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Culpeper, Jonathan and Demmen, Jane

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Original Citation

Culpeper, Jonathan and Demmen, Jane (2011) Nineteenth-century English politeness: Negative politeness, conventional indirect requests and the rise of the individual self. *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 12 (1/2). pp. 49-81. ISSN 1566-5852

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**Nineteenth-century English politeness:
Negative politeness, conventional indirect requests and the rise of the individual self**
Jonathan Culpeper and Jane Demmen

Abstract

In this paper we argue that the kind of individualistic ethos Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model is accused of – and in particular its notion of (non-imposition) negative face – is not simply a reflection of British culture, but a reflection of British culture at a specific point in time. That point is the nineteenth century. Before then, the notion of an individual self separate from society and with its own hidden desires was not fully established. We argue that socio-cultural developments, such as secularisation, the rise of Protestantism, social and geographical mobility and the rise of individualism, created conditions in which the self became part of a new ideology where it was viewed as a property of the individual, and was associated with positive values such as self-help, self-control and self-respect. We also trace the history of conventional indirect requests, specifically *can/could you X* structures, the most frequent request structures used in British English today, and, moreover, emblematic of British negative politeness. We show how such ability-oriented structures developed in the nineteenth century, and propose a tentative explanation as to why ability in particular was their focus.

Keywords

face, indirectness, individualism, nineteenth century, politeness, requests, self

1. Introduction

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's 1978 (1987) work on politeness has done much to galvanise the rapid growth of politeness studies. Their work is not only empirical yet theoretical, detailed yet parsimonious, but also it offers a framework linking concepts relating to both people and social dimensions to linguistic forms. This framework has subsequently been applied in many domains. However, their work is not free from criticism. Much recent discussion in politeness has focused on the precise definition of "face" (see in particular Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Arundale 2006), and much of this has been a reaction to Brown and Levinson's (1987) idea that face can be described in terms of universal individualistic psychological "wants", that is:

- positive face – "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others [...] in particular, it includes the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (1987: 62), and
- negative face – "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others" (1987: 62).

This is in contrast with Goffman (1967: 5), whose notion of face is not just the positive values that you yourself want, but what you can claim about yourself from what *others* assume about you. How you feel about yourself is dependent on how others feel about you, and so when you lose face you feel bad about how you are seen in other people's eyes. This social interdependence has been stripped out of Brown and Levinson's definition. Positive face is about what you as an individual find positive; negative face is about not imposing upon you as an individual. But this seems to ignore cases where the positive attributes apply to a group of people

(e.g. a winning team), or where an imposition on yourself is not the main concern, but rather it is how you stand in relation to a group (e.g. whether you are afforded the respect associated with your position in the team). From a cultural perspective, researchers have argued that Brown and Levinson's emphasis on individualism is a reflection of Anglo-Saxon culture, and not at all a universal feature. Matsumoto (1988), for example, points out that Japanese culture stresses the group more than the individual (see also Ide 1989; Gu 1990; Mao 1994; Nwoye 1992; Wierzbicka 1991 [2003], for similar points):

What is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others. Loss of Face is associated with the perception by others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group. [...] A Japanese generally must understand where s/he stands in relation to other members of the group or society, and must acknowledge his/her dependence on the others. Acknowledgement and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory, governs all social interaction. (Matsumoto 1988: 405)

Here, we are tapping into a distinction between "individualist" cultures (which emphasise the individual over the group) and "collectivist" cultures (which emphasise the opposite) (Hofstede 1991), and the way in which these types of culture correlate with types of facework (Ting-Toomey 1988a, 1988b; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). Of course, there is no clear separation between individualist and collectivist cultures but rather a continuum between the two. Moreover, even within a generally individualist culture some people may want to be strongly linked and dependent rather than autonomous and independent, or are caught in tension between the two (Tracy 1990: 21) (and one can imagine the converse situation). Furthermore, researchers in cross-cultural pragmatics, most notably Ide (e.g. 1989, 1993), have argued that for some cultures politeness is not simply a matter of the individual's strategic choice in redressing FTAs (something which relates to "volition"), but a matter of working out your position in a group and the social norms and acting accordingly. The latter Ide refers to as "wakimae", a notion that bears strong similarities to Watts's (1989, 2003) notion of "politic behaviour".

The overall argument of this paper is that the individualistic emphasis of Brown and Levinson is not simply a synchronic cross-cultural peculiarity of English but a diachronic cross-cultural peculiarity *within* the history of English. Broadly speaking, it reflects the culture of the nineteenth century, notably the Victorian period (1837-1901), although we should add here that that culture began evolving a few decades before that period and remained dominant for many decades after. Our particular concern is to examine the transition from pre-nineteenth century to nineteenth century, both socio-culturally and pragmalinguistically. The following section, section 2, identifies socio-cultural shifts that are consonant with changes in politeness practices, and could be linked to the development and usage of more individualistic style of politeness, including negative politeness. The Victorian age was a period of dramatic social change, not least through industrialisation and urbanisation. Importantly, it was a period of ideological change in which beliefs about the self and communities changed. Sections 3 and 4 address the pragmalinguistics of conventional indirect requests ("CIRs") in a small, tightly-focused study seeking to uncover some specific traces of nineteenth-century sociolinguistic change. Indirectness generally is often considered a stereotypical feature of British English politeness. CIRs are the output strategy that Brown and Levinson (1987: 132-142) discuss first under the

heading negative politeness. They also are a notable feature of Leech's (1983: 107-123) Tact Maxim. In present day British English, the most common way of delivering a CIR is to use the structure "could you X", and the next most common way is "can you X" (Aijmer 1996: 157). Such requestive strategies are emblematic of negative politeness, and that is one of the reasons we will focus on them in the body of our paper. However, such conventionalised structures, oriented towards ability, are a modern invention. Culpeper and Archer (2008) establish that they are nowhere to be found up to 1760. Fennell (2001: 165) suggests that they did not occur until the nineteenth century, though provides no evidence. In section 3, we discuss the rise in ability-CIRs between the early modern period and the present. Then, in section 4, we explore whether their development can be pinned down with more accuracy, in a corpus study of ability-CIRs involving forms of *can you* and *could you* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts.

