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Mitigating strategies and politeness in German requests

Abstract: This article empirically investigates possible politeness effects of different syntactic, morphosyntactic, and lexical mitigating strategies in German requests. In addition to the explicitness of the requestive utterance, internal and external modifiers as well as vocatives are considered. Based on the assumption that the weight of imposition has an influence on linguistic politeness, experimentally elicited production data for two requestive situations with a differing degree of imposition are compared regarding their formal properties. The data come from an online survey in which 578 native speakers of German (from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria) took part. The participants produced 1,006 requests. These were coded for several mitigating strategies and analyzed with a multifactorial analysis in order to identify the devices that are used in the high-imposition context and thus can be interpreted as conveying extra politeness. An important finding is that increased politeness is realized via devices beyond the head act strategy, namely morpho-syntactic and lexical tentativeness markers as well as multiple external modifiers.

> Politeness in Germany? Yes, it certainly exists […].
> (House 2005: 25)

1 Introduction

Since Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) seminal work on politeness, requests have been regarded as an optimal object of study to investigate the mechanisms of verbal politeness. This is because we are dealing with so-called face-threatening acts which – according to politeness theory – require more or less mitigation depending on various social variables such as power, distance, or rank/degree of

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imposition. In negative politeness cultures, in which individuals avoid imposing on others, mitigation often takes the form of linguistic indirectness (1).

(1) a. *Can you pass me the salt?*
     b. *I can't reach the salt.*

Such indirect requestive speech acts with a lower level of illocutionary transparency are less explicit and leave room for interpretation: speakers may deny and hearers can ignore the requestive interpretation (Blum-Kulka 1989: 45). However, it has been shown that the formula "+ indirect = + polite" is overly simplistic, as the relationship between indirectness and politeness is far more complex (see, e.g., Blum-Kulka 1987, 1989; Terkourafi 2015).

Discussions of requests, linguistic indirectness, and politeness sometimes lose sight of the fact that it is not only the more or less explicit realization strategy of the head act (i.e., the minimal unit with which the requestive illocutionary act is performed) that contributes to politeness. Lexical downgraders (e.g., *maybe*) or morpho-syntactic internal modifiers such as the subjunctive also play an important role here – partly in interaction with the realization form of the head act (see Section 2.2 for a detailed discussion). In addition, so-called supportive moves, that embed the request, and alerters, are also part of the requestive "speech act set" (Murphy and Neu 1996) and politeness sensitive (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Take the example in (2). Here, the head act is *please pick up the phone*, *please* being an internal modifier. The vocative *Taylor* functions as an alerter, which is defined as an opening element preceding the actual request. Other typical alerters or attention-getters are (greeting) particles like *hey* or *look.* The sequence *I'm busy cooking right now* is classified as a supportive move since it is external to the requestive head act. Typical supportive moves – that may precede or follow the head act – are grounders (i.e., explanations or justifications for the request) as the one in (2).[1]

(2)   ALERTER   HEAD ACT   SUPPORTIVE MOVE
      Taylor,   *please pick up the phone.*   *I'm busy cooking right now.*

Some of these requestive elements have already been investigated with regard to their mitigating potential, especially in the context of variational pragmatic studies, often drawing on the coding scheme developed in the context of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP, cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

The present study aims to further this line of research by investigating empirically which mitigators are used in German to convey politeness and how they

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1 Of course, such grounders may also function as (less explicit) head acts if they constitute the minimal requestive unit.

interact with each other. The data come from an online survey with discourse completion tasks (DCT) in which 578 German-speaking participants from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria took part. By systematically comparing two requestive situations with varying degrees of imposition – while keeping the social variables "distance" and "power" constant – I will examine (i) which linguistic strategies are used for face-threat mitigation in German requests, (ii) which strategies gain frequency in the more face-threatening, i.e., high-imposition context, and (iii) how their distribution can be explained (from a politeness theoretical perspective). In addition to the production data, the results of an adequacy rating task are also reported to gain insight into first order politeness in German.

The article is structured as follows. First, Section 2 takes a closer look at the relationship between requests, mitigation strategies, and politeness, discussing previous research on this topic. Sections 3 and 4 present the description of the experimental study and the results of the multifactorial analysis of the data. A discussion of the findings is provided in Section 5, and Section 6 summarises the study's conclusions and presents areas for further study.

2 Requests and politeness

In this section, I will set out the theoretical background for the present study and define some crucial notions. While Section 2.1 deals with politeness theoretical concepts, Section 2.2 discusses various linguistic mitigation strategies, namely head act explicitness and internal as well as external modification.

2.1 Requests as face-threatening acts

According to Searle's (1969) classification of speech acts, requests are directives. Thus, the illocutionary point is that a speaker S wants a hearer H to perform an action A in the future. Since S's wants restrict H's freedom of action, requests pose a threat to H's negative face (in the sense of public self-image) according to Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) seminal work on politeness. Thus, requests are so-called face-threatening acts (FTAs). The potential face-threat caused by a request requires politeness which comes in the form of linguistic expressions that mitigate the face-threat on H. A central aspect of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is that it suggests a direct connection between a linguistic form (e.g., an indirect speech act) and politeness. In the case of requests, this means that S can use more or less explicit expressions depending on the contextual variables. If politeness is the less preferred strategy in a specific situation (e.g., if urgency prevails), S can

perform the request by going "bald-on-record", i.e., without taking care of H's face. Imperative requests without mitigation are typical examples of this strategy. However, doing an act baldly, without any redress, hardly ever occurs in requests with a benefit for the speaker.[2] In situations where face considerations play a role, S can go "on record" and make the communicative intent transparent, but the request requires redressive action in the form of positive or negative politeness. A speaker can be positively polite by paying attention to H's needs (e.g., by making a compliment) or by marking H as an in-group member (e.g., by using terms of endearment such as *darling*). Negative politeness manifests itself, for example, in conventionally indirect speech acts such as the prototypical *Can you VP?* request. According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 70), they are a compromise "between (a) the desire to go on record as a prerequisite to being seen to pay face, and (b) the desire to go off record to avoid imposing". Even though the speech act is not maximally explicit the intended meaning is undeniable here. The situation is different for "off record" strategies, where the communicative intent is not transparent. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) "off record" strategies such as negative state remarks (e.g., *It's cold in here*) trigger conversational implicatures (e.g., +> close the window).

In their model, Brown and Levinson (1987: 68–83) specify further *when* politeness can be expected. It is assumed that the use of a certain strategy for the utterance of a potentially face-threatening act is determined by the situational value of the three variables "power", "distance", and "degree of imposition".[3] Power refers to the social status difference between S and H here. The greater this difference and the lower the relational power of S, the more linguistic mitigation is to be expected. Distance refers to the familiarity between interactants. As familiarity increases, the need for mitigating procedures decreases accordingly. Finally, the weight or degree of imposition, which is a feature of the requested action and can be defined by variables such as benefit, action type, or urgency, determines the use of linguistic politeness strategies: low degree of imposition requires less linguistic mitigation. For instance, requests for non-physical activities and/or a low urgency – such as a request for the confirmation of an invitation within the next few days – have a low imposition. These social factors and their complex interactions lead to the existence of a large variety of forms that are used to perform a request.[4]

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2 Typical contexts for bald-on-record acts are military commands or offers that are clearly in H's interest.
3 Ruytenbeek (2021: 165–172) discusses additional contextual variables such as gender.
4 As Ruytenbeek (2021: 164–165) discusses, the predicted effects of these three social variables are not always additive.

Despite its plausibility, Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) politeness theory has often been criticized – not least because of the face concept which is central to it – as showing a bias towards a too individualistic perspective that cannot be considered universal (for an overview see, e.g., Ehrhardt 2018; Flöck 2016: 24–28; Terkourafi 2012). Newer discursive approaches such as that of Locher and Watts (2005) do not view politeness as exclusively speaker-oriented but rather as something that is interactively negotiated, i.e., as "relational work" or "rapport management" (e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2005). These approaches do more justice to the fact that politeness is not primarily about the speaker's need to mitigate face-threatening speech acts. In a similar vein, Terkourafi (2015) argues that "conventionalization" is more central to politeness than the notion of indirectness/implicitness. In her model, politeness is not understood as tentativeness, "but as providing outward displays of one's familiarity with the norms governing the current exchange" (Terkourafi 2015: 15). Thus, she regards politeness as a matter of habit, not of rational calculation (of face needs). I also take the view that politeness should not be defined as a level of meaning communicated by means of a requestive utterance and cannot be primarily based on the notion of "indirectness". Politeness is rather a matter of utterance interpretation that can but need not be achieved by H and is thus a perlocutionary effect of S's utterance (see e.g., Searle and Vanderveken 1985 on this notion). However, I also assume that speakers are – or at least try to be – strategic to a certain degree when it comes to the formulation of a more or less polite utterance as they adapt their verbal requestive behaviour to politeness-sensitive social variables (such as degree of imposition). Thus, in line with Ogiermann (2009), I take the view that even though no utterance is inherently polite as such, there is nevertheless a great degree of consensus among members of a culture that allows to make predictions on the appropriateness/politeness evaluation of particular structures in a given context. Thus, the crucial concepts of Brown and Levinson's framework such as "face-threat" or "negative politeness" still prove very useful for analysing requestive strategies. Or, as Kádár and House (2021: 81) put it:

> any theory which argues that there is a definite relationship between form and politeness – or totally rejects this relationship – is potentially problematic if it does not take a contrastive perspective, simply because this relationship is always subject to linguacultural variation.

