Letter-writing manuals and the evolution of requests markers in the eighteenth century

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ABSTRACT

In eighteenth century England the middle classes were looking for assistance guides to help them to move upwards in society. Among those help books we find letter-writing manuals, a very popular text-type in the Late Modern English period, which provided information on how to write letters on any occasion. It is also in the eighteenth century when we observe the beginning of the replacement of *pray* by *please* as the default courtesy marker in requests, which would not be fully accomplished until the beginning of the twentieth century. The epistolary genre in general is a good source for the analysis of requests due to the interactive character of letters. Letter-writing manuals in particular offer an organised collection of letters and other correspondence texts according to topic, senders or receivers, among others, which makes them ideal for the study of pragmatic features. Therefore a diachronic study of *pray* and *please* constructions in this text-type will provide insights regarding the shift of request markers, their

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main function and the processes of change. The popularity of letter-writing manuals, instruction books for specific purposes, may have influenced the replacement.

1. Introduction

The epistolary genre was very fashionable in the eighteenth century and so were letter-writing manuals, which became popular guide books for those in need of assistance when writing a letter. The target audience of these books was quite varied, and they were deliberately addressed to different social classes. Due to the dialogic features of letters, these letter manuals seem particularly relevant for the study of some pragmatic features, typical of interaction and close to the language of immediacy (cf. Osterreicher, 1997). This is the case of courtesy markers in requests, which can only be found when some sort of interactive communication is present between writer and reader. The main courtesy markers in requests during the Late Modern English period, *pray* and *please*, were in competition until *pray* was eventually ousted by *please*. The beginning of the shift in this pragmatic function can be traceable in the eighteenth century and the present article will provide an analysis of the main structures found in letter-writing manuals from that century.

As regards the organisation of this article, Section 2 will depict the main social events which were taking place during the eighteenth century in order to understand the historical background of this period. Section 3 will define the main features of the epistolary genre and its adequacy to study pragmatic functions in earlier periods. Section 4 will focus on the specific text-type of letter-writing manuals and the importance of this resource for specific purposes in the Late Modern English period. Thus, the texts used as a corpus for the

present study will be described. Section 5 will provide information on the request markers *pray* and *please*, paying attention to their historical development and to research already done on this issue. Section 6 will offer an analysis of the data found in structures with *please* and *pray* in the collection of letter-manuals, together with a contrast with an eighteenth-century epistolary corpus. Finally, the article closes with some conclusions and some questions for further study.

2. Social context in the eighteenth century

Since the present study concerns mainly the analysis of the courtesy markers *please* and *pray* in eighteenth century English letter-manuals, it will be illustrative to provide a general view of some historical events of this period in order to understand the relevance of the epistolary genre in this century.

The government-run post office started in England in 1685 and meant a revolution as regards administrative and political issues, transatlantic contact, development of commerce and the transmission of news. With the aid of the improved transport systems, the postal delivery system facilitated the distribution of newspapers and the communication between individuals since the service became affordable for the lower classes (cf. Bannet, 2005, p. 9-12).

Concerning education and level of literacy at the beginning of the Late Modern English period, only the upper classes or the children living in urban areas could benefit from education. In 1697 charity schools were established and soon spread all over the country allowing a higher literacy rate in children from poor social classes, although not all of them attended these schools. The Church played a very important role in this development since they were the main promoters of elementary education. In the 1770s there was a revival of charity schools and from the eighteenth century onwards classical teaching of Latin in schools was gradually given up in favour of the vernacular. Thus, the education system was crucial to the spread of the English standard (cf. Langford, 1989, pp. 130-133; Görlach, 1999, pp. 9-13 and 2001, pp. 14-17).

The eighteenth century is also known as the age of prescriptivism, and the amount of grammars and dictionaries published in this century reflects a need for guidance in linguistic aspects. Contrary to other European countries, England lacked an academy setting fixed linguistic norms, which favoured the

proliferation of these prescriptivist texts, many of which became bestsellers. A great amount of grammars was produced during the eighteenth century, especially in its second half (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2006 and Görlach, 2001, pp. 18-20).

