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PERFORMATIVE VERBS IN REQUESTS: EVIDENCE FROM EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LETTERS

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ABSTRACT: In the second half of the eighteenth century the courtesy marker pray *was the default pragmatic marker used in polite requests while the new form* please *started to emerge.* Pray *was a grammaticalized form originated in the longer performative expression* I pray you/thee, *whereas the verb* please *had a different syntactic pattern. In the same period there were other performative expressions, particularly common in the epistolary genre, with the same syntactic pattern observed in* (I) pray (you) *and also used in directives. They resorted to the wide variety of requestive verbs available in Late Modern English, such as* beg, beseech, desire, entreat, *and* request. *This paper examines the set of different performative expressions used as polite request markers in the* Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose *(1761-1790) in order to provide an account of their productivity and functions in the second half of the eighteenth century.*

KEYWORDS: performatives, requests, politeness, epistolary genre, eighteenth century.

VERBOS PERFORMATIVOS EN PETICIONES: EVIDENCIA EN CARTAS DEL SIGLO XVIII

RESUMEN: En la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII el marcador de cortesía pray *era el marcador pragmático más habitual en peticiones mientras que la nueva forma* please *empezaba a surgir.* Pray *era una forma gramaticalizada con origen en el performativo* I pray you/thee, *pero* please *tiene un origen sintáctico diferente. En el mismo periodo se utilizaban otras expresiones performativas, frecuentes sobre todo en cartas, con el mismo patrón sintáctico que* (I) pray (you) *y que también se usaban en directivos. Estas expresiones hacían uso de la gran variedad de verbos de petición disponibles en el periodo de inglés moderno tardío, como* beg, beseech, desire, entreat *y* request. *Este trabajo revisa el conjunto de expresiones performativas utilizadas como marcadores de cortesía en peticiones en el* Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose *(1761-1790) para revisar su productividad y las funciones desempeñadas en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: performativos, peticiones, cortesía, género epistolar, siglo XVIII.

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1. Introduction

Directive speech acts have become an interesting source to gather linguistic and extralinguistic information about previous stages of the language since they might reflect ongoing changes in societies and individuals (cf. Culpeper and Demmen 2011; Włodarczyk 2013). In this respect, Sönmez (2005) analyses several requestive verbs such as *beg, beseech, desire, entreat, please, pray,* and *request* in her study on this speech act in seventeenth-century family letters, and finds revealing results concerning the selection of request markers depending on variables such as age.

Some of these expressions were extremely productive and often used parenthetically as downtoners to soften the imposition of the request, as in the case of *(I) beg*, which reached a substantial level of conventionalization. The fact that there were so many expressions used with similar functions may be related to sociolinguistic factors due to the important role played by politeness in the eighteenth century (Klein 2002). In fact, the characteristic eighteenth-century abundance of mitigating devices in the speech act of requests and the frequent use of both conventional and non-conventional indirect strategies might be perceived as overpolite from a modern perspective (cf. Locher 2004: 90).

The analysis takes into consideration the different pragmatic functions of these expressions and the level of fixation reached by some of them. For this purpose, it will make use of the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose*¸ compiled by David Denison and Linda van Bergen, which comprises a collection of letters (c. 300,000 words) sent to Richard Orford, a steward of Peter Legh the Younger at Lyme Hall in Cheshire, in the period 1761-1790. The corpus includes dialectal English of the North-West, which was relatively uninfluenced by prescriptivist ideas. The letters included usually deal with everyday subject-matter, often combining business and personal affairs (see van Bergen and Denison 2007).

2. Performatives and request strategies in English

Austin's (1975: 6) broadly defined "performative" verbs as those verbs that 'perform' different actions (Austin 1975: 6). Such actions may be realized through a performative verb, that is, "the verb naming the action while performing it" (Huang 2007: 95). Thus, when an action is realized by uttering the verb, the action is an "explicit performative", whereas "implicit performatives" do

not contain a performative verb (Austin 1975: 32). Fraser (1996: 173) includes performative expressions (e.g. *I promise, I request, we invite you*) within his catalogue of pragmatic markers, since they can convey the speaker's communicative intention beyond theit literal meaning. Thus, performatives are regarded one of the source categories of pragmatic/discourse markers (cf. Landone 2009: 89; Ghezzi 2014: 26), due to their pragmatic function.