The experimental approach presented in Section 3 makes it possible to study the relationship between form and politeness in the sense of face-threat compensation within one language. Before addressing my own study, I will first take a closer look at the different components of requestive utterances and their specific politeness potential.

2.2 Linguistic mitigating strategies

2.2.1 Explicitness of the head act

Let us first look at the different requestive head act strategies that can be distinguished according to their "explicitness" before discussing the politeness effects attributed to them. Explicitness refers to "the degree to which the speaker's illocutionary intent is apparent from the locution" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 278). Unlike Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]), Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), and the literature referring to them, I will not use the terms "indirectness" and "directness" in what follows – these are traditionally used to refer to different linguistic strategies for performing the requestive head act – preferring "implicitness" and "explicitness" (with the exception of "conventional indirect request", which I use as a label for a certain category; see below). By doing so I want to avoid confusion, especially with speech act theoretical approaches where "(in)directness" has a special connotation and is not taken as scalar. Furthermore, the term "explicitness" is less ambiguous than "directness": while "explicitness" only captures the apparency of S's illocutionary intent, "directness" is sometimes also entangled with the expected degree of face-threat (see Decock and Depraetere [2018] for a critical discussion of the terminological and conceptual confusion regarding the notions of "directness" and "indirectness").

In accordance with the literature on requestive strategies, I regard the terms "explicit" and "implicit" as abstract labels referring to the endpoints of an explicitness continuum (see, e.g., Blum-Kulka 1987; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]; Leech 1983; see also Ruytenbeek 2021: 81–105 for a discussion). Following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), I further assume three broad categories or levels of explicitness for the head act, labelled as "impositive", "conventional indirectness" and "hint".

So-called impositives exhibit the highest degree of explicitness in that the request is marked as such by the sentence type in the case of imperatives or by other elements (e.g., in the case of explicit or hedged performatives by the performative verb).[5] Also locution derivables and want statements have a high degree of explicitness. This is evident, for example, from the fact that a response to the direct (i.e., assertive) interpretation of a want statement such as *I want you to leave the room* by replying *Indeed* or *That's right* does not seem appropriate.

Conventionally indirect requests (CIRs) are considered less explicit. The strategies of this category are based on conventions of means and have a high degree of

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5 See Ruytenbeek (2021: 46–51) for a discussion of the semantic features and the pragmatic properties of imperatives that make them predisposed to the performance of directives.

standardization in the sense of frequency of use (see, e.g., Clark 1979; Kasper 1995; Ruytenbeek 2021: 35–40). One such convention of means is connected to the speech act theoretical notion of preparatory conditions: In these strategies, also referred to as query preparatories, the speech act is performed by reference to a preparatory condition for the feasibility of the request. For example, ability questions such as *Can you VP?* target the first Searlean preparatory condition for requests: "S believes that H is able to perform the requested act" (cf. Searle 1969).[6] Besides ability, reference to the willingness of H is a common strategy in some languages (e.g., *Will/Would you VP?*).[7]

Finally, hints – also called "non-conventional indirect" strategies in the literature – are maximally implicit requests that trigger implicatures. In the case of strong hints, the request is made either by reference to the requested object or via contextual information. In the case of mild hints, the utterance contains no element which is of immediate relevance to the illocution or proposition. Since the communicated intention is not unambiguously clear to H, the meaning is more or less negotiable. Table 1 gives an overview of the three main categories and the different strategies for the realization of the head act.[8]

One might assume now – as was partly done in earlier approaches (e.g., Leech 1983) – that greater implicitness implies increased politeness, i.e., that there is a linear relationship between the two. However, the relation between explicitness and politeness is more complex.[9] As Blum-Kulka (1987) has shown in her pioneering study, more implicitness is no guarantee for more politeness: the most implicit request strategies (i.e., hints) were not perceived as most polite but *conventionally* indirect requests were, particularly query preparatories. As mentioned above, CIRs

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6 Standardization, i.e., the diachronically increasing association of a specific form with its indirect request meaning, is also relevant here as the following example shows. For instance, *Are you able to VP?* and *Can you VP?* both have the same conventions of means but only the latter one is frequently used as an indirect request and thus has a higher degree of standardization.

7 Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 280) also regard "suggestory formula" such as *Why don't you VP?* as conventionally indirect requests. Here, the "illocutionary intent is phrased as a suggestion by means of a framing routine formula".

8 These head act strategies adapted from the CCSARP are connected to Brown and Levinson's (1987: 315–317) strategies for performing FTAs that were mentioned above. Maximally explicit imperatives are "bald-on-record" (if not further mitigated) and hints are "off record" cases. However, the notion of positive and negative politeness relates not only to the head act strategy but also to other components of the requestive unit. For instance, supportive moves that have the function of repairs (e.g., *I'm sorry to bother you so late, but* …) are negative politeness strategies since they mitigate the threat that the following request constitutes to H's negative face.

9 Note that it has been shown that the assumption that implicit/indirect speech acts tend to be more polite than explicit/direct ones is by no means to be regarded as a pragmatic universal (Terkourafi 2015).

Table 1: Explicitness strategy types (according to the CCSARP, cf. Blum-Kulka et al. [1989: 278–281]).

HEAD ACT STRATEGY TYPES	EXAMPLE
Impositives	
Mood derivable (imperative)	*Bring me a coffee!*
Performative (explicit or hedged)	*I('d like to) ask you to bring me a coffee.*
Locution derivable	*You should bring me a coffee.*
Want statement	*I'd like to have a coffee.*
Conventionally indirect requests	
(= CIR)	
Query preparatory	*Could you bring me a coffee?*
Hints (non-conventionally indirect)	
Strong or mild	*Are you going to the coffee machine?*

EXPLICITNESS (+ top, – bottom)

are said to be both communicatively effective due to the low level of ambiguity and interactionally safe since S takes care of H's emotional costs. Hints, on the other hand, are said to involve higher communicative risks since they might carry a multiplicity of meanings in context (Blum-Kulka 1989).

As previous experimental studies on German have shown, *Can you VP?* is indeed the most frequently produced requestive strategy in this language (see, e.g., Ackermann 2021; Blum-Kulka and House 1989). When it comes to the politeness potential of this query preparatory there are, however, two major hypotheses as Ruytenbeek (2020: 119) mentions "On the one hand, *Can you VP?* is used to communicate extra politeness effects absent in imperative directives. On the other hand, *Can you VP?* enables speakers to avoid being perceived as impolite, while making their directive intent clear enough". Production task experiments on German provide evidence for the first or "extra politeness" hypothesis since *Can you VP?* occurs more frequently in contexts where politeness plays a bigger role, especially in situations with a high degree of imposition (see, e.g., Kranich et al.

2021; Lochtman 2022). If *Can you VP?* could be considered a "baseline" for politeness evaluations (and enable S to avoid the risk of being perceived as impolite) it should be used equally frequently in different social contexts – a result that Ruytenbeek (2020) reports for Belgian French e-mail communication.

2.2.2 Morpho-syntactic and lexical internal mitigating strategies

Besides the prominently discussed explicitness of the head act strategy, internal modifiers (e.g., *bitte* 'please', *mal* 'just') may also affect the perception of a request as more or less polite. These linguistic down- (or up-) graders are not only stylistic devices superficially adjoined to the requestive speech act. In accordance with Sbisà (2001: 1812), "[e]ach linguistic expression or textual strategy participating in the production of the illocutionary effect contributes in its own way to the overall physiognomy of the speech act". From a cognitive linguistic perspective, Ruytenbeek (2021: 87–88; see also Panther and Thornburg 2005) discusses the idea of utterances having different degrees of "illocutionary force salience", i.e., different degrees "to which the illocutionary force (for instance, directive) of an utterance is linguistically 'specified'". Salient requests are characterized by linguistic expressions like *für mich* 'for me' indicating the benefit for S, which is a prototypical characteristic of requests (in contrast to suggestions) and this specifies the requestive illocutionary meaning. When it comes to politeness, it is evident that high requestive illocutionary force salience and negative politeness can conflict (see below on the adverb *bitte* 'please'; see also Panther and Thornburg 2005: 61). What is also evident, is that internal modifiers should be integrated into a comprehensive investigation of politeness effects since they contribute to the illocutionary meaning.