As opposed to the general view, the Late Modern English period was dynamic both as regards linguistic changes and social, cultural and political transformations (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 2009, p. 10). All these developments and achievements played an important role in the reading public, they created a favourable environment for the mass-market of potential letter-writers and in a similar way social and cultural changes took part in language contact and in the spread of standard written English. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009) shows that the language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries differed from present-day English regarding main issues such as pronunciation, spelling (or spellings, since there were both private and public systems), vocabulary, and grammar.

3. Epistolary genre

The increase of literacy, social and geographical mobility and the improvement of transport systems mentioned above, contributed to the development of letters and letter-writing in the eighteenth century. Letters became a major method of communication. Among other proofs of the relevance of letters in this period, we can recall the number of epistolary novels in eighteenth-century Europe, with British writers such as Samuel Richardson or Henry Fielding. They are also present in several eighteenth century portraits, which usually depicted their protagonists holding a letter or even surrounded by letter-writing tools (cf. François Boucher's portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour, 1756, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, and Pompeo Batoni's portrait of Charles Joseph Crowle, 1761-1762, Louvre, Paris).

From the linguistic point of view, the epistolary genre offers valuable evidence for the historical linguist, and mainly for the historical pragmatician, for different reasons. As Palander-Collin (2010, p. 661) remarks, "since more contextual information is usually available for letters than for many other written genres, letters are a particularly good genre for linguistic studies where contextualisation

is crucial in the interpretation of language use." Letters as communicative events assume a writer and an addressee without narratorial intervention. They are often characterised by their dialogical character, even if classifications of dialogues may exclude this text-type (cf. Culpeper and Kytö, 1999). Fitzmaurice (2000, pp. 361-364) defends the interactive and interpersonal character of letters in spite of their written form. According to Jucker, a letter "may react to a previous letter and anticipate the reactions of the reader but they cannot attune instantaneously to the addressee's feedback" so letters contain elements of both dialogue and monologue (Jucker, 2000, p. 23).

These characteristics make this genre particularly valuable for the study of pragmatic aspects. Letters usually contain a highly formulaic language, which includes not only openings and closings, but also other fixed expressions depending on the letter type, which made letter-writing manuals particularly useful, especially for less-skilled writers (cf. Dossena 2010). In addition, letters prove to be of great value for some phenomena, since they "show many interactional features such as greetings and politeness formulae" (Jucker, 1994, p. 535). The epistolary genre is also interesting for the study of speech acts, since it is very likely to find "many clearly recognisable speech acts such as questions, apologies, thanks, requests, promises, and so on" (Jucker, 1994, p. 535). Consequently, private letters of earlier periods can reveal significant and reliable data regarding different topics on pragmatics, and especially those related to speech acts and courtesy markers. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009) recognises the importance of information provided by letters in the Late Modern English period, since the conditions as regards travelling and cheaper postal rates made of this genre "an important vehicle for keeping in touch with faraway relatives and business relations" (2009, p. 10).

4. Letter-writing manuals

In the second half of the eighteenth century there was a demand of what Fitzmaurice (1998, p. 309) refers to as "social resources," that is books which served to guide the reader on a whole range of topics, such as manuals on etiquette, guidance on behaviour during meals, cookery, house-keeping, brewery, commerce, sailing, gardening, arithmetic, spelling and letter-writing manuals,