2. The rise of the individual self and the nineteenth century

The point of this section is to consider the cultural, social and ideological history of the self in England. We will begin by focussing on the notion of the self before the nineteenth century and the social developments which caused that notion to change (in section 2.1). Then we examine Victorian values in the nineteenth century, especially individualism and self-help, in section 2.2. In section 2.3 we reflect on the implications of what we have discussed for politeness.

2.1 The self before the nineteenth century and causes of change

Baumeister (1987) presents a substantial overview of historical research on the notion of the self, and we will draw on this work in much of this section. He points out that "mediaeval lords and serfs did not struggle with self-definition the way modern persons do" (1987: 163). In fact, the earlier sense of *individual* is relevant here, namely, "indivisible"; the later sense of "separate from others" had yet to arrive (the earliest citation of *individual* in this sense given in *The Oxford English Dictionary* ("OED") is dated 1613). As Baumeister (1987: 169) puts it, in mediaeval society, and indeed earlier societies generally, "the person's very being is unthinkable apart from the actual context of social roles assigned to that person by God, society, and family". People believed in a fixed social hierarchy, each person allotted their place in the "great chain of being" by God. In this context, the idea of an individual's psychological wants is not relevant. A number of social and economic changes influenced the ways people perceived themselves in relation to others, including religious beliefs, social and geographical mobility, and changes in the economy and the labour which fuelled it. We shall look at these in turn, beginning with religion, more specifically secularisation and the rise of Protestantism.

In the mediaeval world, Christian salvation and the promise of heaven were dominant sources of self-fulfilment – one toiled in accordance with moral and virtuous behaviour. The demise of this ideology had a profound effect on how the self was viewed. Citing McIntyre (1981), Baumeister (1987: 56) states that:

the demise of traditional Christian morality, as understood by the mediaeval, entailed the demise of the view that a person was inevitably and essentially required to discharge the obligations of the rank and station to which that person was born. The blacksmith's son, for example, was no longer ineluctably and essentially tied to a moral duty to become a loyal and pious blacksmith himself; and even if he did become one, he was a person first

and a blacksmith second, to put it crudely. In McIntyre's words, starting in the 18th century "man is thought of as an individual prior to and apart from all roles".

The rise of Protestantism had important implications for both life-choices and the conception of work. Protestantism involved the idea that life-choices, including choices concerning behaviours, were not simply allotted but were to be made. Baumeister (1987: 172) comments:

The Protestant schism, and the subsequent decline of Christian faith, were the areas in which optional-choice processes were most widespread. Protestantism confronted persons with an alternative to the most fundamental beliefs. Christian faith had always served as the ultimate arbiter of questions about proper and correct action.

The Protestant, and more particularly Puritan, work ethic had an important impact. In this belief system, work was considered "an essential human activity", and, moreover, a source of self-fulfilment in modern life (Baumeister 1987: 167). We will have more to say about changes in the nature of work below.

In addition to the move towards self-direction and away from religious direction, concerns to do with the inner, hidden self became inwardly-focused instead of other-focussed. The inner self had become a commonplace conception by the sixteenth century (Baumeister 1987: 165), but at that time the focus seems to have been upon knowing the "inner selves of others, not one's own self" (1987: 165), hence the sixteenth-century concern with deception, pretence and sincerity. Importantly, Baumeister (1987: 166) notes that it was during the nineteenth century that "personality (rather than social rank and roles) came to be increasingly regarded as a, even *the*, central aspect of the self". Furthermore, citing Sennett (1974), Baumeister (1987: 166) points out that the Victorians were alarmed at "the belief that others could deduce their personalities, including private thoughts and wishes, from looking at their clothes and subtleties." (1987: 166). The concept of an inner self is also connected to the notion of privacy, mentioned below.

Social mobility increased towards the end of the Middle Ages. The growing middling ranks unfixed the social hierarchy (Baumeister 1987: 169), and this had a crucial consequence: "separating the person from the fixed place in the social network requires one to think of a person as the basic unit, not the community" (1987: 169). The nineteenth century was notable for an increased sense of conflict between individuals and society, with the rising assertion of the individual associated with the decline of community. Baumeister (1987: 169) notes that this separation between the individual and society also had implications for the notion of privacy:

Nowadays, we tend to regard privacy as a fundamental human right and a universal human need. The mediaeval European, however, apparently got along without privacy; indeed, it may never have occurred to him or her to want it [...] The desire for and cultivation of privacy reflects an attitude that there is some part of life that does not belong to public society.

Baumeister (1987: 169) notes Sennett's (1974) claim that whilst eighteenth-century citizens valued public life more highly than private, the value hierarchy was reversed in the nineteenth century. In the Victorian period, the private life of the home and family was valued, and its functions shifted, under the influence of urban industrial life, from being an economic unit to

"providing intimate, emotional relations among the family members" (1987: 170). He also points out that in the early modern period "the rise of the middle class entailed an increased use of wealth as a standard of self-definition, with its attendant issues of competition, uncertainty, constant change, and discontent" (1987: 172).