As Blum-Kulka and House (1989: 139) claim, there is no strict correlation between the head act strategy and internal modification. For instance, the affinity for indirect requests in a culture does not correlate with a higher occurrence of internal modification. According to their data, German exhibits a particularly high amount of internal modification. Looking at these devices and their potential politeness effects should thus be promising for German.

One lexical modifier that has been discussed quite extensively is *bitte* 'please'. This multifunctional marker may act both as an indicating device, "used to signal pragmatic force", as well as a sociopragmatic device, "meant to affect the social impact the utterance is likely to have" (Blum-Kulka 1989: 61). This means that *bitte* – as well as its English counterpart *please* – has a mitigating function in explicit strategies with a highly transparent illocutionary meaning, whereas its addition to a less explicit request in a face-threatening context tends to be less polite, since it "robs the Query Preparatory strategy of its point, as the utterance is

thereby marked as a request" (House 1989: 113). Thus, *please/bitte* is by no means to be considered a context-independent "politeness marker" per se.[10]

Other lexical modifiers which are said to have a mitigating function are downtoners (e.g., *vielleicht* 'perhaps') or understaters/minimizers (e.g., *kurz* 'quick' or diminutives). With the former, S modulates the impact the request may have on H; with the latter, S downplays the required action. The former in particular serve to reduce the imposition on H and may thus have a politeness effect (Barron 2003: 147). Underrepresenting the state of affairs by an understater such as *eine Sekunde* 'for a second' has – as does the use of *bitte* 'please' – a variable function. In requestive standard situations (i.e., situations where there is no power asymmetry and a low social distance between S and H and the rank of imposition is low) understaters may be a tool for being polite as H's needs are taken into consideration or, as Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza (2002) propose, they indicate the speaker's attempt to minimize the cost of the requested action. However, in the case of requests with a high degree of imposition, it can seem too demanding to downplay the requested action.

There is also discussion of polite downgraders, which are supposed to be limited to certain registers or speaker-hearer relations. For instance, the subjunctive mood is said to make a request more polite by reducing "the expectations as to the fulfilment of the request" (Trosborg 1995: 210; see also Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza 2002: 267 on the notion of *optionality*). At the same time, it conveys a certain degree of formality in German, which may increase the social distance to the addressee. Thus, the subjunctive is often classified as a negative politeness marker that is, however, inappropriate in in-group communication, e.g., between friends (see, e.g., Faerch and Kasper 1989; Ogiermann 2009).[11] The same argumentation can be found for modal verb choice in query preparatories. In German, the unmarked or most standardized form is clearly *können* 'can' (see Ackermann 2021). Permission questions with the modal verb *dürfen* 'may' are sometimes described as more polite on the one hand because of their submissive character. On the other hand, they may even be perceived as overpolite in case of a symmetric role relationship between the interlocutors

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10 A subsequent question would be whether explicit request strategies modified by *please* or unmodified CIRs exhibit higher politeness values. Evidence for the former comes from Vergis and Pell (2020) who show for Canadian English that imperatives preceded by *please* (*please lend me a nickel*) supersede bare CIRs (*can you lend me a nickel*) at least in perceived politeness.

11 Studies focusing on regional differences in German show that the subjunctive is used with high frequency in requests, especially in the south of the German-speaking area – with particularly high values in Switzerland and Austria (see, Ackermann 2021; Warga 2008). Even if these studies do not explicitly distinguish between situations with high and low social distance, the high values suggest that the subjunctive is also used in in-group requests.

(Faerch and Kasper 1989: 229). However, modal verb or query preparatory choice is sometimes also discussed as a factor independent of register. It is said that query preparatories that are more frequently used as CIRs (e.g., willingness questions like *Magst du VP?* 'Will you VP?') or impersonal constructions (e.g., possibility questions like *Wäre es möglich, VP?* 'Would it be possible to VP?') have a more polite effect than highly standardized and hearer-orientated ability questions (see, e.g., Van Mulken 1996; Warga 2008).[12] However, for Belgian French, Ruytenbeek (2020) does not find significantly more non-conventional possibility questions (*Is/Would it possible to VP?*) in asymmetrical status contexts than in equal status contexts.

Conditional clauses such as *Ich wollte fragen, ob du VP* 'I wanted to ask if you VP' are syntactic downgraders that are not said to be restricted to particular speaker-hearer relations but could distance the request further from reality comparable to the subjunctive mood. Other embeddings/subjectivizers can add an element of enthusiasm to the request (Trosborg 1995: 211). According to Warga (2008), the mitigating force of such subjectivizers comes from the expression of subjective opinions. While tentative subjectivizers (e.g., *Ich frage mich, ob du VP* 'I wonder if you VP') can be regarded as hedges making the request sound less explicit and are thus elements of negative politeness, appreciative embeddings like *Es wäre toll, wenn du VP* 'It would be great if you VP' are obviously linked to positive politeness. Ogiermann (2009: 202) furthermore mentions consultative devices as negative politeness elements mitigating the face-threat by acknowledging H's opinion (e.g., *Denkst du, ich VP*? 'Do you think I VP?').[13] In her German data these elements are, however, very rare.[14]

2.2.3 External modifiers and alerters

As mentioned in Section 1, speech acts such as requests often occur as "speech act sets" (see, e.g., Murphy and Neu 1996; Olshtain and Cohen 1983; Vásquez 2011). This means that "any speech act may be realized by either using a single discourse

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12 Assumptions on the frequency of use of diverse query preparatory requests in German are only based on experimental data thus far (see, e.g., Ackermann 2021). Corpus studies that support these assumptions are necessary.

13 As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, acknowledging the addressee's opinion is also a form of positive politeness.

14 Negation is sometimes also discussed as a syntactic downgrader in German (Barron 2003: 145). However, as Faerch and Kasper (1989: 227) already mention, the use of negation – especially in combination with interrogatives – can be regarded as un upgrader in German. Since requests such as *Kannst du nicht leise sein?* 'Can't you be quiet?' presuppose a negative response, this gives them a reproachful note (see also Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza 2002: 267–268). Accordingly, they are likely to be absent in polite requests (see, Ackermann 2021; Ogiermann 2009: 200).

strategy – or by combining two or more discourse strategies, some of which may represent other types of speech acts" (Vásquez 2011: 1708). For example, a request can be realized by a single utterance, i.e., the head act (e.g., *Could you lend me some money?* [request]) or it can combine with other strategies (e.g., *Could you lend me some money? I'll pay you back tomorrow!* [request + promise]). Following Blum-Kulka et al. (1989: 17, 287–289) and Faerch and Kasper (1989), I will call conversational strategies, which precede or follow the head act, "supportive moves" or "external modification". In contrast to internal modifiers, which have been described as rather implicit markers of politeness, external modifiers are not only longer but also more explicit, having their own proposition. According to Faerch and Kasper (1989: 244) "there are pragmatic, discourse structural, and psycholinguistic reasons for language users to prefer internal modifiers [to external ones] wherever they find them sufficient to reach their communicative goals, both in terms of politeness and achieving compliance with their request." From this, we can infer that external modifiers are used to convey politeness in situations that require more redressive action and when internal modifiers are not sufficient. Supportive moves are classified according to the function of these external modifiers, which is derived from their illocutionary meaning. For instance, they may serve to justify the request, praise the addressee, minimize costs for H, or prepare H (see, e.g., Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 287–289 among many other proposals). According to Trosborg (1995: 216), a request can only be presented without any so-called preparator (e.g., *Bist du grade beschäftigt?* 'Are you busy right now?') if it has a low degree of imposition or is addressed to someone very familiar. As studies on German show, requests are indeed frequently accompanied by supportive moves – prototypically grounders (see Ackermann 2021; Kranich et al. 2021; Ogiermann 2009; Warga 2008). Warga (2008) assumes that the use of combined external modifiers as well as the use of more varied (non-formulaic) modifiers conveys a greater politeness effect. The first aspect corresponds to Brown and Levinson's (1987: 143) suggestion that "the greater the number of compatible outputs the speaker uses the greater the politeness he may be presumed to intend". This suggestion is supported by Kranich et al.'s (2021) data as they show that a higher degree of imposition leads to wordier requests with more external modifications in German as well as in (British, American, and Indian) English.