which constituted self-learning tools. According to Bannet (2005, p. 20), at the beginning of the century, all the members of the family, including "servants, apprentices and kin" could be the intended audiences of letter manuals, since editors tried to target as broad a market as possible. Social awareness about etiquette and good manners was underlying different cultural aspects. The need for advice in these matters is reflected in the number of reprints of books of this kind. According to Görlach guides to letter writing had in the eighteenth century "a larger market than at any period" (2001, p. 211). These guides started to be used already in the sixteenth century and became very popular along the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (cf. Bannet, 2005). Characters in fictional letters may reveal the kind of potential users of these guides. According to Porter, eighteenth-century society was "finely graded" (1982, p. 64). Social groups were divided depending on issues such as "wealth, occupation, region, religion, family, political loyalty, and connexion" (Porter, 1982, p. 68). Levels of literacy had increased and thus, target audiences generally included a wide range of reader-writers, different social ranks, ages and levels of literacy. In fact, there were different adaptations of these letter manuals depending on the audience, among them we may find American, Scottish and other local versions, and those addressed to ladies, to the youth, and to schoolboys. Different social and professional positions were included, namely servants, clerks, country chapmen, shopkeepers, town landlords, urban tenants, soldiers, apprentices, merchants or tradesmen, being the two latter the ones who were more in need of these guides (Bannet, 2005, pp. 20-ff.). In fact, Brant refers to letters as "a key medium of business and government" (2006, p. 1). Together with marriage, commerce was one of the most powerful devices for those who wanted to ascend the social ladder, and provided "impressive opportunities for social mobility and personal and dynastic enrichment" (Hunt, 1996, p. 45). Even if at the end of the century there was not "any dramatic transformation of the social structure," a "gradual change" in society had taken place during the eighteenth century without affecting stability (Porter, 1982, p. 112).

Politeness was an important issue in letter manuals and other assistance books. Good evidence of its importance for this century can be found in the numerous sections or chapters on this topic in general guide books, and in etiquette manuals from the Late Modern English period. Prescriptivists emphasised grammatical features of language, while other areas of language

such as pragmatics are somehow present in letter manuals and other types of assistance books. As Görlach wisely remarks, since "[t]here is no 18th-century equivalent of the concept 'pragmatics'; the discipline is partly covered by rhetorics and various guides to appropriate behaviour such as books on letter-writing, conduct books and stylistic manuals" (2001, p. 130). In many letters we can observe a language full of structures denoting a highly marked negative politeness,[2] and it is very likely that many of these common fixed expressions were imitated by letter-writers. Given the popularity of letter manuals, we may immediately regard them as highly influential in the actual writing of letters and by extension in linguistic developments. Brant (2006), however, diminishes the influence of letter-writing manuals on actual letters, although she admits "some influence on correct forms of address and discourses of politeness" (2006, p. 10). While some politeness features could be imitated almost intuitively, it is questionable whether the particular use of isolated politeness or courtesy markers could have been looked at or overlooked by speakers and, especially, by writers.

The letter-writing guide was a popular genre throughout the Late Modern English period –and still is nowadays a best-selling reference book-type– in which the user could often find assistance sections on grammar, spelling or vocabulary.[3] A relevant issue for its use as a corpus is the fact that letters are classified according to different topics, and clearly delimited through letter titles, together with the roles of addresser and addressee, which are well established. Thus, letter manuals provide a good resource for the analysis of sociolinguistic variation. Moreover, letter-writing manuals offer a standardised level of language, as opposed to the sub-standard levels we may find in Late Modern English 'real' letters, such as in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose* (cf. van Bergen and Denison, 2007).

Taking into account the importance of epistolary collections during the period under study and the lack of collections available for some periods, the

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[2] Negative politenesss implies the selection of strategies to preserve the addressee's image, avoiding the speaker's image is at risk. In requests it often involves conventional indirectness, pessimism and reduction of the imposition on the addressee.

[3] See Bannet's sections on 'Manual Architectonics' for a detailed description of the organization of letter manuals (2005).

inclusion of letter-writing manuals proves important for language studies. They are not only relevant from the socio-historical perspective, since the popularity of these guides was widespread, but they also help us to cover a gap of material in the Late Modern English period, given that eighteenth and nineteenth century epistolary corpora are still scarce. In addition, the classification of letters into different types, such as family letters, or business letters, can provide clues of the types in which certain linguistic phenomena may have taken place. We also find letters of request, which can offer revealing insights on how people in this period understood this speech act.