Baumeister (1987) does not mention geographical mobility, but it is pertinent to do so here. As Hobsbawm (1954: 299) states "the story of nineteenth-century labour is one of movement and migration". The first half of the nineteenth century was the heyday of *tramping*, something which had none of its negative modern associations but simply meant setting out in search of work, usually on foot (see Southall 1991, for detail on the extent of travelling people undertook). The same applies to the large group of agricultural labourers. With changes in farming practices, all-year employment became a thing of the past. What is important about this mobility is that it further broke down the established social networks and enhanced the focus upon the individual. Southall (1999: 1-7) puts it thus:

The acquisition of such a spatially dispersed social network inevitably worked to break down the local chauvinism, even tribalism, that vitiated radical movements in less developed societies. The experience of travel itself would work to increase an individual's confidence in his ability to act effectively in varied and novel situations: finding oneself frequently in the uncomfortable situation of being surrounded by strangers, with whom one's relationship is undefined, is perhaps the best preparation for confrontations with other, and in conventional terms superior, social groups, where existing relationships must be redefined.

Of course, a key population movement of the nineteenth century falls under the label "urbanisation". Britain was the first country to experience rapid and large-scale urbanisation, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and finishing roughly at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The census figures are striking: in 1801 one third of the English population lived in towns or cities; in 1851 over half the population did; by 1901 three quarters of the population was urban, with about one third living in big cities (Law 1967). This happened in the context of general population expansion: when Queen Victoria came to the throne the population of Britain was 23 million; when she died it was 41 million (Jarvis 1997: 129). Again the important point for us here is that, as Southall points out, such movements served to break down established local networks and increase the focus on the individual.

The final area of change we need to consider, and one which is both concomitant with and running parallel to urbanisation, is industrialisation. Industrialisation essentially refers to the transition from manual labour-based production to machine-based production (including, for example, the demise of cottage-based industries and the rise of large new factories deploying steam power). As may be surmised from discussion above, changing attitudes in the shape of the rise of the Protestant work ethic and changing social structures in the rise of the middle classes helped fuel industrialisation. A consequence of industrialisation is that the nature of work began to change fundamentally:

primitive societies have a social division of labor by which different persons contribute different products and services to the society. [...] only modern society has produced the detail or task division of labor by which each task is subdivided into components that are assigned to different persons. (Baumeister 1987: 168).

A general consequence of subdividing tasks and making them simpler, and thus manageable by a less skilled person, is that each person's work becomes repetitive and boring. Following on from this is a shift in motivation for doing that work, from intrinsic to extrinsic: "once potential work becomes conceived of in terms of possibilities for advancement, prestige, and payment (salary potential), rather than in terms of intrinsic satisfaction from performing the work activities" (Baumeister 1987: 168). And those extrinsic benefits were dependent on the abilities of the workers. As Karl Marx observed, in the new industrial era workers no longer worked with the materials and instruments of production – the means of production were owned by the capitalists, who could dictate terms to the new class of wage earners. Those terms focused on the "usefulness, the use-value, of the workers' labour power, its capacity to produce" (Bellamy 1988: 53).

2.2 Mid-nineteenth century individualism

In the previous section, we summarised the effects of a number of far-reaching social, cultural and ideological changes. No discussion of the self in the nineteenth century would be complete, however, without consideration of the notion of individualism and the closely related concept of self-help. "Individualism" has various meanings (cf. Lukes 1971); here, we mean the psychologist's sense, as explained by Graumann (2001):

crucial for the psychologist, is the notion of an 'abstract' individual, according to which basic human psychological features (be they called instincts, needs, desires or wants) "are assumed as given, independently of the social context". (Lukes 1973: 73, quoted in Graumann 2001: 6)

According to the *OED*, the term "individualism" appeared in the English language in the first part of the nineteenth century, the first citation date being 1827. Significantly for our concerns here, the meanings of individualism were established and popularised in the mid-nineteenth century (Swart 1962). According to Swart (1962: 77), the term designated three dissimilar though related clusters of ideas:

1) *Romanticism*. Impetus here seems to have come from the German intellectuals, who articulated:

the Romantic idea of "individuality" (*Individualität*), the notion of individual uniqueness, originality, self-realisation – what the Romantics called "*Eigentümlichkeit*" – in contrast to the rational, universal, and uniform standards of the Enlightenment, which they saw as "quantitative," "abstract," and therefore sterile. (Lukes 1971: 54)

The term "Individualismus" came to be used in the 1840s, notably in the work of the German liberal, Karl Brügemann, and was "virtually synonymous with the idea of individuality, which had originated in the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, and Friedrich Schleiermacher" (Lukes 1971: 54).

2) *Political liberalism* (e.g. egalitarianism, the rights of man). In fact, egalitarianism and the individual rights of man (as they were known) were initially viewed by many with great suspicion in Britain, because of the French Revolution (Swart 1962: 78). Individualism was but one step away from anarchy. Early French socialists also took a negative view, not of egalitarianism itself, but of the liberal belief that the interests of the self would naturally serve the interests of society (Swart 1962: 80-1). They claimed that "unfettered individualism" found its fullest expression in England, the home of modern industrialism and capitalism (Swart 1962: 81). Friedrich Engels in his classic work *The Condition of the Working Classes in England* (1845) noticed "the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest" (Swart 1962: 81). A similar view developed in Britain in the context of Owenite socialism, arising from Robert Owen and his followers, who were particularly active in the early 1830s (Claerys 1986: 82).

3) *Economic liberalism* (broadly, the doctrine of *laissez-faire*). This is very much identified with the work of Adam Smith. Smith's most famous work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, was published in 1776. One notion that he emphasized was self-interest, something which he argued would in turn promote the interests of society. Consider this quotation:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (Smith [1776] 1977: 18)

We return to the subject of linguistic politeness in the next section, but it is interesting to note here that the basic idea of self-interest articulated in the quotation above is also reflected in Brown and Levinson's (1987) claims about the motivations for doing politeness work. They make the assumption that it is of "mutual interest" (1987: 60) for interactants to cooperate by supporting each other's faces.