Blum-Kulka (1987) and Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) offer a catalogue of the different request strategies in Present-day English from more direct to more indirect ones, as shown in Table 1 below. According to this classification, performatives are placed in the most direct side of the continuum:

Table 1. *Requests strategies in English* (*adapted from Blum-Kulka (1987) and Blum-Kulka* et al. *(1989: 18)*)

Direct	Mood derivable	*Move your car.*
	Performatives	*I'm asking you to move your car.*
	Hedged performatives	*I would like to ask you to move your car.*
	Obligation statements	*You'll have to move your car.*
	Want statements	*I want you to move your car.*
Conventionally indirect	Suggestory formulae	*How about cleaning up?*
	Query preparatory	*Would you mind moving your car?*
Non-conventionally indirect	Strong hints	*You've left the kitchen in a right mess.*
	Mild hints	*We don't want any crowding (as a request to move the car).*

Whereas conventionally indirect requests are the most common strategy in Present-day English, this was not the case in earlier periods of English. Thus, in Late Modern English there were several verbs with meanings related to 'request' in this speech act, and most of them were used performatively. Examples of explicit performatives from early Modern English onwards include *I beg, I beseech* or *I entreat* (cf. Akimoto 2000: 78; Sönmez 2005: 11), and their core lexical meaning was similar: 'to ask earnestly'. *Pray*, which was the most frequent politeness marker in requests in this period, had a performative origin (*I pray you*), while *please*, which was starting to emerge in the late eighteenth century, was not an explicit performative since it developed from an imperative followed by an infinitive with *to*. According to Akimoto (2000: 77-78), the grammaticalization of *pray* followed a similar path to that of epistemic parentheticals, such as

I think (cf. Thompson and Mulac 1991), namely the deletion of *that* in the subordinate clause could enable the free position of the expression as a parenthetical.

Several studies pay attention to requests strategies in the history of English. Sönmez (2005) analyses request expressions in family letters in the seventeenth century, using the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler* and other collections. She selects both unmarked requests and conventional indirect requests formulated most commonly with verbs such as *beseech*, *beg*, *please*, *entreat*, *pray* and *desire*. In the period covered by her study, five decades from 1623 to 1660, direct strategies constitute the most frequent way of formulating a request. She also shows that the set of request verbs and strategies used by seniors addressing their juniors is less varied than those used by juniors to address seniors and those used between equals. Thus, Sönmez finds out a correlation between certain expressions and social relations, since generational deference is a determining factor in the choice of requests expressing a higher or lower degree of deference.

Culpeper and Archer's (2008) analysis of requests in trial proceedings and play-texts shows that direct strategies, such as impositives were the most common way to express a request in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and reveals that in the period they examine there was no need for mitigation or modification. Culpeper and Archer identify a number of strategies that fit in Blum-Kulka *et al.*'s (1989) three main groups of request strategies (according to their directness scale): direct, conventionally indirect and hints. While impositives are the most frequent strategy in their study, conventional indirect requests were used mainly by powerful people or intimates of high status. According to Culpeper and Archer, it seems "likely that the lack of distance associated with impositives, particularly imperatives, has neutral or even positive value" (2008: 76). Thus, they find that more power relative to others correlates with greater directness.

Del Lungo Camiciotti (2008) focuses on nineteenth-century commercial letters, and identifies performatives as the most common request strategies, while indirect strategies, the preferred ones in Present-day English, were not so frequent yet. This author relates the use of straightforward strategies to the non-institutional context of business relations, in which participants negotiate both commercial activities and acquaintance.

3. Data analysis

3.1. *Performative verbs in eighteenth-century requests*

Entries corresponding to different performative verbs in eighteenth-century dictionaries reveal several coincidences with regard to the verbs included in their definitions. Thus, in an entry for the verb *beg*, several other requestive verbs are included: "to pray, beseech, intreat, desire, petition, or crave alms, favour, or assistance of any kind from another" (Dyche 1740, s.v. *beg*). Similarly, we can identify other synonyms in entries for *beseech* "to beg, or intreat" (Martin 1749, s.v. *beseech*) or *bid* "to desire, to ask; to command, to order; to offer, to propose; to pronounce, to declare; to denounce" (Sheridan 1780, s.v. *bid*). Verbs such as e*ntreat*/*intreat*, defined as "to beg earnestly, or beseech; to court with fair Words" (Defoe 1735, s.v. *entreat*) and *request* "To ask; to solicite; to entreat" (Johnson 1755-56, s.v. *request*, v.) were among the most frequent terms in eighteenth-century grammars, often used as hypernyms.