The selection of letter-writing manuals for this study was initially based on the list offered by Bannet (2005, pp. 316-325), considering those manuals available in the *Eighteenth Century Collection Online* (*ECCO*) databases.[4] Apart from letter manuals, secretaries and other guides including a high number of letters, which were accessible in this database, are also part of the works that I have collected. A total number of 48 books have been looked at, distributed in three periods during the century: 7 in 1700-1733, 23 in 1734-1767 and 18 in 1768-1800. Table 1 below shows the distribution of the works included in the present study throughout the century. A peak can be noticed in the first decades of the second half of the century:
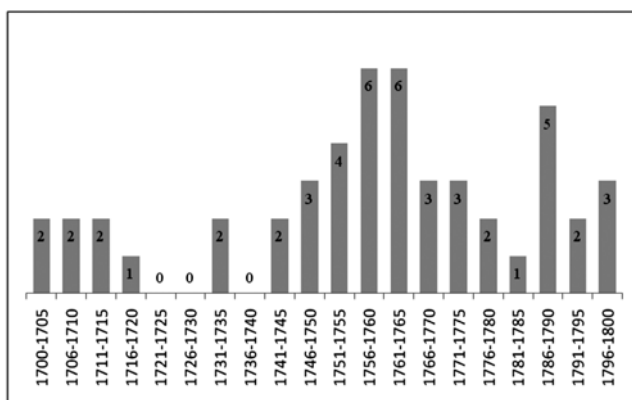

Table 1. Eighteenth century letter-writing manuals

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4   I am grateful to the *Leiden University Centre for Linguistics* for providing me access to this collection.

As regards methodology, word searches are allowed in this collection through scanned, frozen images of the original books in pdf format, although they are not 100% reliable. Word counts however are not possible and therefore frequencies cannot be analysed. Given the characteristics of the *ECCO* database, this collection of letter-writing guides needs a method of analysis based on the percentages of the different uses and relevant forms of *please* and *pray*, which can be compared to a corpus of real letters.

5. Main courtesy markers in requests in the Late Modern English period

A request is a speech act in which the speaker is demanding something politely from the addressee. Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989) distinguish the following elements in requests: (alerter) + Head Act + (supportive move), of which only the Head Act is compulsory. The alerter is "an opening term preceding the actual request, such as a term of address or an attention getter." The Head Act is the request proper. This element can be internally modified by downgraders, like politeness markers, hedges, and downtoners, and by upgraders, like intensifiers or expletives. *Please* is an instance of a lexical or phrasal downgrader. Finally, requests may also include a supportive move, an external unit, "which modifies [the impact of a request] by either aggravating or mitigating its force" (Blum-Kulka *et al*, 1989, p. 276), by means of insults or threats (aggravating), or by preparators, or promises of reward (mitigating).

Following a form-to-function approach to the study of requests, in the history of English, there have been two main replacements in the preferred request marker. *Pray* came to replace the native form *biddan*, in phrases such as *ic bidde*, and was eventually replaced by *please*. According to the *OED*, the verb *pray* was first introduced into English in the thirteenth century from Anglo-Norman and Old French (*OED* s.v. *pray* v.). Different phrases with verbal *pray*, like *I pray you*, *pray thee*, *prithee*, *I pray* or *pray* were "used to add urgency, solicitation, or deference to a question or request." *Pray* became the default marker in requests from the seventeenth century onwards, with the first uses of *pray* on its own, functioning as an adverb, dating back to the early seventeenth century (*OED* s.v. *pray* adv.). As stated by Traugott (2000) and Akimoto (2000), *please* came to replace the former courtesy markers constituted by complex constructions using

the verb *pray*, such as *I pray you*, and the grammaticalised marker *pray* itself.[5] This replacement took place, according to Akimoto, in the nineteenth century (2000, p. 79).

The verb *please* was first introduced into English in the fourteenth century through Anglo-Norman and Middle French *plaisir* (*OED* s.v. *please* v.). In fact, in Present-day French, the conditional expression *s'il vous plaît* (literally 'if it you please'), the counterpart of *please* in French, still keeps a form of this verb. The first *OED* entry for the verb *please* in English dates back to 1350 (*OED* s.v. *please* v. 1 and 3), whereas its first usages as a courtesy marker are only found in the eighteenth century. The earliest *OED* entry of *please* with this value is precisely found in a letter from 1771 (*OED* s.v. *please* adv. and int.).

