopting a persona with a particular accent or with a curious way of expressing things. This can be seen in (44), where Barry and Henry are playing a kind of game and Henry, supposedly assuming the role of an ideal knight, asks a hypothetical queen to go with him by using *please* in a polite request, this accompanied by the inappropriate term of endearment *darling,* a formula not

expected to be used in addressing a queen. *Please* thus loses its original value and adds a humorous tone to the exchange, in which there is also an imitation of a braying horse which, we are told, is disabled; all of this contributes to making the episode even more amusing. There is also an indication that the queen responds to the offer with the negative *never* pronounced with a trill /r/, indicating an exaggerated, archaic form of Received Pronunciation.

(44) jump him you have to now you gonna get jumped # Henry makes galloping horse noises ah you're jacked double time now your turn now jump him # Henry makes sucking teeth noises and brays like horse # he's gotta ask the king but the horse is disabled cos it can only turn in Ls xxxx my darling come to me **please** you know # *accented* # never # *with trill r* # # continues with horse galloping noises (LEC young)

4.5.1.4. Verbal formula mismatches. This group is represented in the data by two examples in which there is a clear mismatch between a polite and an impolite formula. Such examples are what Culpeper (2011: 174) calls 'verbal formula mismatches', equivalent to Leech's (2014: 238) 'attitude clashes', that is, 'situations where the overt "polite" meaning and the "impolite" meaning of irony occur side by side in the same piece of language'. In these cases, *please* often occurs with emotionally loaded swear words or taboo language, yielding a situation where there is a clash between a polite and an impolite formula. This can be observed in (45), where Stacey, a 12-year-old girl, wants her friend to turn the recorder off. Despite using *please*, the whole interaction is loaded with directives (*turn that down*, *turn it off*, *leave me alone*, *beg you*), offensive vocatives (*you dickhead*, *you retard*) and taboo or vulgar words (*shit*, *shitty*), thus leading to a mismatch of formulae.

(45) Stacey: turn that down turn it off completely name turn just leave me alone man B: what'd you mean just leave you alone you dickhead touch him what you all gonna do what's it called? Yeah ye y ey eeeeeeeee # drawn out # yo yo yooooo # drawn out # name yeah?
Stacey: turn that shit off leave me alone mmm mmm mmm you retard ey name beg you go and turn off his off his erm what's that shitty thing **please**? (LEC young).

4.5.1.5. Please expressing negative attitudes. A total of 5 tokens were found in which the speaker uses *please* not to express something polite but to convey their discomfort, disapproval, disagreement, disbelief with what another participant has just said or with the way they have behaved. *Please* here occurs mainly in initial position, which helps to reinforce the speaker's negative intention, followed either by an imperative in the negative (46) or by strong directives such as *shut up* (47) and *stop* (48).

(46) I thought no **please** don't try anything I thought she was gonna jump on me or something. (LEC young)
(47) just **please** shut up and let us go. (LEC young)
(48) when x no **please** stop lying/she's lying she's lying (LEC young)

4.5.1.6. Exclamative please. This final group includes a total of 23 examples where *please* is part of an exclamative through which the speaker expresses disapproval (ex. 49), irritation (ex. 50), a strong wish (ex. 51), sarcasm (ex. 52), or disbelief (ex. 53), that is, attitudes, feelings and responses that exceed what is generally understood by politeness. In all these cases the speaker tells a story or recounts a situation and becomes emotionally involved. *Please* here occupies initial position and is very often followed by a directive.

(49) Oh my days this is long **please** don't have me do it again **please.** (LEC young)

The speaker in (49), a seventeen-year-old girl, is asked by the interviewer to read out a list of words. Having read it once, she does not want to do so again, and reacts by showing her disapproval, which is expressed by means of *Oh my days* ('Oh my God'), a recurrent exclamative in so-called *Multicultural London English* (MLE; Cheshire et al., 2011). The repetition of *please* at the end of the clause serves to strengthen the impositive force of the directive rather than toning it down.

In (50) Dexter is trying to describe to Courtney's mother what happened at a party; his interlocutors, however, do not seem to be paying much attention, and he shows his irritation by resorting to the combination of *please* with the imperative *listen up*, as a means of engaging his audience and calling their attention, this reinforced by the following 'are you listening'.

(50) can I say that? You can say # Courtney laughs # but it's my mum [nah I re] she's old I remember one time yeah # Aimee laughs # there was a party at your house yeah are you listening? Ah **please** listen up because # laughing # are you listening? (LEC young)

In (51) a group of friends are reflecting on what happened on their nights out. One of them explains how, on one occasion, he became very drunk, fell down the stairs, and felt very bad. It is at this moment that he resorts to the use of *please* plus a

negative imperative (*don't die*) to express a strong wish about something over which the speaker has no control and which is also charged with a humorous tone arising from the contrast between the serious connotations associated with the idea of dying and the context of banter in which the exchange takes place. The fact that *please* is used both at the beginning and at the end of the utterance also helps to convey this strong and hypothetical wish, and serves to intensify the emotional involvement of the speaker.

(51) oh my goodness don't **please** don't die tonight **please** (BNC2014 young)

In (52) Maria is explaining that all the white girls used to feel attracted (at school) to a black boy called Ryan; she then sarcastically and ironically mimics the kind of things these girls would say whenever they saw him. Here the apparent request expressed by *please* in the exclamative is loaded with sarcasm, which helps to ridicule the behaviour of the girls even more strongly.