Consequently, the performative verbs included in the study are *pray*, which was the most frequent request marker in the eighteenth century, and the set of verbs identified in eighteenth-century dictionaries and grammars, analysed in the following order from the least to the most common: *beseech*, *entreat/intreat*, *bid*, *ask*, *request*, *desire*, and *beg*. More attention will be payed to the latter since it showed a wider range of functions in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose*. Other verbs found in eighteenth-century grammars or in Sönmez's study, such as *beseech*, are absent from the corpus. All the searches have been done using WordSmith 6 tools, and all the possible spelling variants of each verb have been considered.

3.2. *Pray*

The verb *pray* was introduced into English from Anglo-Norman in the thirteenth century, while the courtesy marker *pray* originated in the verb "from a parenthetical expression, and ultimately from a main clause performative expression" (Traugott and Dasher 2002: 252). *Pray* as a courtesy marker replaced the native form *biddan* (Traugott 2000: 1), one of the verbs with the lowest frequencies among those included in the present study (see Section 3.4 below).

Most of the different performative phrases with verbal *pray*, like *I pray you*, *I pray thee*, *pray you*, *pray thee*, *prithee* and *I pray* were "used to add urgency, solicitation, or deference to a question or request" (*OED*, s.v. *pray* v. P1 b). Parenthetical forms of this verb, such as *I pray you* became fixed and

started a grammaticalization process as early as the fifteenth century (cf. Akimoto 2000). Hence, *pray* is completely grammaticalized in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose*, which reveals no occurrences of *pray* with pronouns in subject or object function in requests. Besides, there are no instances of verbal *pray* in this corpus, other than the formulaic parenthetical expression *I pray God* (cf. Table 2 below), and examples of *pray* in its religious sense, or inflected forms (i.e. *prays* or *prayed*) are absent from this epistolary collection.

Table 2. *Classification of* pray *in the* Corpus of Eighteenth-Century Prose

FORMS	**FIGURES**
Pray (courtesy marker)	100/33.66[1]
Pray (attention getter)	37/12.45
I pray God	2/0.67

Regarding its pragmatic functions in this corpus, *pray* can be found conveying two main usages, either instances of the courtesy marker preceding an imperative, as in (1), which includes a request for an answer, or as an attention getter preceding a question, generally a request for information, as in (2):

> *1. Pray* indulge me with a Line (1789, Edward Barker)[2]
>
> 2. Now give me Leave to ask, *pray* did M[r]. Dickenson in any one Jnstance offer to interfere? (1783, John Dickenson)

A previous study (Faya Cerqueiro 2007) purposely excluded from the tally several instances of *pray*, which were classified as cases where *pray* might have been wrongly used instead of *pay* as in (3) below:

> 3. *pray* my Complimts to Henry Richardson when you see him & tell him we shall send him a %bill of W[m] Turners Expences (1771, W Burchal)[3]

1. Raw numbers and frequencies per 100,000 words in the corpus.

2. Italics are used in all the examples in order to highlight performative expressions.

3. For the conventions and symbols used in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose* see van Bergen and Denison (2007).

Those instances included expressions such as *pray my compliments, pray my respects and pray my duty*, as shown in Table 3, which are also possible in the same pattern with *pay*. According to the *OED*, *to pay one's respects* is "to show polite attention or deference (*to* a person) by presenting oneself or by making a call" (s.v. *respect* n. P7).

Table 3. *Fixed expressions with the verb* pray

FORMS	**FIGURES**
pray my compliments	26/8.75
pray my respects	3/1.01
pray my duty	1/0.34

However, a closer look at fixed structures identified with other performative verbs in requests, as found in *beg* (cf. Table 4), would suggest that those expressions were actually conventionalized with requestive verbs in the eighteenth century.

3.3. *Entreat/Intreat*

Entreat is also a word of French origin, introduced in Middle English (*OED*, s.v. *entreat*, v.). Although *entreat/intreat* was a common word for *request* (both as a noun and as a verb) in eighteenth-century reference works, as shown in many of the definitions included in 3.1, there is only one instance (0.34) in a non-finite clause:

> 4. J am perswaded that no one wishes Better to the Public than you do, for which reason let me *entreat* you never to consent that we shoud next Year keep the Bars in our own hands (?1789, John Dickenson).