Finally, address terms – especially those with a relationship-intensifying function such as terms of endearment (e.g., *Schatzi* 'sweetie') – can serve as in-group markers in communication or have a honorific function (e.g., titles), thereby mitigating the face-threat posed by the request (see, e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987: 107–108). Kendrick (2020: 128–129), for instance, shows that address terms occur frequently – and especially more frequently than in other domains of social action such as questions – with requestive utterances in English. This could

be explained by the fact that address terms function as attention getters and serve to designate a particular addressee as the recipient of the request. Additionally, as signals of in-group membership they may also be used to display positive politeness. Further evidence for the mitigating functions of address terms comes from Polish: as Zinken (2020: 318) shows, vocatives predominantly occur in requestive sequences in which S occupies a lower social position than H.

In summary, a range of studies already exist that shed light on the relationship between the form of a request and its degree of politeness in German or related languages. However, these studies, primarily in the area of cross-cultural or variational pragmatics, mostly focus on linguacultural comparison, not specifically on politeness effects. These are often simply ascribed to certain strategies (via theoretical considerations) but there is no clear empirical proof thus far. These politeness effects are the focus of the experimental study reported on below.

3 Methodology

3.1 Tested variables and hypotheses

In the experimental study which is described in this section I use an online survey with both a DCT and appropriateness ratings. The DCT – which is more central to this study – contains two situations in which the participants were asked to formulate a request, with the degree of imposition manipulated. As empirical studies on German (and English) have shown, a higher degree of imposition is particularly associated with more polite requests (see, e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Brown and Gilman 1989; Holtgraves 2005; Kranich et al. 2021 among others).[15] Moreover, it has been shown that features of the requested action (e.g., weight of imposition) are less sensitive to language change and even seem to override social relational factors such as power or distance (see Blum-Kulka and House 1989; Kranich et al. 2021).[16] Thus, manipulating the factor "weight of imposition" seems to be promising for investigating politeness.

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15 As has been shown by Vergis and Pell (2020), the degree of imposition – among other factors – also plays a role for the perception of a request (in Canadian English). Low-imposition requests such as *repeat the question* are generally perceived as more polite than those associated with higher imposition (e.g., *repeat the workout*).

16 As Kranich et al. (2021) discuss, the power variable seems to be subject to language change in German as older participants (47–86 years) were more influenced by hierarchy structures than younger ones (18–31 years). Both age groups produced more explicit requestive strategies when they were in a position of power compared to equal power scenarios, but the older participants increased

It is also expected that verbal mitigation strategies will be observed in both situations in the DCT test, since in both cases participants had to produce a face-threatening request with a benefit for them. However, it is further assumed that the need for politeness increases with the degree of imposition. Thus, a tendency towards unmarked behavior is expected in the low-imposition task or – in Watts' (2003: 257) terms – "politic behavior" that is defined as "linguistic and non-linguistic [behavior] which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction". Increased politeness, i.e., linguistic strategies that indicate the speaker's attempt to save the intended addressee's face, is more likely in the high-imposition context. This leads to the following hypotheses regarding the realization of the requestive utterances in the production data.

3.1.1 Head act strategy

H1: Based on previous studies, I assume that CIRs are both communicatively effective due to the low level of ambiguity and interactionally safe since S takes care of H's emotional costs. Thus, they should be the dominating strategy in both requestive contexts. However, it is predicted that CIRs occur more frequently in the high- than in the low-imposition situation according to the assumption that they are used to increase the politeness of a message compared to impositives, which should occur less frequently in the high-imposition context. H2: It is also expected that non-CIRs and especially query preparatories other than *Can you VP?* are more frequent in the high- than in the low-imposition context. Since the "request for action" interpretation is not deeply entrenched in these constructions, speakers may intend an (additional) "request for information" meaning or – in the case of hints – leave the interpretation open (see, e.g., Ruytenbeek 2021).

3.1.2 Internal modification

With regard to internal modification, several hypotheses arise, since previous studies have shown that the various syntactic and lexical mitigating strategies cannot be lumped together. H3–H5: First, it is assumed that lexical downtoners such as *vielleicht* 'maybe', which reduce the imposition on H by emphasizing optionality, have a politeness effect. Thus, it is expected that they are more frequent in the high-imposition situation. Second and third, a politeness effect is also assumed for the subjunctive and embeddings that distance the request from reality. Consequently, they should also be more frequent in the high-imposition

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their explicitness to a greater extent than the younger ones. In contrast, the weight of imposition had a stable effect across age groups.

situation. H6–H7: As discussed in Section 2.2.2, the multifunctional marker *bitte* 'please' cannot be said to have a politeness effect per se. Since it has been described as a standard-situation marker I expect *bitte* to occur more frequently in the low-imposition situation. Similarly, understaters such as *kurz* 'quick' can be regarded as standard-situation markers. Thus, they are expected to be more frequent in the low-imposition context.

3.1.3 External modification

H8: According to the literature, supportive moves convey politeness – especially in situations where internal modifiers are not sufficient. Thus, it is expected that single and multiple supportive moves are more frequent in the high-imposition context. It is further hypothesized that speakers intend to convey greater politeness with wordier requests. Therefore, I expect (multiple) supportive moves to be more frequent when the imposition on the addressee is high.

3.1.4 Vocatives

H9: Since vocatives are in-group markers, they are assumed to convey positive politeness. Consequently, it is predicted that they are more frequent in the high-imposition context.

These nine hypotheses will be tested using the production data. The variables that will be examined for their occurrence in the high- and low-imposition contexts with the help of a multifactorial model are listed in Table 2 together with their values.

Table 2: Investigated variables and their values[a].

Variable	Value
Head act strategy	Impositive, CIR (= *Can you VP?*), non-CIR
Downtoner	Yes, no
Subjunctive	Yes, no
Embedding	Tentative, appreciative, no
Politeness marker	Yes, no
Understater	Yes, no
External modification	No, one, multiple
Vocative alerter	Yes, no

[a]Contrary to the CCSARP manual, only instances of the highly standardized *Can you VP?* construction are counted as CIR. All other less explicit requestive strategies (i.e., hints such as negative state remarks but also other query preparatories such as willingness or possibility questions) were counted as "non-conventional indirect". As Table 2 shows, all internal and external modifiers as well as vocatives were coded as categorial variables for the regression model presented in Section 4. In addition, the concrete forms/functions were annotated for each token of the categories "downtoner", "understater", "external modification" and "vocative alerter" for possible further analyses. See also the appendix.

3.2 Test design

3.2.1 Discourse completion task (DCT)

DCTs have been criticized, as the elicitation of individual speech acts does not take into account interaction, which is typical of natural discourse, and because the data are considered to be less authentic. In addition, the written survey often leads to participants giving shorter and more formal answers than in natural discourse. Irrespective of this, it has been questioned to what extent spontaneous utterances are actually elicited and not rather attitudes and intuitions regarding the appropriateness of the utterance in a given situation (cf. on this and further criticism, e.g., Jucker and Staley 2017; Ogiermann 2018). However, for the present research question, it is not crucial whether the participants would use exactly the same expressions as indicated in the DCT in a corresponding situation as long as they consider their answers to be socially and culturally "appropriate". The comparability of the data and the possibility of strict variable control make elicitation tasks a valuable method to study mitigation. These benefits outweigh the higher degree of artificiality of the data.

The DCT part of the online survey was preceded by a brief instructional text in which participants were asked to imagine a concrete interlocutor and to answer in the variety that seemed most natural in the situation. A situation for eliciting thanking with exemplary responses was chosen as an example to illustrate the procedure. In total, the DCT contained eleven situations. Among them were those for eliciting requests, apologies, orders, and offers. For the present study only the two situations containing requests (with varying degree of imposition and comparable distance and power) are of interest. However, the other situations helped to distract the participants from the research question. All situations contained concise descriptions of the setting with specification of the relationship to the intended addressee but no further discourse sequences. The text input field below the description was unrestricted. Respondents could skip any item if they could not identify with the situation described – with the option of providing an explanation as to why they do not identify with the situation.

With regard to the two situations tested, a few more words about the social variables are in order. First of all, the degree of imposition for the addressee is of course not a dichotomous but a continuous variable. For the present study, two situations were chosen that can be located near the outer poles of this continuum. In the low-imposition situation, participants were instructed to ask a good friend to hold a glass while they take off their jacket during a concert, which is an absolute "standard situation" in House's (1989: 115) terms. The categorization "low degree of

imposition" is based on the fact that the request is for a short-lasting action, physical but still easy to realize, which is in the immediate future and does not strongly distract the addressee from other activities. In the high-imposition situation, participants were asked to imagine calling a family member after midnight and asking them to pick them up, as there was no public transport available. The role relations are also transparent and predetermined here, but some participants have explicitly questioned their right to make a request in the situation described (see Section 4.1). Here we have a request, the realization of which would clearly prevent the addressee from other actions – and for a longer period of time.