As we approach the middle of the nineteenth century, the notion of individualism takes on a more positive character, at least amongst some groups in some countries. Whilst early Romantics had seen the individual in conflict with society, later Romantics, particularly German, saw a unity of individual and society, a compatibility between individualism and socialism, whereby individuals contributed to an organic community that was more than the sum of the parts (Lukes 1971: 57-8). In France, the term individualism has retained much of its negative character (Lukes 1971: 48). Lukes (1971: 53) notes that General de Gaulle used the term in its paradigm French sense in his New Year's broadcast to the nation on 31 December 1968: "At the same time, it is necessary that we surmount the moral malaise which – above all among us by reason of our individualism – is inherent in modern mechanical and materialist civilisation". Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did a few French writers (e.g. the disciples of Charles Fourier, Jean Jaurès, Emile Durkheim) deny any basic opposition between individualism and socialism, taking it to signify positive values – autonomy, freedom, and the sacredness of the individual (Lukes 1971: 51). However, it was in Britain that the term individualism began to take on a more positive character in general. Claerys (1986: 91-92) notes that the writings of James Elishama Smith, who broke away from the Owenite, presented individualism in an increasingly positive light. Swart (1962: 87) points in particular to the Unitarian minister, William McCall,

partly influenced by German writers, who proclaimed a way of life according to the "principle of individualism", issuing a number of books and pamphlets on the topic, the first of which, *Elements of Individualism*, appeared in 1847. However, it is Samuel Smiles and the publication of his book *Self-help* in 1859 that did so much to cast individualism in a positive light and, crucially, popularise it. Four editions appeared in its first year of publication; by 1904, when Smiles died, it had been reprinted 50 times and sold a quarter of a million copies in English (Himmelfarb 1994: 165). It has never been out of print (Jarvis 1997: 51).

Self-help was "one of the favourite mid-Victorian virtues. Relying on yourself was preferred morally – and economically – to depending on others" (Marsden 1998: 103). Smiles admired physical work and craft skills of individuals, and the achievements that flowed from them. Jarvis (1997: 136) argues that Smiles articulated a truly Victorian value: "'we' were richer and stronger than other people because of the skills of the workers and because society was sufficiently fluid to allow them to rise to the highest circles of achievement – and wealth". Smiles was the first to characterise individualism as a great English tradition. This did not prevent Smiles's book from later being translated into other languages. Furthermore, "Victorian values, it was implied, are universal values, and there was a confidence in their power to change societies" (Marsden 1998: 112). Finally, we should note that in the second half of the nineteenth century the term individualism became central to the vocabulary of English liberalism of all shades, and was used in contrast with socialism, communism and collectivism (Lukes 1971: 64).

In fact, it would be wrong to interpret the Victorian notion of self-help and other individualistic values in an entirely negative way (perhaps, anachronistically, through the prism of Thatcherism). The flipside of self-help was charity. For John Wesley, one of the central tenets of Methodism was: "Gain all you can ... Save all you can ... Give all you can" (quoted in Himmelfarb 1994: 143). As Himmelfarb (1994: 143) points out, this perfectly expresses "the apparent paradox behind the Victorian ethos: the fact that the most individualistic of countries was also most philanthropic-minded". It would also be wrong to assume that individual self-help was a value shared by all. Briggs (1988: 17) argues that there was still an emphasis on the collective throughout the nineteenth century, or what was called "mutual self-help, as in the case of the friendly societies".

One might ponder here whether the so-called Victorian values, including self-help, were merely the prerogative of the middle classes, and the intellectual middle classes at that. Himmelfarb (1994: 30-31) argues strongly against this:

these Victorian values were as much those of the working classes as of the middle classes. [...] This was especially true in the latter part of the century, as less skilled and unskilled workers benefited from the expanding economy, the availability of consumer goods, the growth of literacy, and the greater mobility within the working classes – the latter facilitated by the dissemination of precisely these Victorian values.

The point of aspiration for all strata of society was the gentleman, who was "typically identified by his moral virtues: integrity, honesty, generosity, courage, graciousness, politeness, consideration for others" (Himmelfarb 1994: 46), virtues which are encompassed by the notion of respectability. Responsibility for maintaining such virtues was located in the individual self, hence the emphasis "not only on self-help and self-interest but also on self-control, self-discipline, self-respect" (Himmelfarb 1994: 51).

Having aired the historical causes and conditions which surround the establishment of Victorian values and the rise of self- and individual-oriented ideologies, we are now much better placed to understand the consequences for politeness.

2.3 The development of the individual self and implications for politeness

In the mediaeval world, people were assigned their place in the social order, an order that was underpinned by Christian belief. Moreover, they were at one with their place; the notion of a separate self was simply not current. Kohnen's (e.g. 2008a, 2008b) work on early Anglo-Saxon society points out the implications for politeness practices. Politeness was more about acknowledging your place in society, through terms of address for example, than negotiating face. Kohnen (2008b: 39-40) concludes that, as far as performatives and associated speech act verbs are concerned, "negative politeness did not play a major role in Anglo-Saxon communication". This does not mean that there is no overlap at all with anything that, for example, Brown and Levinson (1987) talk about. Kohnen (2008b: 40), for example, points out that in Christian settings one might select strategies resembling negative politeness in order to humble oneself. However, the important conclusion that Jucker (2010) draws is that we are generally not really dealing with issues of negative face, and certainly not the non-imposition (i.e. "not wishing to impose") kind of negative politeness, but rather we are dealing with "discernment". Politeness in early Britain has more to do with social indexing, recognising one's place in the scheme of things.