The mismatch between the high frequency of *entreat/intreat* in eighteenth-century grammars and dictionaries and its scarcity in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose* could be related to the prescriptivism of most reference books in the period. It is also possible that it just fell in disuse or that the level of formality of this verb was too high for the personal and immediate issues dealt with in this epistolary collection, with many exchanges among family members and business transactions among equals.

3.4. *Bid*

The native verb *biddan* was used performatively as a directive in earlier periods in the history of English (Traugott 2000). It is cognate with German *bitten*, which is still used in Present-day German as a performative verb in requests. German also keeps the pragmatic marker *bitte*, the equivalent of English *please*, as the default marker in requests. Most instances of *bid* in the corpus are found in reported speech, meaning 'To ask pressingly, beg, entreat, pray' (*OED*, s.v. *bid* v1) although there is only one instance as a performative, shown in (5):

> 5. please to Give my Service to all my fellow Servants in Generall I now *bid* them all a farwell; (1779, Mary Moseley)

The performative verb *bid* is used here as part of the fixed expression *bid farewell*, still found in Present-day English, and it could be part of other fixed expressions in the speech act of greetings and farewells (cf. *OED*, s.v. *bid* v1, 9). This example is interesting since it also includes the imperative form *please to*, a pattern which was very frequent in this corpus, and which finally led to the courtesy marker *please*. The use of this Germanic form was probably already marginal in performative sentences.

3.5. *Ask*

The native verb *ask* was not very frequent as a requestive verb in the data under analysis, and in fact, most examples of this verb are used with the general meaning 'to question, inquire'. Thus, the corpus yields only nine (3.03) performative uses of the verb meaning 'to make request for a thing desired' (*OED*, s.v. *ask* v.), including performatives, as in (6), hedged performatives, as in (7), and want statements, as in (8):

> 6. Dear sir I *ask* pardon for not sending the Bills yesterday but was so busy I had not [^"t" crossed out?^] Opportunity (1771, Daniel Samuel)
>
> 7. If I sh^{d} . not be thought troublesome I wou'd *ask*, for a line from you (1777, Robert Caunce)
>
> 8. I want to *ask* you a bit of advice (1789, James Grimshaw)

The general meaning of this verb makes it also suitable to express different speech acts, as in (6), where it is used as part of an apology.

3.6. *Request*

The verb *request* is formed from the homonymous noun, introduced earlier through French, in the fifteenth century (OED, s.v *request* v1). It became the hypernym and came to name the speech act of requests. The corpus contains 49 (16.49) instances of the verb *request*, including both performatives, as in (9), and hedged performatives, as in (10):

> 9. & I *request* you to Give my best respects to M[r]. Legh (1789, James Leigh)
>
> 10. Enclosed you've 2 %Bills val: £200 — must *request* you will not omit to put us in Cash for the Bill advanced in due Season (1778, W Bowden)

The modal *must* is the most common way of hedging in the examples analysed, it also occurs with *desire* and particularly with *beg* (cf. examples (14), (17), (24) and (27) below). By adding *must* the writer expresses the obligatory character of the request, as if external circumstances compel him or her to ask the reader to do something.

This verb can also be found with the same meaning and in the same speech act in non-finite clauses depending on other verbs, as in (11), where *permit* functions as a mitigator of the directive:

> 11. Permit me, Sir, to *request* you will not engage yourself until you are fully acquainted with every Circumstance that hath occasioned this intended Separation. (1785, John Boldero)

3.7. *Desire*

The verb *desire* is also a French loanword and its frequency is considerably high in the corpus (72.03). There are 214 instances including performatives, both with and without an implicit subject, as in (12) and (13) respectively, and hedged performatives, as in (14):

> 12. I *desire* the sum may be sent in Bank Notes (17??, Elizabeth Keck)
>
> *13. Desire* you'l send my Books by the return as I cannot settle with our men till they come to hand. (1774 , Harry Richardson)
>
> 14. I must *desire* you will remit me the Money I lent you, as soon as you can, for I shall really want it. (1779, Martha Legh)

In spite of its high frequency, this verb was not common in fixed expressions in letters save for some examples, as in (15):

> 15. I *desire* your answer by the return of the post, (1781, John Jackson (of Golborne)

Nevertheless, among the instances of *desire* there are no want statements due to the lexical meaning of the verb, which already carries a volitional connotation.