In contrast to the weight of imposition, power and social distance were nearly kept constant. However, for the low-imposition context, the addressee is defined as "good friend", while in the high-imposition context s/he is more loosely defined as "family member" whereby the participants could choose the concrete person they would address in such a situation. Thus, the distance between the interlocutors could have been perceived as lower in the high-imposition situation, which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the results. Additionally, social hierarchies can also play a role among family members, e.g., when parents have been chosen as addressees (ca. 25% of the cases). In line with expectations this would lead to a further increase in the use of mitigators. However, most of the participants indicated siblings or the partner as addressee where power plays a minor role. Another difference is the medium. While the participants were asked to imagine an oral face-to-face utterance in the low-imposition request, they were asked to imagine a phone call in the high-imposition request. However, both utterances were collected in writing.

These differences, which were integrated to provide the participants with situations that are as natural as possible, are reflected upon when discussing the data.

3.2.2 Appropriateness ratings

The second part of the questionnaire contained appropriateness ratings, adopted from classical acceptability studies for the evaluation of grammatical variants. While the DCT data provide information on the production of requests, the appropriateness ratings and especially the comments on the utterances to be rated were intended to gain insights into (reasons for) the participants' evaluation of variants of face-threatening acts as more or less appropriate. Participants were not asked for a "politeness" rating here in order not to sensitize them to certain polite phrases such as *bitte* 'please'. Since requests are per se FTAs, it was assumed that the participants would nevertheless assess the appropriateness of the utterances in terms of perceived politeness. As the participants' comments on the test items suggest, this was the case (see Section 4.2).

The rating section was also preceded by an instructional text, in which participants were asked to respond intuitively, imagining the presented utterances in the variety of German they were familiar with. This time the participants were presented with different preformulated utterances that were embedded in a certain context and had to be rated according to the question "Would you formulate the utterance like this?" on a 5-point Likert scale with the poles "no, completely different" and "yes, exactly like this". In each case there was the additional option "I cannot judge" and an input field for comments on the utterance to be evaluated.[17] The five utterances of interest for the present study are minimal pairs of different request strategies within the same context.[18] All items were presented in randomized order. In particular, all items of a minimal pair were presented on a different page each, and it was not possible to jump back. This was to avoid the participants being able to directly compare the items belonging to one situation.

The utterances of the first set listed at (3) were framed as follows: 'Anna is sitting with her boyfriend Markus at breakfast and wants him to pass the jam/honey/juice. She says:'.[19] Here, power, distance, and degree of imposition are low.

(3) a. Impositive: *Reich mir mal die Marmelade rüber!*
                      'Pass me the jam!'
     b. CIR: *Könntest du mir mal den Honig rüberreichen?*
                      'Could you pass me the honey?'
     c. Hint: *Ich komme nicht an den Saft ran.*
                      'I can't reach the juice.'

The second minimal pair consists of the two utterances to be judged, set out at (4). The setting was similar to the first one (couple; rubbish in the kitchen must be taken out).[20]

(4) a. Impositive: *Sei so gut und bring den Müll nachher raus!*
                      'Be so good and take out the rubbish later!'
     b. CIR: *Könntest du nachher den Müll rausbringen?*
                      'Could you take out the rubbish later?'

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17 The concrete instruction was: *Falls Sie Kommentare zu dieser Äußerung haben:*, 'If you have any comments on this utterance:'.
18 In total, Part 2 of the online questionnaire contained 24 items, including the evaluation of forms of address, complaints, etc.
19 Original description text: *Anna sitzt mit ihrem Freund Markus beim Frühstück und möchte, dass er ihr die Marmelade/den Honig/den Saft rüberreicht. Sie sagt:.*
20 Original description text: *Der Müll in der Küche ist schon übervoll. Lena sagt zu ihrem Freund:*, 'The rubbish in the kitchen is overflowing. Lena says to her boyfriend:'.

3.3 Data collection and participants

The data collection took place between December 2018 and March 2019. The link to the online survey, which was created via Soscisurvey,[21] was distributed via various mailing lists and social media channels. After the data collection, coding of the requests from the DCT was done according to the coding scheme found in the appendix, which is based on the CCSARP.[22]

A total of 578 native speakers (plus 7 non-natives, which were excluded) from Germany (465), German-speaking Switzerland (74) and Austria (39) completed the online questionnaire.[23] The participants were between 15 and 91 years old (Ø = 39.8). 376 people said they were female, 186 male; 16 participants did not assign themselves to any gender.

4 Results

4.1 Production data

The sample contains 1,006 observations: 559 for the low- and 447 for the high-imposition context. This is because 23% of the participants refused to respond to the high-imposition situation – about half of them indicating a perceived discomfort in the comment field (e.g., *käme mir sehr unhöflich vor* 'would seem very rude to me'). In contrast, only 3% of the participants could not identify with the low-imposition situation.[24] This shows that the imposition for the addressee in the high-imposition context was considered (too) high to imagine a possible requestive strategy by a substantial number of participants.

In order to assess which potential mitigation strategies occur significantly more often in the high-imposition context, the data have been analysed with a

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21 Access via www.soscisurvey.de, latest access on 23.06.2021.
22 I thank Katharina Hülscher and Nora Judith Winterberg for their assistance in coding the production data.
23 I assume that, generally, all German-speaking participants – regardless of their place of residence – adapt their linguistic behavior to the specific situation. It is imaginable that there are diatopic/cultural differences within the German-speaking area. However, this aspect is not the focus of the present study (but see, e.g., Ackermann 2021; Warga 2008).
24 Among the refusals, only three were specifically related to the request (e.g., *das geht gut non-verbal* 'this works well non-verbally'). No one said they found the request embarrassing or inappropriate.

binary logistic regression model.[25] The variables head act strategy, subjunctive, downtoner, understater, embedding, politeness marker, vocative alerter, and external modification were integrated in the multifactorial model. I started with a maximal model. Independent variables that had no significant influence were removed from the model in a step-down procedure based on the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). The only variable removed was embedding as it did not improve the model quality. The specification of the final model is set out at (5).

(5)   IMPOSITION ~ ALERTER_VOCATIVE + STRATEGY + SUBJUNCTIVE + DOWNTONER + UNDERSTATER +
       POLITENESS_MARKER + EM_AMOUNT

Overall, the main effects predict the context very well (Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 = 0.876). As the concordance index indicates (C = 0.984), the model discriminates extremely well.[26] Table 3 gives an overview of the significant variables integrated into the model. In addition, the effect sizes (log odds) including 95% confidence intervals, the standard errors, the Wald test statistic (a ratio of the estimate and the standard error), the *p*-values, and the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) are listed.

The effect coefficient – in contrast to the *p*-value – indicates the direction of the effect as well as its strength. Log odds are centered around 0 and reach from + Infinity to – Infinity. Thus, a coefficient of 0 would mean that there is no difference between the levels of the variable with regard to the choice between the high- and the low-imposition contexts. Positive coefficients indicate that the specified level (e.g., occurrence of a vocative) occurs more frequently in the high-imposition context in comparison with the base level (no vocative). The right-most column in Table 3 shows the VIFs. These VIFs (all < 3) indicate that there is no critical multi-collinearity between the factors. In addition, bootstrapping was used to test whether the model overfits the data, which is not the case.[27]

Overall, the statistical model confirms the hypotheses. As the positive effect coefficient indicates, CIRs (i.e., *Can you VP?*) are more typical for the high-imposition context compared with impositives (H1). As Figure 1 further visualizes, they are the dominant requestive strategy in both the low- (66%) and the high-imposition context (87%). However, while *Can you VP?* is nearly the only option in

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25 The R statistics software was used for all calculations (R Core Team 2020; R version 4.0.2).
26 Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 and the concordance index C are goodness-of-fit measures. Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 shows the proportion of variance explained by the model and ranges from 0 (no predictive power) to 1 (perfect prediction). For logistic regression models, the C-index is usually also reported (for details see Levshina 2015: 259).
27 Overfitting can be a problem in logistic regression. It usually occurs with small sample sizes and a large number of explanatory variables. If a model is overfitted it will perform poorly on new data of another sample and thus, it has little value (Levshina 2015: 274–275). Hence, it is important to check how well the fitted model performs on "new data".

Table 3: Summary of logistic regression model including the variables alerter, strategy, subjunctive, downtoner, understate, politeness marker and external modification with low imposition as reference level.