(52) all just love him "Ryan oh **please** Ryan come and hug me Ryan" #mobile goes off # that's why I #Grace laughs # (LEC young)

In (53) a group of friends are taking about rules in their family homes. Isabella refers to the fact that she always has to be home at a certain time. While the rest of the interlocutors react to that, Hadiya, as if she were making fun of Isabella, says (laughing) that she has to be back by eight o'clock, although she immediately makes it clear that it is always after half past eight. On this occasion *please* is added at the end of her turn not to express a request but as a reaction to her interlocutors' laughter, as well as to sound more convincing in her claim. The amusement that accompanies the whole turn lends it a tone of banter rather than a dramatic one.

(53) Isabella: (I) have to come home a certain time
Hadiya: tick for that one <laughter>
Isabella: they'll be ringing on my phone yeah.
Bisa: eh embarrassing.
Isabella: my mum come in [Bisa: eh] in 2 minutes ago. ten minutes ago {unclear}
Hadiya: yes < Bisa laughs> and the time like eight o'clock as well <laughter> … I'm coming after half eight ***please*** <laughter>
S: what time do you have to be in?
Hadiya: <laughter> I'm joking well uhm like [Bisa: not that early] (LEC young).

5. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

The present study has served to confirm the status of *please* as a distinctive feature of oral communication, not only among adult speakers, but also, and more markedly, among younger ones. Although previous work (e.g., Aijmer, 2015) has considered the frequency and functions of *please* in the language of adolescents, no contrast has hitherto been drawn using recent data between young and adult speakers regarding their use of this traditional courtesy marker. This was the starting point of the present study.

Our results have shown that even though *please* is more common in the language of teenagers in the BNC2014 corpus (differences not statistically significant), this is not the case in LEC, where the reverse is true and *please* is more frequently attested in adult speech. This would only partially confirm Aijmer's (2015) findings from analysis of the COLT corpus concerning the high frequency of *please* among London teenagers. In terms of gender variation, we did not detect any statistically significant differences, although females tend to use *please* slightly more often than males, which coincides with Aijmer's results.

Our study also shows that *please* occurs quite frequently in reported or quoted speech (almost 26 % of cases). In line with previous research, it seems that young speakers perceive *please* as a sort of discourse marker which they often include in their exchanges, especially when they want to express their emotions and show their involvement when telling anecdotes or narrating stories to others, probably in order to make their accounts more vivid, real and authentic.

Clause position and clause type were also taken into consideration, since these two parameters have been shown to influence the various pragmatic functions that *please* may convey. Thus, despite its great flexibility, final position of *please* in the clause is prevalent (in pleas and indirect requests above all), especially in imperatives and questions, the types of clauses in which *please* occurs most frequently. Initial position favours the use of *please* as an attention-getter, as well as its use to introduce requests, pleas and various types of exclamatives, while *please* in medial position is far less commonly attested and can express a variety of meanings. Used on its own, as a sort of independent turn, *please* mostly expresses acceptance and positive response. As far as the type of clause is concerned, modal interrogatives introduced by CAN to express requests are, by far, the most numerous, whereas *please* is also frequent in imperative clauses, both positive and negative.

Not surprisingly, our analysis has shown that *please* is more commonly attested as a courtesy marker, but its presence as a marker of impoliteness in the language of teenagers should be emphasised, in that this clearly contrasts with its behaviour in

the language of adults, where it is far less frequent in impolite contexts, group differences here being statistically significant. As a politeness marker, *please* is mainly found in requests in the case of teens, and in orders in the case of adults. As a marker of impoliteness, it may be used to convey different meanings, including irritation, sarcasm, disbelief, disapproval, strong wish, banter, mockery, etc. Of particular interest in our analysis was the use of *please* in so-called 'verbal formula mismatches', where a clash occurs between a polite and an impolite meaning/formula within the same utterance. Therefore, the (im)polite uses of *please* by teenagers, especially when compared to those of their adult counterparts, appears to support the idea that, in terms of (im)politeness theory, the age factor should be addressed alongside other variables, such as the cultural background, social context, and gender. It may also be the case that the perception of what is polite and impolite in language may change over time.

Furthermore, the use of *please* in different contexts of impoliteness would, in our opinion, account for the notion of 'deontic' or 'pragmatic reversal', as discussed in Mazzon (2017) and Fedriani (2019), since *please* here seems to shift in its politeness value, appearing more often in confrontational and conflictive situations, which broadly resembles the process(es) that the corresponding equivalents *per favore*, *per cortesia* and *per piacere* in Italian have undergone, as Fedriani (2019) shows.

Finally, possible avenues for further research include the analysis of *please* in other varieties of English, as well as in other languages; thus, a contrastive study of English *please* and Spanish *por favor* would be a potentially interesting area to explore. The gender variable should also be addressed by considering a larger sample of data, towards more conclusive results in this respect. Moreover, as a means of seeing the notion of pragmatic/deontic reversal in operation, further polite uses of taboo vocatives and swear words could be explored to shed new light on this interesting phenomenon.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Paloma Núñez Pertejo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Data availability

Data have been extracted from open access corpora (*London English Corpus* & *BNC2014*).

Acknowledgements

The Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (grants PID2020-114604GB-I00 & PID2021-122267NB-I00) and the Regional Government of Galicia (Consellería de Cultura, Educación, Formación Profesional e Universidades, grants ED431B2021/02 & ED431B2023/03).

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