3.8. *Beg*

According to the *OED*, *beg* is etymologically obscure, although there are some suggestions of French origin (s.v. *beg*, v.). This verb is the most frequent one among the verbs under analysis (74.05), with 220 instances. Most instances include performative uses, as in (16), and hedged performatives, as in (17), while want statements are not very frequent, only two instances (0.67), as in (18):

> 16. J am in a very Bad State of Health and *J beg* you yould Releace mee as soone as posable you can at this time (1771, William Burchall)
>
> 17. J must *beg* Leave to ask you this serious Question, which is all J want to know from You, Was two Guineas a Year, in your Opinion, a full & adequate Consideration for all the great & important Advantages J was to give M^{r}. Jacson? (1780, John Dickenson)
>
> 18. I Want to *beg* a little of your good advice, (1778, E Hancock)

There are three subjectless instances, where *beg* could be regarded as an imperative followed by a *to*-infinive construction, as in (19). Although this pattern is not identified with the other performatives under analysis, it is similar to the structure with verbal *please* (cf. examples (5) above and (22) below):

> *19. Beg* now mr Grimsw, to send my Goose to London when convenient to him. (1783, John Amson)

One of the main differences of *beg* as compared to the other performative verbs is the range of fixed and conventionalized expressions such as *beg pardon*, *beg excuse*, *beg leave*, which, according to the *OED*, are "often merely a

courteous or apologetic mode of asking what is expected, or even of taking as a matter of course". Some of these instances of *beg* are elliptical "for *beg leave*" (*OED* s.v. *beg*, v.). Table 4 below shows the six more common expressions, which are related not only to the speech act of requests but also to those of greetings or excuses.

Table 4. *Fixed expressions with the verb* beg.

FORMS	**FIGURES**
beg the/a favour	31/10.43
beg my compliments	17/5.72
beg pardon	16/5.38
beg leave	14/4.71
beg my respects	12/4.04
beg acceptance	6/2.02

As regards the syntactic patterns of this verb, in addition to the frequent construction *I beg* + object, identified in the set of fixed expressions in Table 4, the most common patterns in the *Corpus of Eighteenth-Century Prose* are *that*-clauses and *to*-infinitives, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5. *Syntactic patterns of the verb* beg

FORMS	**FIGURES**
that-clause (omission of that)	69/23.22
to-infinitive	27/9.09
Final position (parenthetical)	4/1.35
that-clause	3/1.01

Some instances followed by a *to*-infintive, as in (20), are regarded by the *OED* as "*ellipt.* in epistolary formulas of goodwill: to desire to send, to offer":

> 20. As this Alteration is like to take Place soon, there is a young Man in the Garden, I would *beg* to sollicit M={*}= Legh's consideration of, that he may be continued a while in the Employ. (1787, Henry Hewitt)

After fixed transitive constructions, *that*-clauses with omission of *that* are the most frequent syntactic pattern, as in (21) below:

> 21. I shall desire my Witness{'}s to attend & *beg* youll bring with you ny Papers (1773, Lowndes Thomas)

Examples such as (21) have been a source for the emergence of some pragmatic markers, such as *I think* (cf. Thompson and Mulac 1991), since *that*-clauses with omission of *that* are a necessary step before fixed expressions move to other positions in the sentence. This would probably be the case of *I beg* in (22), where it is a parenthetical in final position:

> 22. Please to send me a ansr. to the Inclosd by first as We shall not go before Wensday fail not *I Beg* (790, Thomas Gaskell)

In spite of the four occurrences of parenthetical *I beg* in the data, the degree of grammaticalization reached by *beg* is questionable. There were several other fixed expressions available in requests in this period, especially *pray* and *please to*, which were frequent strategies, the former fully grammaticalized and the latter under grammaticalization at the same time. In addition, none of the four parentheticals with *I beg* is subjectless, although the omission of first-person subjects is very common due to the nature of the corpus, which very often includes very short answers, even just a few lines long, on business issues. Examples where the subject is omitted are common among performatives, as in (23), used as a parenthesis in a *that*-clause, and hedged performatives, as in (24):

> 23. I shoud be very glad if she g coud wait of either of the Ladies at Lyme Old or Young if you think there is any probability, *beg* you will let me know, the poor thing is very Unhappy at being out of place (1773, W Burchal)
>
> 24. Poverty again begins to peep in at Our Windows therefore must *beg* your assistance for a 100£ on Tuesday with the Horse if Possible your Compliance (1776, Thomas Gaskell)