	Coef	S.E.	Wald Z	Pr(>|Z|)	95% confidence interval		VIF
					2.5%	97.5%	
Intercept	−8.2990	0.8613	−9.64	<0.0001	−10.1055	−6.7167	
alerter_vocative=yes	3.7620	0.7401	5.08	<0.0001	2.4214	5.3107	1.1736
strategy=indirect_conv	2.1680	0.5353	4.05	<0.0001	1.1529	3.2548	1.7430
strategy=indirect_non_conv	−0.2526	0.8012	−0.32	0.7525	−1.8143	1.3321	1.7706
subjunctive=yes	1.3263	0.3678	3.61	0.0003	0.6197	2.0665	1.1902
downtoner=yes	−4.6177	0.4302	−10.73	<0.0001	−5.5233	−3.8285	2.0739
understater=no	7.2367	0.6415	11.28	<0.0001	6.0756	8.6054	1.7625
politeness_marker=no	2.0622	0.3864	5.34	<0.0001	1.3442	2.8700	1.6512
EM_amount=multiple	3.9166	0.6333	6.18	<0.0001	2.7598	5.2603	1.2875
EM_amount=single	1.5495	0.3196	4.85	<0.0001	0.9349	2.1924	1.1920

the high-imposition context, impositives also play a substantial role in the low-imposition context (28%).

Contrary to H1, H2 is not confirmed by the data. As the results of the regression model indicate, implicit requests with a lower degree of standardization such as willingness questions (e.g., *Magst du kurz halten?* 'Would you like to hold this for a second?') show no significant effect (6% in the low-imposition context versus 9% in the high-imposition context). Thus, the data do not support the assumption that non-conventional indirectness is used by the participants to be extra polite in the high-imposition context investigated here.

In line with expectations, the subjunctive tends to occur more often in the high-imposition context (H4). As the coefficient indicates, the effect is small. In contrast, the politeness marker *bitte* and especially understaters (e.g., *kurz* 'quick'), which have the highest coefficient, are characteristic of the low-imposition context, which confirms hypotheses H6 and H7. Both hypotheses H8 and H9 are also confirmed by the production data: single and especially multiple external modifiers as well as vocatives occur more frequently in the high-imposition context than in the low-imposition context.

As mentioned above, the variable embedding did not improve the model quality and is therefore not included in the final model. H5 is thus not confirmed. The non-significant impact may be due to the fact that embeddings are overall very rare in the production data (only 31 observations in total). One result that even
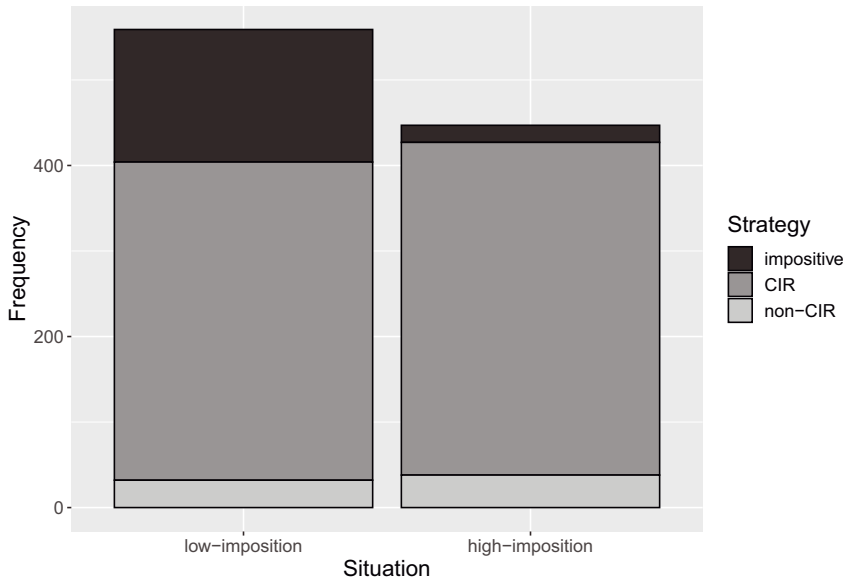
Figure 1: Observed frequencies for the strategies "impositive" "conventional indirect" and "non-conventional indirect" by context.

contradicts the hypothesis concerns downtoners (H3). The negative coefficient indicates that the occurrence of downtoners (and here especially *mal, eben, grade* 'just, once') decreases the chance of high-imposition context. Thus, they are an indicator for the low-imposition context and not, as expected, for the high-imposition context. A discussion of the implications of these results – where also a more fine-grained analysis of downtoners is proposed – is given in Section 5. First, the results of the rating section are reported in the next section.

4.2 Appropriateness ratings

The results of the appropriateness ratings provide some information on the perception of different FTA strategies in standard situations. As the boxplots in Figure 2 show, participants prefer *Could you VP?* requests over imperatives and especially over negative state remarks (which were only tested in the breakfast situation). Even in situations with low social distance, no status differences, and a low rank of imposition, bare imperatives in particular are not considered fully adequate on average. In the breakfast situation 18% (105) of the participants made a politeness-relevant comment on the imperative item: 11% (63) noted that a *bitte*
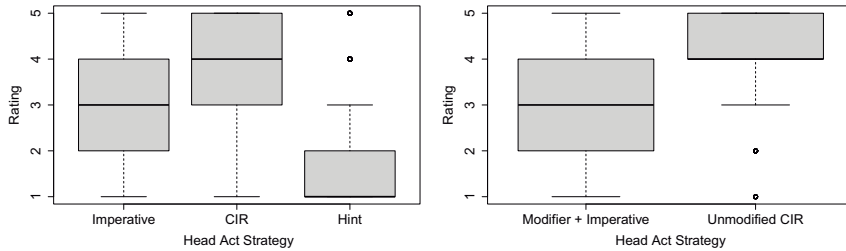
Figure 2: Boxplots for different head act strategies in the breakfast situation (left) and in the rubbish situation (right); *n* = 578.

'please' is missing, 4% (24) would formulate the request as a question and 3% (18) remarked that a combination of a question + *bitte* would sound more appropriate/ polite. In the rubbish situation the imperative is modified by the appreciative subjectivizer *sei so gut* 'be so good'. However, this does not give the explicit strategy a better rating on average. The lack of *bitte* 'please' or an interrogative strategy is only mentioned by 5% (29) of the participants and thus less frequently complained about in the comments here. However, seven participants (1%) noted that *sei so gut* 'be so good' sounds a bit old-fashioned, mummy-like or too demanding.[28]

Overall, the CIRs are rated better in both situations (median=4). In the breakfast situation, nevertheless, 7% (43) of the participants complained that *bitte* 'please' is missing in the *Could you VP?* request. In contrast, only 2% (13) of the participants noted that the CIR – and here especially the subjunctive – seems too polite to them in such a familiar situation. The CIR in the rubbish situation was commented on less frequently overall, but similarly 5% (28) commented on *bitte*, 1% (7) found it too polite.

Remarkably, the negative state remark is rated worst (median=1). Here, 7% (38) of the participants either formulated/added a CIR (33) or a more explicit request (5) in the comment field. 3% (18) of the participants explicitly noted that the utterance is too indirect and thus even impolite for them (e.g., *zu indirekt, unhöflich* 'too indirect, impolite'; *wirkt so allein etwas schroff* 'seems a bit harsh on its own'). In line with previous studies, the results indicate that highly implicit request strategies such as negative state remarks are not perceived as more appropriate or politer than highly conventionalized ones in standard requestive situations with a low face-threat as the one I tested here.

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28 In future studies, the combination of an imperative with the internal modifier *bitte* should be tested as well.

5 Discussion

5.1 Requestive head act strategy and internal modification

The query preparatory *Can you VP?* is the dominant requestive strategy in both the low- and the high-imposition context. This CIR also scores best overall in the adequacy ratings. However, *Can you VP?* is almost obligatory in high-imposition contexts, while impositives are also an option in requestive standard situations (H1). The low number of non-CIRs (especially in the high-imposition context) could partly be explained by the test design since it is plausible that "requests that in natural discourse might have been negotiated across several turns, are here confined to one turn. To achieve maximum efficiency, the requestive move in this case has to have the advantages of both a prequest and a request proper, an efficiency achieved by conventional indirectness" (Blum-Kulka and House 1989: 132).

The question now is to what extent *Can you VP?* contributes to the mitigation of the face-threat. As I would argue, there is not only one *Can you VP?* construction but two. These two constructions are usually lumped together under the term "conventional indirectness" due to their formal identity. However, high- and low-imposition *Can you VP?* requests differ with regard to their illocutionary meaning. The crucial difference lies in the degree of seriousness with which the "question for information" meaning of the utterance is intended. Especially in less standardized requestive situations, e.g., in high-imposition contexts, *Can you VP? is* often a real or "direct question for information" about H's ability while it usually is a highly standardized and conventionalized "request for action" in low-imposition contexts. Thus, both constructions differ regarding their degree of explicitness.