Jucker (2010: 179, 193) points to evidence in the fifteenth century that a shift towards a culture based on face work was taking place. Indeed, in the previous sections we have pointed to social and ideological changes that are likely to have caused such a shift. The process of secularisation eroded the idea that it was your pious duty to put up with your lot in life and remain in your place. Protestantism brought into focus the idea that there were choices to be made in life, that people had options to choose through which they could obtain personal value. Note here that the notion of optionality is an important dimension of Leech's (1983) Tact Maxim. But this is not so applicable to the mediaeval world in which one's options were limited and understood to be decided by God. The development of the notion of an inner self in the early modern period is a necessary foundation of the notion of face, as understood by Brown and Levinson (1987). Psychological wants and desires belong to the inner self; they are not a matter of the self at one with society. Both social and geographical mobility, both of which were so dramatic in nineteenth-century Britain, did much to divide the self from society. Community ties were weakened, people had to become more independent. As social ties became weakened, the notion of privacy became stronger, and acquired positive value in the Victorian period. The notion of privacy, of one's private space, of freedom from imposition is of course all related to negative face.

Jucker (2010) claims that the non-imposition kind of negative face politeness has its seeds in Middle English courtesy culture. But when did those seeds come to fruition? We would argue that this is in the nineteenth century. We have already pointed to a number of social developments in the previous paragraph that created appropriate conditions by the time of the nineteenth century. In addition, as we discussed in section 2.2, the ideology of individualism, with its inputs from Romanticism, political liberalism and economic liberalism, was the ideology of the nineteenth century. What is particular about the British case is that individualism takes on such a positive character, in the second half of the nineteenth century being generally identified

with liberalism. More specifically, the notion of self-help, and of mutual self-help, became popularised. These were not just the values to which the middle classes aspired. The virtues of the self – of "self-control, self-discipline, self-respect" – came to embody ideals for modes of behaviour. This is the stuff of negative politeness. We will now explore a central negative politeness strategy, ability-related CIRs.

3. The rise of conventional indirect requests

In section 3.1 we discuss factors relating to the development of CIRs. We outline the conventionalisation process and the present-day functions of the most popular ability-CIRs, to help contextualise those which arise in our data from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries later on. We mention previous research into forms of requesting which were most frequently used prior to this time, and we touch briefly on studies of historical change in modality, since the ability-CIRs which are our focus of interest of course feature modal verbs. We also mention changes in historical politeness strategies which may have a bearing on the increase in frequency of use of ability-CIRs as the preferred ways of making a request. In section 3.2 we prepare the ground for our corpus study which follows in section 4, by looking at existing evidence for ability-CIRs beginning to occur in English.

3.1 Factors relating to the development of ability-oriented conventional indirect requests

Speech acts always involve context: Searle (1975) argues that indirect speech acts are activated by certain "felicity conditions"; Levinson ([1979] 1992) claims that certain activity types become associated with specific speech acts; Holtgraves (1994) found that certain "interpersonal information" can trigger a requestive interpretation of a speech act by an addressee, e.g. if the speaker is of much higher social rank. What is key to our present study is that speech acts and their contexts are (or become) conventionally or standardly associated with particular forms. Thus, the requestive implications of *can you X* have become strengthened so that today it is interpreted by default as a standard request and not an enquiry about an addressee's ability: it is conventionally indirect. Bach and Hamish's (1979: 193) concept of "accumulated precedent" – i.e. the repeated use and spread of a form that eventually becomes conventional – is relevant here. Looking for evidence of that accumulated precedent is the task of the following sections, a task which we will carry out by examining usages in corpus data.

That *can you/could you* ability-oriented enquiries have now become associated with requestive force has been confirmed in present-day pragmatics studies such as Aijmer (1996: 157), and also Blum-Kulka and House (1989: 134), who not only found the most frequently-used requests in present-day English to be CIRs, but that most of these oriented to the addressee's ability as a "preparatory condition" (ibid: 50; see also Aijmer 1996: 132-3). It is also confirmed in studies of present-day grammar, for example Huddleston and Pullum (2002) and Quirke et al. (1985: 221-222). Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 940) argue that requests made via *can you* and *could you* enquiries (which they term "ability questions") function as "idiomatic" and "conventional" indirect speech acts (ibid: 865). They point out that "[w]ith *can*, the enquiry force is commonly vacuous, in that the answer is self-evidently *Yes*" (ibid), and they give the following speaker rationale for choosing an "ability question" in order to make a request:

These lend themselves to indirect directive use since a likely reason for me to be interested in your ability to do something is that I want you to do it [...] the direct enquiry force is effectively lost; this will usually apply with such everyday examples as *Can you pass the salt*, etc. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 940)

This, then, is the present-day situation.

As indicated in section 1, Culpeper and Archer (2008) found no evidence for ability-CIRs involving *can you* or *could you* (or their variant forms) in their detailed study of requests in early modern English courtroom trial and drama texts. They found that direct requests (i.e. impositives) were by far the most frequently-occurring type between 1640 and 1760, accounting for about 73% of all requests present in courtroom trial proceedings and in play-texts (2008: 63-65). Although CIRs were present in their data, these accounted for only 17% and 16% of all requests in drama and trial texts, respectively (ibid: 65), and they did not orient towards the addressee's ability using *can you* or *could you* (or variant forms). Instead, the following strategies were most commonly used:

- *let* followed by a first or third person pronoun and a verb
- *will you* followed by a verb
- *if* [pronoun] *will please to* [verb]/*that*, and *you may* [verb].

These strategies orient much more towards the addressee's volition, desire or will than to his/her ability¹, and we can look to the nature of social hierarchies and their associated cultures of politeness for an explanation.