With regard to the pragmatic functions of *beg*, requests, as expected, are the most common speech act where this verb takes place, and performative expressions with *beg* are particularly common as polite request markers, as in (25). Within the speech act of requests, expressions with *beg* can be used for specific purposes. Thus, it is very frequent to find a request for an answer, especially in postscripts, as in (26), and also when asking for advice, as in (27):

25. I *beg* the favour of you to Send the inclosed to Henry Richason as I propose Coming into Cheshire the end of this month as our famely is gone to Bath (1772, Betty Clayton)

26. I *beg* S^r^ your answer by the return of the Post, as I shou^d^ be sorry to move anything, you wou^d^ think, wrong (1775, Jane Holford)

27. now I must *Beg* your kind Addvise how to proseed forder about it. (?1781, E Hancock)

However, the set of functions and speech acts with this verb goes beyond directives. Other speech acts where *beg* might occur are also related to negative politeness. This is the case of expressives such as excuses and apologies, as in (28) and (29) below. Example (28), an apology at the very beginning of the letter, includes the expression *beg your pardon*, one of the routinized expressions in Table 4 still common in polite contexts in Present-day English, while (29) also includes the expression *I am quite sorry*, of more general use nowadays:

28. D^r^ Sir I most Sincerly *beg* Your Pardon for not forwarding the Salt Water. as %Promis'd (1777, John Drinkwater)

29. tell her that I am quite Sorry She as had so much trouble but as it was a case of Nessec^i^ty *beg* She will excuse it (1779, Mary Moseley)

Other expressive speech acts include salutations and farewells, as in (30) below, placed at the end of the letter:

30. Beg my kind respec^ts^ to them if you please, am your trublesume Freind and Humble Sarvint (1785, E Hancock)

The routinized expression *beg my respects* is one of the common ones identified in Table 4 above. The farewell includes also part of a typical ending formula in personal eighteenth-century letters (*your humble servant*), and negative politeness is further emphasized by *if you please*, another common request marker in the period.

4. Final remarks

The analysis of the set of performative verbs used in the second half of the eighteenth century has revealed that *pray* was the only grammaticalized perform-

ative expression in the *Corpus of Eighteenth-Century Prose*, although other verbs, namely *desire* and *beg* were more common than *pray* in the study. The case of *beg* is particularly interesting regarding its syntactic and pragmatic features. Despite the lack of data supporting a full process of grammaticalization in the corpus, this verb shows a high degree of conventionalization, as evidenced in the range of fixed expressions and functions used in the epistolary genre, and its parenthetical use in sentence-final position.

Some verbs included in eighteenth-century grammars and dictionaries are very rare or not attested in the corpus. This fact might point at the prescriptivist character of reference works in this period, which might not be reflected in private letters. The set of performatives available in the speech act of requests in this period includes mainly loanwords from French, while the only native verbs are *bid*, already very infrequent at the time, and *ask*, with a very broad meaning and which does necessarily imply a high degree of politeness. This fact suggests the need of new forms to reinforce the negative politeness weight of the request. In addition, the avoidance of routinized expressions in favour of new forms and the use of a wider catalogue of forms can have an effect on the expressiveness and sincerity of the request, especially when using expressions of French origin, since they might incorporate additional courtesy connotations.

Performatives (and also hedged performatives and want-statements) are meant to be direct request strategies, however most of the performative expressions analysed are used in negative politeness contexts. This evidence would corroborate prior studies that identify direct strategies as the most common ones in earlier periods. Moreover, as shown in the selection of examples making use of direct strategies, the lexical meaning of the requestive verb prevails over the syntactic pattern without any face risk for the writer or the reader.

In addition to proper requests, some of the performative verbs analysed, and especially *beg*, have spread their uses to expressive speech acts such as excusing and apologising, both also typical examples of negative politeness. Most of the expressions used in eighteenth-century letters are still kept in Present-day English with similar values, although many of them are limited to very formal contexts or otherwise perceived as too refined by the modern speaker.

Therefore, this study contributes to the description of the wide catalogue of request markers in the second half of the eighteenth-century, and, in particular, to the set of performative verbs, in a period that witnessed ongoing changes in the selection of politeness markers in the speech act of requests.

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