From a constructionist perspective, standardized *Can you VP?* – which typically occurs in low-imposition contexts – only has the form of a question but means a request. Thus, the requestive potential is part of the pragmatic meaning of the construction; the semantics of *können* 'can' is bleached. The meaning of the construction is completely conventionalized and standardized, and S does not question the ability of H to fulfil the requested action (see, e.g., Stefanowitsch 2003 for a construction-based approach).[29] In non-standard or high-imposition situations *Can you VP?* often – but of course not always – not only has the form of a question but is also uttered to express a question for information, which is less

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29 For an early generative semantic approach on the ambiguity of unmodified *Can you VP?* see Sadock (1974: 123–124).

explicit than its more standardized counterpart with unambiguous requestive meaning.[30] As I will discuss in the following, several internal modifiers are used to specify the intended pragmatic meaning/illocutionary point of the utterance.

The regression model has shown that speakers make use of very different internal modifiers depending on the context or face-threat. First, the adverb *bitte* 'please', which increases the illocutionary force salience of the utterance, is generally more frequent in the low-than in the high-imposition context (H6). This is not only because impositives, which require mitigation, occur more often in the low-imposition context. *Bitte* also occurs frequently, namely in 49% of the utterances with the *real* CIR (e.g., *Kannst du bitte mal halten?* 'Can you hold this, please?'). Also in the adequacy ratings a frequent criticism was that a *bitte* 'please' was missing with CIRs in standard situations. This internal modifier not only specifies the requestive meaning but also marks an obvious request overtly as polite. *Can you VP?* + *bitte* is thus a good balance between clarity and politeness. Questions for information on the other hand do not allow for the occurrence of *bitte* since they don't have a requestive meaning (e.g., ?*Kannst du bitte schon schwimmen?* 'Can you already swim, please?'). Indeed, *bitte* occurs significantly less frequently in the high-imposition context and in only 37% of the *Can you VP?* occurrences.[31] In the high-imposition context an underspecified requestive meaning is thus preferred. The assumption that tentativeness is the preferred negative politeness strategy in face-threatening situations is further supported by the distribution of downtoners.

Downtoners indicating tentativeness such as *vielleicht* 'possibly', which signal the insecurity of S regarding the ability of H to fulfil the requested action, occur only in 2% of the *Can you VP?* requests in the low-imposition context. In the high-imposition context, downtoners such as (*ganz*) *vielleicht, eventuell, ausnahmsweise* '(quite) possibly, eventually, exceptionally' occur with a higher frequency (24%, cf. 6a). As the logistic regression model shows, the probability of downtoners occurring in the low-imposition context is much higher overall (contrary to H3). However, it is especially the modal particles *grade* 'just', *mal* 'once', *eben* 'simply/just (also in combination) which occur with high frequency in

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30 From a speech act theoretical perspective, there are two speech acts, a direct one with interrogative form and only interrogative illocutionary force and a conventionally indirect one. The latter has the same form, but the primary or nonliteral illocutionary act performed by the utterance *Can you VP?* is a request for action by way of performing a secondary or literal illocutionary act of asking a question for information. See, e.g., Searle (1981) on indirect speech acts; Sadock (1974) or Searle and Vanderveken (1985) on illocutionary force (indicating devices) and Meibauer (2019) or Ruytenbeek (2021) for recent discussions of the literary force hypothesis.

31 As a χ^2-test shows, the occurrence of *bitte* with *Can you VP?* in the low-versus high-imposition context differs significantly: $\chi^2 (1) = 4.0822$, $p = 0.04334^*$, $\phi = 0.063$. However, the effect size is very low indicating a low association strength.

this context and especially with ability questions (69%, cf. 6b). These particles mark the casualness of the request rather than robbing the ability question of its point.[32] Characteristically, these modal particles hardly occur in the high-imposition context (2.0%). Since downtoners that indicate tentativeness differ significantly in their occurrence from downtoners that indicate casualness within the same head act strategy (χ^2 (1) = 286.32, $p < 0.001$***, ϕ = 0.891), they should be treated separately in future studies.

(6)   a.   *Könntest du mich **vielleicht** abholen?*   ("tentativeness markers")
           'Could you maybe pick me up?'
   b.   *Kannst du **grade mal** mein Glas halten?*   ("casualness markers")
           'Can you just hold my glass?'

The subjunctive, which occurs significantly more frequently in the high-imposition context, has a similar function to that of lexical downtoners that indicate tentativeness (H4).[33] This morphological modifier further increases the optionality, i.e., the addressee's freedom to decide whether or not to perform the action, and as a result the politeness.

As the data show, punctuation is another means of indicating illocutionary force salience that has rarely been discussed so far. Formally, CIRs are obviously interrogative sentences that should be marked by a question mark. However, we find deviations from this orthographically correct punctuation as (7) exemplifies.

(7)   a.   *Kannst du mal eben halten!*
           'Can you hold this for a second!'
   b.   *Kannst du mal bitte mein Glas halten.*
           (*bewusst mit Punkt und nicht mit Fragezeichen.*)
           'Can you just hold my glass. (Deliberately with a full stop and not a question mark.)'

Deviating from the norm, we find both full stops and exclamation marks (as well as combinations of question marks and exclamation marks). As one participant explicitly notes (7b), these are not (always) typos but at least sometimes deliberate decisions. Thus, these cases can be seen as an indication that the requestive meaning may override partial aspects of the form type of a sentence if the CIR is

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32 The same holds true for understaters such as *kurz/schnell* 'quick', which are used to verbally downplay the required action. As the high coefficient in the regression model indicates, they are particularly clear predictors for the low-imposition context (H7).
33 Since the high-imposition context is an informal one, the subjunctive is indeed used for in-group communication and is not limited to formal registers in German (see Section 2.2.2).

highly standardized.[34] This non-interrogative punctuation moves CIRs a bit further towards explicitness, which should diminish their politeness value. Interestingly, we do not find this standard-defying punctuation equally frequently in both situations.

As Table 4 shows, full stops and exclamation marks occur slightly but nonetheless significantly more frequently than question marks in the low-imposition context (χ^2 (1) = 4.8405, p = 0.0278*, ϕ = 0.096).[35] However, the effect size is extremely low since question marks, which would be in line with the written standard language, dominate in both contexts. A phonological experiment that contrasts intonation in questions for information with that in CIRs would be interesting and probably far more informative since intonation is not subject to codification. The fact that we can observe significant deviations from the norm in codified written language at all is nevertheless worth following up and would have to be further substantiated by corpus studies that investigate texts with a high amount of quasi-spontaneous speech.

Table 4: Punctuation marks after a *Can You VP* request in low-versus high-imposition contexts.

	LOW-IMPOSITION CONTEXT		HIGH-IMPOSITION CONTEXT	
Punctuation mark	?	. / ! / ?!	?	. / ! / ?!
Absolute frequency	299	48	338	19
Percent	86%	14%	95%	5%

In summary, the data – which of course contain only a very limited set of social contexts – support previous findings that negative politeness expressed by CIRs can be considered as cultural ideal in Germany (as well as Austria and German-speaking Switzerland).[36] In weaker FTAs, as in the low-imposition context tested here, the highly standardized *Can you VP?* request fulfils this need. Internal modifiers that minimize the costs for H are frequent in this context, such as understaters or adverbs such as *bitte* that overtly mark the utterance as a polite

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34 On such feature constitutions see Altmann (1987, 1993), who regards intonation as a formal means of determining sentence types.

35 Cases with omitted punctuation marks were not considered. Similarly, cases where the head act is followed by a comma were treated as separate cases. Commas (rarely) occur when the head act is followed by an external modifier. Here it is plausible to assume that the final punctuation mark (the full stop) refers to the second – usually independent – clause.

36 See also Ackermann (2021), who shows that negative politeness seems to be even more important in the south-west of the German-speaking area.

request (in contrast to an order or a demand) and thus increase the requestive force salience. In contexts that require extra politeness (i.e., requests with a high degree of imposition) it is not primarily the head act strategy that is varied since *Can you VP?* is the default formula in both situations of the DCT (but note, however, that explicit impositives are significantly less frequent here than in the low-imposition context). In the highly face-threatening DCT situation, increased negative politeness is primarily realized by several internal modifiers (i.e., downtoners, the subjunctive as well as punctuation) which support the question for information meaning of the *Can you VP?* construction by overtly signalling tentativeness. By these means the "requestive force salience" is decreased.