The reason for the choice of request strategy at any given point in history is rooted in social context. In present-day English the most frequently-occurring request forms, the ability-CIRs *can you* and *could you*, are also apparently those which are considered the most polite in British culture (Blum-Kulka et al. 1987: 133; Aijmer 1996: 138-140)². However, Culpeper and Archer (2008) stress (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1987) that speakers have not necessarily become more polite since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather that the conventional methods of requesting have evolved according to changes in social and institutional structures. In commenting on the relative politeness of the impositives which constitute most of the requests in their early modern data, they argue that this type of request strategy would have been consistent with a "positive politeness" culture in England at that time, (a claim made in Koptko's 1995 study of Shakespeare's plays). One might argue that in early modern England the value of directness in communication was comparable to Poland today. Wierzbicka (2003: 37) comments on the current situation: "in Anglo-Saxon culture, distance is a positive cultural value, associated with respect for the autonomy of the individual. By contrast, in Polish culture it is associated with hostility and alienation". A gradual shift towards the "negative politeness" culture of the present day (cf. Koptko 1995), that is, one which is oriented to non-imposition upon the addressee and indirectness (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62), would in turn be consistent with a rise in the use of CIRs. Furthermore, note that the forms *can you* and *could you* explicitly involve the addressee. Busse (2002: 31) suggests that between the early modern period and the present there has been a shift in emphasis from speaker to addressee in English politeness strategies, based on comparisons of requests involving *pray* in Shakespeare's plays and *please* in the *OED*. He says:

[...] at least in colloquial speech a shift in polite requests has taken place from requests that assert the sincerity of the speaker (*I pray you, beseech you*, etc.) to those that question the willingness of the listener to perform the request (*please*). (Busse 2002: 31)

Although our focus here is on the pragmatic use of *can* and *could* in the context of requestive strategies, it is worth considering the present and historical meanings of these modal verbs. Quirke et al. (1985: 222) argue that in the present day *can* and its past tense form *could* convey meanings of “ability”, “possibility” or “permission”, and also that they have the function of a “rather polite request”. Historical studies mentioning the development of *can* and *could* are very few, however. In her diachronic study of ability modality, Ziegler (2001: 291) found that forms of *could* increased in frequency between middle and early modern English periods, and also that its functions develop “from meanings of knowledge to physical ability or skills, and finally to senses of possibility (or impossibility in the case of negatives)” (ibid: 300). Ziegler also argues that in the early modern period, *could* takes on a new function of “counterfactual/hypothetical meanings” and its earlier lexical function is largely reduced (ibid). Biber’s (2004) study of the use of modals between 1650 and 1990 provides some statistics on the use of *can* and *could* in different historical periods and genres from the “ARCHER” corpus (A *Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*; see Biber, Finegan and Atkinson 1994). It is notable that whilst most modals show a decreasing trend in use, *can* shows a general increase over time, with a dominant meaning of “personal ability”, widening later to “impersonal ability” (Biber 2004: 204, 210). His data (ibid: 212) shows that in drama and letters (two genres that also feature in our analysis in section 4) the greatest increase in the use of both *can* and *could* occurs after 1900 – a fact which tallies with some of our conclusions about the rise of ability-CIRs. In drama, there is a noticeable increase in frequency of *could* between 1800 and 1949, but this drops off sharply in the second half of the twentieth century. *Can* increases sharply in drama in the first half of the twentieth century and then drops off again in the second half. These figures provide an interesting point of overall reference, but it is not possible to tell how closely, if at all, they are linked to a rise in the use of *can* and *could* in ability-CIRs. A shift in preference for a certain type of pragmatic function of *can* and *could* in speech acts of requesting need not necessarily be mirrored by an increase in the presence of the modal verbs through which they are conveyed, since these verbs continue to function more widely in meanings of (literal) ability, permission and possibility.

3.2 Evidence for the existence of pre-nineteenth century ability-CIRs

According to the *OED*, forms of *can* and *could* are respectively attested in English from the years 1000 and 893 onwards. Examples in the *OED* which pre-date the nineteenth century have dominant literal meanings of mental or physical “power”, “ability” or “capacity”. Examples involving clearer requestive force, though still retaining the sense of ability, permission or possibility, begin in the second half of the nineteenth century, e.g.:

(1) Can I speak with the Count? (1879, Tennyson, *Falcon* 12)

In addition to investigating *OED* entries for *can* and *could*, we conducted a brief search of forms of *can you* and *could you* (and variant spellings and forms) in William Shakespeare’s plays, a corpus of just over 800,000 words written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Shakespeare is known to have used innovative forms of language (Crystal 2003: 62-63), so it seemed possible that if there were any rare cases of ability-oriented requests in use in earlier times, his plays would be a likely place to look. Just one example was found, and an ambiguous one at that, in *Romeo and Juliet* (dated 1595-1596; see Busse, 2002a: 43):

(2) Nurse (to Juliet): Iesu what hast? can you not stay a while?
 Do you not see that I am out of breath?
 (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II:v, 1341-2)

In example (2), the nurse teases Juliet by wanting her need for rest acknowledged prior to delivering a message from Juliet's lover, Romeo. The nurse's use of *can you* here is unclear, since it could be interpreted as a request for Juliet to be patient, or a literal enquiry about Juliet's ability to wait. The presence of some requestive force is by no means out of the question, since although the nurse is a servant and of lower social rank than Juliet, the nurse's habitual attitude towards Juliet reflects the fact that Juliet has been in the nurse's charge as a child. Although interesting, this is, however, apparently an isolated case. Thus, the evidence in Shakespeare's plays, the *OED* and Culpeper and Archer (2008) supports the claim that there is no clear evidence for ability-CIRs before the late eighteenth century.

4. Investigating the rise of ability-oriented conventional indirect requests in the nineteenth century

Our first step was therefore to find out whether there are any signs of increasing frequency immediately after 1760. We investigate the presence of ability-CIRs in the late eighteenth century in section 4.1, then move on to nineteenth-century data in section 4.2.