Several authors have suggested that courtesy marker *please* originates in the parenthetical form *if you please* (cf. Traugott and Dasher, 2002; Brinton and Traugott 2005; Brinton 2006), but if we consider the frequencies of *if you please* before and after the emergence of *please*, they keep quite stable (Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Faya Cerqueiro, 2007, p. 432), which suggests that this was not the only possible source. Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Faya Cerqueiro (2007) propose a grammaticalisation process originated in a verbal construction (cf. Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Faya Cerqueiro, 2007, Faya Cerqueiro, 2009), according to which the ultimate source of courtesy marker *please* would be the imperative form *be pleased to*, which would lead to the imperative *please to*, followed by an infinitive. The particle *to* would eventually be left out and the verbal form would be reanalysed as a pragmatic marker, used in a similar way to marker *pray*.[6] Apart from the imperative construction, other constructions, such as the conditional construction mentioned above, and those with modal *will* may have also influenced the emergence and development of *please*.

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5   Grammaticalisation is a linguistic process of change, broadly defined by Hopper and Traugott as "the change whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions and, once grammaticalized, continue to develop new grammatical functions" (Hopper and Traugott, 2003: XV).

6   According to Gold (2006), the construction *please to* is still productive nowadays in varieties of English, such as Jamaican English, and still found, to a lesser extent, in British and American English, as reported by this author.

Late Modern English epistolary corpora have already provided interesting insights into the development, the functions, and the sociolinguistic distribution of the courtesy markers *pray* and *please* (Faya Cerqueiro, 2007 and 2008).

6. *Please* and *pray* structures in letter-writing manuals

For the present study, I have considered different structures which may have played an important role as request markers in eighteenth century letter-manuals. I have included similar or even identical examples when they take place in different books, but I have excluded those examples found in the books and which do not belong to letters, but rather to dialogues, songs, wills or narrative accounts.

In the following graphs we can observe the percentages of the main requests markers using *please* or *pray*. The marker *pray* was already grammaticalised in this period, but we can still find some instances of *prithee* and *I pray you* especially in what some letter manuals refer to as 'ancient letters.' I have considered different expressions with the verb *please*, and especially those which may have influenced the development of the courtesy marker. At the same time, other fixed expressions have been excluded from the graph, such as *(if) (it) may it please your Majesty/Grace*, which are usually found in explanations on how to address letters. Since they present a highly formulaic character throughout several periods, they could not have had an impact on the development of parenthetical *please*. Figures 1-3 represent the percentages of the different constructions throughout the eighteenth century:
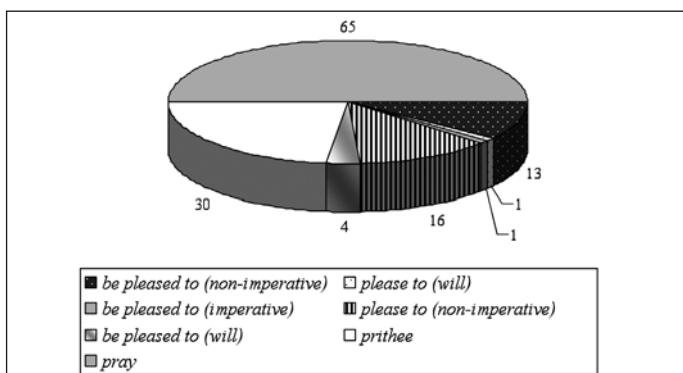