5.2 External modification and alerters

As shown in Section 4.1, the occurrence of single and particularly multiple external modifiers is more probable in the high-imposition context (H8). The experimental data thus confirms what Held (1995: 314) has shown for French and Italian and Kranich et al. (2021: 106) have recently shown for German (and English): "the higher the weight of imposition, the more [external] mitigation speakers use". Even in requests elicited via written DCTs, which are said to be shorter than requests in naturally occurring speech, bare requests are very untypical in the high-imposition situation. As expected, grounders occur with highest frequency in both contexts. However, with 73% they are typical of the high-imposition context in contrast to the low-imposition context (22%). Also hedges/cost minimizers (e.g., *hoffentlich hab ich dich nicht geweckt* 'I hope I didn't wake you') and repairs (e.g., *tut mir leid, dass ich dich so spät störe* 'sorry to bother you so late') are more typical if the imposition has a higher weight (34%); these external modifiers hardly ever occur in standard requests with low imposition (1%). Regarding the expression of gratitude there is no difference between both conditions (7–9%). In sum, one could speak of pragmatic iconicity here: the higher the weight of imposition, the wordier the request must be. Although extra politeness is partly conveyed via the head act and its internal modification in German, it is important to examine external modification as well since extra politeness is particularly achieved via devices beyond the head act strategy.

Finally, let us turn to the role of alerters. As the logistic regression model has shown, the high-imposition context boosts the chances for the occurrence of a vocative. This result also conforms to the expectations described above (H9). Nevertheless, the result should not be over-interpreted, as the two tasks

compared not only differ in terms of the degree of imposition, but also in terms of the communicative situation. In contrast to the low-imposition situation, in the high-imposition situation there is no face-to-face interaction, as the request should be made via telephone, which elicits a greeting by S. As Günthner (2016) discusses with reference to Goffman (1971), onymic vocatives in particular are typical in greeting sequences since they are interpersonal rituals used to indicate a period of increased accessibility.[37] Thus, the difference in medium could also cause the higher frequency of vocatives here besides the higher degree of imposition. Additionally, the varying social distance may have an influence on vocative production. The social distance between S and H may have been perceived as lower in the high-imposition context since here the addressee was defined as a family member and not as a friend as in the low-imposition context. Lower social distance may boost the use of in-group marking vocatives such as terms of endearment. Indeed, in the high-imposition context we find mainly kin(ship) terms such as *Schatz* 'darling' or *Mami* 'mummy' (15%), but also pronouns (*du* 'you', 9%), which only occur in 1% of the utterances in the low-imposition context. The kin terms in particular can be seen as in-group markers that convey positive politeness. However, pronominal vocatives are also noteworthy in this context. With a certain intonation – indicated in writing by some participants by vowel doubling (e.g., *duuuu*) or the insertion of <h> (e.g., *duhu*) – these alerters have similar functions as the devices indicating tentativeness discussed in the previous section. Mitigating the threatening nature of a request by displaying restraint thus seems to be a prominent negative politeness strategy in German realized through various morpho-syntactic, lexical, and graphemic (as well as intonational) devices.

6 Conclusion

As has been shown on the basis of the empirical investigation, various (morpho-)syntactic, lexical and graphemic means are available in German to mitigate the strength of a directive speech act. While certain strategies are increasingly used in standard situations and can thus be regarded as "politic behaviour", other strategies are primarily used in situations with a high degree of imposition and

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37 As Ruytenbeeek (2020) shows, exploring (the type of) greeting may also be useful since these alerters are also politeness sensitive: in French e-mail communication participants used more formal greetings when addressing higher status people and thus signal deference to H's superior status.

are thus to be regarded as extra polite. Remarkably, the factors discussed in the literature can predict quite precisely whether a more or less face-threatening request is present, as the multifactorial analysis shows. Mitigation always plays a role in polite requests according to expectations and *Can you VP?* can be considered the default, which is confirmed by both the production and the rating data. In standard situations, however, the requestive meaning of the CIR is already so obvious from the context itself – reflected even in writing/punctuation – that *bitte* 'please', while further increasing the requestive force salience, at the same time overtly marks the utterance as a *polite* request (see House 1989: 112–113). Mitigation is additionally achieved by particles that emphasize the casualness or optionality of the requested act. In more face-threatening situations, tentativeness plays a major role. For one thing, the *Can you VP?* construction often has a question for information meaning. Since the marker *please* would rob the question for information of its point, it occurs less frequently. In addition, the morpho-syntactic (i.e., the subjunctive) and lexical modifiers (e.g., *maybe*) used in such situations aim to mark S's uncertainty regarding the addressee's ability to fulfil the requested action. Head act external elements such as vocatives and supportive moves are also increasingly used for minimizing the face-threat. The evidence suggests that the pure head act strategy should not be overemphasized in politeness considerations since several linguistic expressions contribute to the overall physiognomy of the requestive utterance. Accordingly, the complete speech act set should be considered.

However, within this study only two specific situations/social contexts have been investigated with an experimental design. Thus, the results should be confirmed by further studies that integrate more situations in order to validate the findings on the connection between degree of imposition and linguistic mitigation. Additionally, in this study only the imposition-variable was manipulated while distance and power were largely kept constant. Future studies on requests should strive to make a systematic comparison of the social variables' degree of imposition, power, and distance in order to investigate how they interact and influence politeness. Moreover, the different mitigating strategies discussed here should also be investigated in natural interaction. Of course, social and demographic characteristics of S and H such as age or gender as well as contextual parameters would also have to be taken into account.

Appendix

Type	Examples	Translations
	HEAD ACT STRATEGY/EXPLICITNESS	
Impositive		
Imperative	*Halt mal bitte kurz!*	'Please hold this for a second!'
Performative	*Ich bitte dich, mich abzuholen.*	'I'm asking you to pick me up.'
Locution derivable	*Hältst du mal kurz?*	'Can you hold this for a second?'
Must statement	*Du musst mich abholen.*	'You have to pick me up.'
Want statement	*Ich möchte, dass du mich abholst.*	'I'd like you to pick me up.'
Conventionally indirect		
Ability question (*Can you VP*?)	*Kannst du mal kurz halten?*	'Can you hold this for a second?'
Non-conventionally indirect		
Willingness question	*Magst du mal halten?*	'Would you just like to hold this?'
Possibility question	*Wäre es möglich, mich abzuholen?*	'Would it be possible to pick me up?'
Availability question	*Hättest du Zeit mich zu holen?*	'Would you have time to pick me up?'
Permission question	*Darf ich dir das kurz in die Hand drücken?*	'Can I put this in your hand for a second?'
Hint	*Ich weiß nicht, wie ich heim kommen soll.*	'I don't know how to get home.'
	INTERNAL MODIFICATION	
Subjunctive	***Könntest** du mich abholen kommen?*	'Could you come and pick me up?'
Downtoner	*Könntest du mich **vielleicht** abholen?*	'Could you maybe pick me up?'
Understater	*Hältst du mal **kurz**?*	'Can you hold this for a second?'
Politeness marker	*Hältst du **bitte** mal?*	'Would you just hold this, please?'
Embedding tentative	*Ich wollte fragen, ob du mich abholen kannst.*	'I was wondering if you could pick me up.'
Appreciative	*Würdest du so lieb sein und mich abholen?*	'Would you be so kind and pick me up?'
	EXTERNAL MODIFICATION	
Grounder	*Halt mal kurz, **ich muss die Jacke ausziehen.***	'Hold this for a second, I need to take off my jacket.'
Disarmer	***Ich weiß, es ist sehr spät**. Könntest du mich bitte trotzdem abholen?*	'I know it's very late. Could you please pick me up anyway?'
Preparator	***Bist du noch wach?** Meinst du, du könntest mich abholen?*	'Are you still awake? Do you think you could pick me up?'
Repair	***Es tut mir leid, dass ich dich so spät noch stören muss**, aber kannst du mich abholen?*	'I'm sorry to bother you so late, but can you pick me up?'

Appendix (continued)

Type	Examples	Translations
Gratitude	*Könntest du mich vielleicht abholen?* **Das wäre echt super.**	'Could you maybe pick me up? That would be really great.'
Promise of reward	*Könntest du mich eventuell abholen?* **Du hast einen bei mir gut!**	'Could you possibly pick me up? I owe you something!'
Offer of retreat	*Könntest du mich vielleicht abholen?* **Sonst kann ich auch ein Taxi rufen.**	'Could you maybe pick me up? Otherwise I can also call a cab.'
ALERTER/VOCATIVE		
Personal name	*Manfred*	'Manfred'
Terms of endearment	*Schatz, Mami*	'Darling, mummy'
Pronouns	*du*	'you'
Combination	*du, Inge*	'you, Inge'

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