Our corpus study focuses on ability-CIRs involving *could you* and *can you*. Using the Concordance function in *AntConc* (Anthony 2007), we looked for instances of *can you* and *could you*, plus negated forms (*can't you*, *couldn't you*, *can you not*, *could you not*, *cannot you*). We also searched for historical spelling variations and unpunctuated versions of contractions (*cant*, *canst*, *coud*, *couldst*) and the form *ye* for "you". We considered whether to include the first-person forms *can I/we have* and *could I/we have*, since these also function as CIRs. However, we excluded these on the grounds that we wish to consider the sense of ability conveyed by *can* and *could*, not the senses of possibility or permission which are implied with the first-person forms (compare *can you pass the salt* to *can I have the salt*). We excluded enquiries about literal ability and rhetorical strategies, since these do not qualify as CIRs. We included negated forms of *can* and *could* in ability-CIRs, e.g. *can't you*, *couldn't you*, *could you not*, as well as strategies in which a negated statement about the addressee's ability to perform a request is followed by a corresponding positive tag question (i.e. *you couldn't [...]*, *could you?* and *you can't [...]*, *can you?*). Although they work slightly differently from the non-negated forms in that they orient towards the addressee's **inability** to perform the request (see Aijmer, 1996: 26, 159), they are nevertheless part of the family of ability-CIRs.

For cases where the target addressee's response was given or described (e.g. in fictional dialogue), we judged the requestive force according to how they took the request. We also took into account what Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 864) term "non-propositional markers of indirect force", including the politeness marker *please*, and punctuation (they also mention prosodic features, which of course are unavailable in the case of written texts such as ours).

Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 864) state that *please* identifies an ability-oriented enquiry as being a request, whereas a question mark frames it as an enquiry. Both forms are of course well established in English in the period we are dealing with (for more on the development of *please* from earlier forms of politeness marker, e.g. *I pray you* and *if you please*, see Busse 2002). In effect, *please* strengthens the requestive force of an ability-CIR, and a question mark weakens it. In present-day English, Aijmer (1996: 158) found that the most frequently-occurring ability-CIR *could you* was “frequently modified by *please*”, and concluded that it is “the preferred or unmarked way of making a request”.

4.1 Evidence from the late eighteenth century

We searched *A Corpus of Late 18th Century Prose* (“ACLEP”), containing approximately 300,000 words of letters from English people in the north-west of England written between 1761 and 1790 and found only four matches (three *can* structures and one *could* structure). Two were clearly not ability-CIRs, one being a literal ability enquiry and the other a rhetorical strategy. The other two potentially qualified as ability-CIRs, but were ambiguous, as we explain using example (3) below. In this and subsequent examples from our data, the “head act” of the request (i.e. the minimal essential requestive component, see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989a; Culpeper and Archer 2008) is underlined.

- (3) please to say whether it is probable
such will be obtained or can you think of any other mode
of raising it

(Letter from Jos. Cooke to Mr Richard Orford, 2nd January, 1782: ACLEP)

In example (3) the requestive force is combined with enquiry about ability. The writer enquires about Mr Orford’s ability to “think”, but is actually requesting the communication of those thoughts. The requestive force of the head act is confirmed by the pre-support move “please to say whether it is probable such will be obtained”. Moreover, it seems reasonably likely that Mr Orford would be able to oblige or it would not have been worth Mr Cooke asking him, and so, if it is an ability enquiry, it flouts Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle – there is a deeper meaning to be inferred (i.e. the requestive meaning). However, we do not have access to Mr Orford’s response, so we cannot know to what extent he interpreted (and complied with) the possible requestive force. The force of requests undoubtedly depends to some extent on the power balance and existing relationship between speaker and addressee, and their inferences about entitlement to the request being made and granted. Consonant with Holtgraves’s (1994) study involving the present day, Culpeper and Archer (2008: 77) found that CIRs were used more by speakers of high social rank and/or power in their early modern data. Curl and Drew discuss choices made by speakers in making requests in present-day English in terms of beliefs about entitlement and the “contingencies that may be involved in the recipient granting the request” (2008: 130). However, there is insufficient contextual information surrounding our results to analyse these aspects of our ability-CIRs in a systematic way.

Our late eighteenth-century data shows no real evidence of conventionalisation of ability-oriented CIRs at this time, although there were occasional cases in which questions of literal ability also functioned as a request. This ambiguity is not surprising. As outlined in section 3, CIRs arise because of gradual pragmatic strengthening of an implication. In other words, they

start out as literal questions about ability, but then the requestive meaning strengthens and becomes the dominant meaning. Indeed, even in present-day data, Aijmer (1996: 128-9) argues that ability-CIRs remain inherently pragmatically ambiguous, with a choice of “force” which can be inferred by the addressee according to the context. Aijmer goes on to state that addressees firstly interpret the “unmarked” or “preferred” requestive meaning, but that if they cannot or do not wish to comply they can then infer the “marked” or “literal” meaning. (Aijmer 1996: 128-9, cf. Clark and Clark 1977: 80; Blum-Kulka 1987: 142; Blum-Kulka 1989: 45). It is therefore reasonable to anticipate that we may find ambiguous cases in our nineteenth-century data, as well as some evidence of more clearly conventionalised ability-CIRs.

4.2 Evidence from the nineteenth century

We investigated ability-CIRs in nineteenth-century texts using the following corpora:

- *A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose* (“*ACLMEP*”), containing approximately 100,000 words from “private informal letters” written between 1861-1919 by British people born between 1837-1867 (see Denison 1994). We excluded about 20,000 words of early twentieth-century texts as these were outside the scope of the study.
- *A Corpus of Nineteenth-Century English* (“*CONCE*”), containing one million words from 1800-1900 (although none from the 1840s), including correspondence, scientific writing, historical writing, fiction, courtroom trial proceedings, parliamentary debates and comedy drama.

Again we found some cases of enquiries about literal ability using *can you* and *could you* (and variants), but also cases which clearly functioned as requests (not least because the addressee’s ability to comply was already apparent from the context). We discuss the overall distribution in section 4.2.1. As anticipated, there were many ambiguous or hybrid cases in which a request was clearly indicated, combined with some uncertainty about the respondent’s ability to comply, and we discuss these in section 4.2.2. In section 4.2.3 we break the results down by genre, and we end with some brief conclusions in section 4.2.4.