65

30

4

16

13

1

1

- ■ *be pleased to (non-imperative)* □ *please to (will)*
- ⊟ *be pleased to (imperative)* �III *please to (non-imperative)*
- ⊡ *be pleased to (will)* □ *prithee*
- ⊡ *pray*
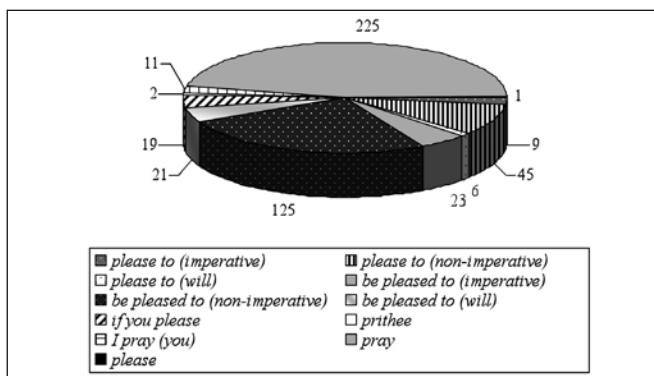
Figure 1. 1700-1733
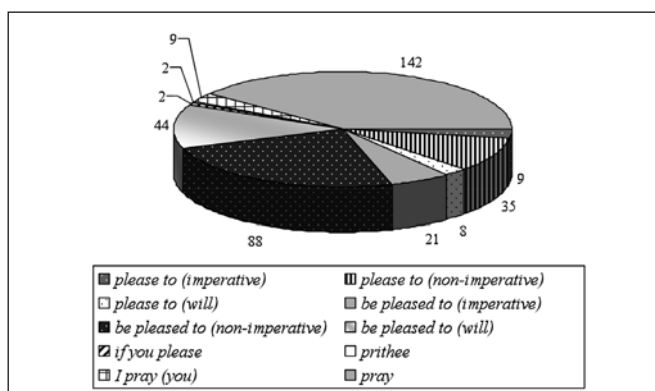
Figure 2. 1734-1767

Figure 3. 1768-1800

As we can notice in the three graphs, the most salient request marker all along the eighteenth century in the letter-manual corpus is the courtesy marker *pray*, with almost half of the instances found in the first two periods (48% and 47% respectively), and with a slight decrease in the last part of the century (38%).[7]

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[7]   Almost all the instances of *prithee* appear in manuals from the first decade of the century. I will not take examples of *I pray* (*you*) or *prithee* into consideration here, since the marker was already grammaticalised in this century.

Pray can be found in two main functions, either as an attention getter preceding a question, often accompanied by vocatives, as in example (1), from a gentleman's reply to a prior letter, or as a downtoner preceding an imperative verbal form, such as in (2), addressed from a brother to a sister. Both letters deal with "love and marriage:"

> (1) But **pray**, madam, is it any great fault to write a love-letter in a serious strain? (1787, *The accomplish'd letter-writer*, p. 90)
>
> (2) **Pray** give my due Respects to all Friends, particularly to honest Mr. *S. T.* and so in a hopeful Expectation of finding you all well at my Arrival, (1735, *The instructor: or, young man's best companion*, p. 64)

Imperative forms of *be pleased* followed by a *to*-infinitive represent only 1% in the first third and 5% and 6% in the second and third periods of the century respectively, whereas *please to* as imperative is absent from the first period and only represents 2% and 3% of the total data in the remaining periods. They very commonly appear in letters on business-related topics or in bills of exchange. Very often these letters are only a few lines long, usually sent to acknowledge a payment or the receipt of goods, and probably due to its briefness they constitute a good example of conventionalised language. Examples (3) and (4) are found in this context, p.

> (3) Sir, you may take my Word with the greatest Safety, that I will pay you as I have mentioned; and if you have any particular Cause for insisting on it sooner, **be pleased to** let me know that I must pay it, and I will endeavour to borrow the Money. (1779, *The accomplished letter-writer; or, universal correspondent,* p. 86)
>
> (4) **Please to** advise the receipt of the same by return of post, and if any material variation has happened in any of the articles of trade between us, inform me of the particulars, for my future conduct. (1790, *The new and complete British letter-writer,* p. 64)

The material analysed yields several instances of the structures *be pleased to* and *please to* with *will* functioning as a downgrader. Instances of *be pleased to* with modal *will* represent 3% and 4% of the total instances in the first and second period, with a notable increase to 12% in the third one. Likewise, instances of

please to with modal *will* move from 1% in the first and second parts of the century to 2% in the third period. Example (5) is taken from a letter "sent to a Gentleman in way of Petition," whereas example (6) is a lady's answer to a former letter sent by a gentleman "with a Present of Tickets for a Concert." Thus, in both cases the writers use a language characterised by negative politeness and the modal *will* serves to emphasise the appeal for the addressee's willingness:

> (5) I know, Sir, that it lies in your power to stand my Friend in this Business, and I hope you **will be pleased to** think me capable of what I make my Request to you for, being Brought up and Educated under my father in the same way. (1701, *Wits academy: or, the muses delight*, p. 96)
>
> (6) Sir, You **will please to** accept my most respectful acknowledgement of the honour you do me by your very obliging letter, and the polite manner in which you offer me the tickets for the concert on Friday evening next. (p. 160)

Example (7) constitutes the earliest instance I have found in any text-type of the courtesy marker *please* in its modern usage. The additional information about the context explains who are the writer and the addressee: "a Tradesman at *Hull* writes to his Correspondent at *London*." It is particularly interesting that in the following page there is another instance of the imperative *please to*, in example (8), in which "a Merchant writes to his Factor at Lisbon." Both instances are found in business-related correspondence:

> (7) If have not insured, **please** omit the same till hear farther. (1756, *The complete letter-writer or, new and polite English secretary*, p. 6)
>
> (8) **Please to** send, per first Ship, 150 Chests best Seville, and 200 Pipes best Lisbon, white. (1756, *The complete letter-writer: or, new and polite English secretary*, p. 7)

The similarity of roles played by both *pray* and *please* is reflected in their occurrence in nearby contexts, as if it were a question of choice, maybe stylistic, in the eighteenth century. Example (9) is taken from a business letter "from a Merchant to his Factor," in which we find the imperative form of *please*, together with the courtesy marker *pray*, both used by the same writer as courtesy markers preceding a direct request. This would reflect the fact that both markers were

used interchangeably as formulaic request markers at least in the second half of the eighteenth century:

> (9) With Convenience, **please to** buy 10 Hhds. of White Biscuit, and 49 Barrels of Beef, and send them by the first Vessel to Jamaica, consigned to Mr. *Thomas Gunston*, for my Accompt: **Pray** engage your Victualler to get the Beef carefully salted and barrelled, considering the climate to which it is sent. I am, Sir. Your Friend and Servant, *Richard Jackson.* (1779, *The accomplished letter-writer; or, universal correspondent*, p. 83)

Similarly, the marker *pray* occurs quite close to the imperative *be pleased to*. In example (10), a son's answer to a former letter, which is classified within a miscellaneous set "fitted for Business, as well as Recreation and Delight," *pray* precedes the imperative form, thus creating a structure with a highly formulaic character and with a highly marked negative politeness. In example (11), taken from "A Letter from a Son to his Father," they appear coordinated showing again the interchangeability of both markers in requests. Example (12) is found under the group "by eminent Persons" from Dr. Swift to Lord Polingbroke. This instance shows several mitigating devices of the request to give more options to the addressee. First of all, the courtesy marker *pray* is used as an attention getter of the request, then the expression *please to* is mitigated with the modal *will:*

> (10) **Pray be pleas'd to** accept of my ill Writing at present, and I doubt not but in a short time I shall mend my hand and write better though as yet I have had but little time allowed me, to learn to write. (1701, *Wits academy: or, the muses delight*, p. 54)
>
> (11) **Pray** give my love to my sister, and **be pleased to** accept of my duty to yourself. (1800, *The complete young man's companion* , p. 32)
>
> (12) **Pray**, **will** you **please to** take your pen, and blot me out that political maxim from whatever book it is in. (1773, *The court letter writer*, p. 196)

There are a good number of instances of non-imperative *please to* in the collection, this structure could also have some mitigation effect on a request when addressed to a second-person, such as in example (13), in which we find an answer letter to a former invitation "to a Party of Pleasure," and (14), which is addressed to an "intimate Acquaintance, to borrow money:"

(13) Sir, The compliments you are **pleased to** pass demand my thanks; the invitation to be of the agreeable party does me honour, and I should have been unhappy in missing an opportunity, which I am persuaded will afford me infinite pleasure and satisfaction. (1790, *The new and complete British letter-writer,* p. 127)

(14) I have immediate occasion; but will repay it again whenever you **please to** make a demand. (1759, *The entertaining correspondent; or, newest and most compleat polite letter writer*, p. 213)

The conditional parenthetical *if you please* is not found in the first part of the century, whereas it represents a 4% of the data in the second period, decreasing to 1% in the last one. In example (15) below it is found in a letter entitled "From a Wholesale Dealer who had made an unexpected Demand. In answer." The pragmatic function of *if you please* here is, according to the *OED*, "a courteous qualification to a polite request" (*OED* s.v. *please* v. 6c). It seems a polite interruption to the proper request, close in meaning to 'if you don't mind:'

(15) However, there is so much seeming Frankness and Sincerity in your Letter, that I shall desire Leave first to ask you whether you have any Dealings with an Ususrer in the *Minories*, and, **if you please**, what is his Name. (1755, *Familiar letters on various subjects of business and amusement*, p. 108)

Figure 4 below represents the data found in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose* (cf. Faya Cerqueiro, 2007). If we compare the data above from the manuals with the data extracted from an epistolary corpus of the second half of the century, we may find remarkable differences. First of all, the percentage attributed to the pragmatic marker *pray* is considerably reduced (32%), showing the following step in the decay already traceable in the manuals, whereas instances of the imperative construction *please to* almost equal those of *pray* (31%). Examples of imperative *be pleased to* are slightly reduced (3%) as compared with the data in the second and third periods in the manuals. We already find some instances of modern *please* in this corpus, which represent still a low proportion (1%). The data from letter writing manuals show a previous stage of language if we compare them with the data from this corpus of letters. Therefore, the popularity of letter-writing manuals was not a major fact in the development of *please* as a courtesy marker.
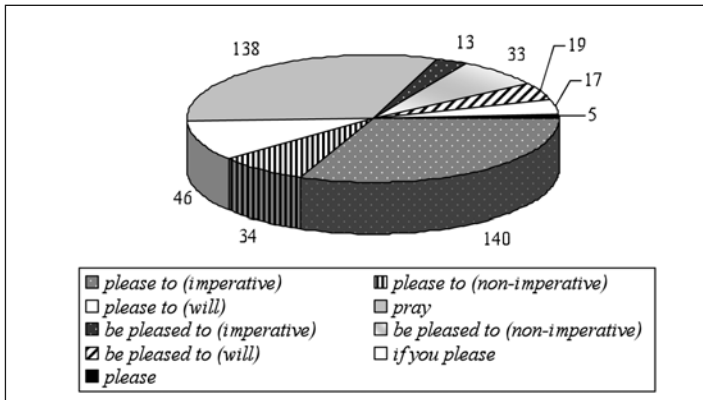
Figure 4. *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose* (1761-1790)

7. Conclusions

As we can observe in the figures, in letter-writing manuals from the eighteenth century, *pray* was still the favourite courtesy marker in requests, but different forms of *please* with a formulaic character were very common in letters. This text-type yields the earliest instance of courtesy marker *please* found in English and it occurs in a letter with business-like purposes. The presence of different structures of *please* in similar contexts offers a clue as regards the conventionalisation of language in formulaic business language, and it is not strange that the first example is found in this type of letter and in a manual with an instructive aim.

Even if letter-writing manuals were very popular in the eighteenth century they do not prove to be very influential in the development of courtesy marker *please*, since the contrast between the collection of eighteenth-century letter manuals and the corpus of letters from the second half of the century reveals clearly a much more advanced stage of the language in real letters than in model ones. The decay of *pray* and the increase in the use of imperative *please* constructions are the two main changes in the *Corpus of Late Eighteenth-Century Prose*, in which we can observe the beginning of a shift in the default request marker in requests.

Further research on this topic could explore whether the variation of these markers obeys to any sociolinguistic variable, such as gender, social position of writer or addressee or letter topic. Similarly, plagiarism detecting tools could be used to measure the degree of conventionalisation of epistolary language in the eighteenth century.

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