To chart the frequency of occurrence of ability-CIRs throughout the nineteenth century, we will display the results of our investigations in three date bands based on those in the *CONCE* corpus, noting that middle band represents a twenty-year period and the early and late bands thirty-year periods, because of the absence of any texts from the 1840s. There are slightly different amounts of texts in each date band, as shown below in Table 1. *ACLMEP* word counts are from *WordSmith Tools 5.0* (Scott 1996-2010); *CONCE* word counts are taken from Table 0.3 in Kytö et al. (2006: 7), also using *WordSmith Tools 5.0*.

Table 1. Representation of each date band in the corpora (in number of words)

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | <i>Total</i> |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|
| <i>A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose</i> | - | 19,459 | 61,833 | 81,292 |
| The <i>CONCE</i> Corpus | 346,176 | 341,842 | 298,796 | 986,814 |
| <i>Total</i> | 346,176 | 361,301 | 360,629 | 1,068,106 |

Texts in the *ACLMEP* corpus are from letters, as noted above. In the *CONCE* corpus the amount of text from different genres varies, as shown in Table 2 below (the “Other” category includes historical writing, parliamentary debates and scientific writing, which have been combined as no results were found in these genres; see section 4.2.3).

Table 2. Representation of different genres in the *CONCE* corpus (in number of words)

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Letters | 121,624 | 131,116 | 90,891 | 343,631 |
| Courtroom trial proceedings | 62,360 | 60,570 | 67,588 | 190,518 |
| Drama | 31,311 | 29,543 | 29,090 | 89,944 |
| Fiction | 42,032 | 39,045 | 30,113 | 111,190 |
| Other | 88,849 | 81,568 | 81,114 | 251,531 |
| Total | 346,176 | 341,842 | 298,796 | 986,814 |

For this reason, the numbers of results given in subsequent tables are displayed as **raw frequency counts** followed by **normalised frequency counts per 10,000 words** in brackets (hereafter “RF” and “NF”, respectively). The NFs are given to one decimal place; a zero with an asterisk (0*) indicates an NF below 0.05.

4.2.1 Tracking the overall distribution of ability-CIRs in the nineteenth century

In our corpora, totalling 1,068,106 words (Table 1), we found 104 ability-CIRs, i.e. just one per 10,000 words overall. The distribution of ability-CIRs featuring *can you* and *could you* is shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Overall distribution of ability-CIRs in the nineteenth-century corpora: *can you*

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| <i>ACLMEP</i> | | 1 (0.5) | 6 (1.0) | 7 (0.9) |
| <i>CONCE</i> | 20 (0.6) | 30 (0.9) | 33 (1.1) | 83 (0.8) |
| Total | 20 (0.6) | 31 (0.9) | 39 (1.1) | 90 (0.8) |

Table 4. Overall distribution of ability-CIRs in the nineteenth-century corpora: *could you*

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| <i>ACLMEP</i> | | 1 (0.5) | 5 (0.8) | 6 (0.8) |
| <i>CONCE</i> | 2 (0.1) | 3 (0.1) | 3 (0.1) | 8 (0.1) |
| Total | 2 (0.1) | 4 (0.1) | 8 (0.2) | 14 (0.1) |

As is clear from Tables 3 and 4, more ability-CIRs involved *can* forms than *could* forms (90 compared to 14, respectively). This contrasts with the present-day situation, in which ability-CIRs involving *could you* were found by Aijmer (1996: 157) to be more frequent than those involving *can you*, although it is consistent with the general increasing trend of the modal verb *can* identified by Biber (2004) (see section 2.2). Tables 3 and 4 show a general increase in the RF of both forms of ability-CIRs as the nineteenth century progresses, although the figures are slight. This finding is also supported by the NFs.

Most of the ability-CIRs were oriented towards the addressee’s **ability** to comply with the request, but a few were oriented towards the addressee’s **inability**. Most of these were *can* forms, shown in Table 5 below, combining data from both corpora. Frequencies of inability-oriented *could* forms were too few for even suggestive conclusions to be drawn.

Table 5. Orientation of CIRs to ability/inability: *can you*

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|-------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Ability-oriented CIRs | 18 (0.5) | 26 (0.7) | 32 (0.9) | 76 (0.7) |
| Inability-oriented CIRs | 32 (0.9) | 5 (0.1) | 7 (0.2) | 14 (0.1) |
| Total | 20 (0.6) | 31 (0.9) | 39 (1.1) | 90 (0.8) |

Table 5 shows that ability-oriented CIRs involving *can* forms increase in frequency in our data from the early to later periods of the nineteenth century, whilst there is a decrease in inability-oriented CIRs after the first period. This pattern is consistent with the idea that as the *can you* forms became conventionalised as "polite" indirect request strategies, the *can't you* forms were made conspicuously less "polite" by the fact that they broke with this convention. This is consistent with present-day ability-CIRs: Aijmer (1996: 159) found fewer negated modal requests (e.g. *can't you* or *couldn't you*). She argues (ibid) that “*can't you*” signals the speaker’s feeling that the addressee is not meeting his/her expectations. In effect, it is less "polite" than the non-negated version (see also Leech 1983: 171).

4.2.2 Clarity of requestive force of ability-CIRs

As noted in section 4.1 and at the start of section 4.2, ability-CIRs are often characterised by ambiguity, combining requestive force with some degree of enquiry about the addressee’s ability. We wanted to find out whether ability-oriented requests with a clear requestive force occurred with greater frequency as the nineteenth century progressed, which would be expected if ability-CIRs underwent a conventionalisation process during that time. We therefore categorised our results as either clear or ambiguous (defined below). This was based on the addressee’s response, where this was present in the co-text, indicating whether or not they complied or gave information about their ability to do so; where the response was not known it was based on contextual information about the circumstances of the request.

- Those with **clear requestive force**: fully-conventionalised ability-CIRs, i.e. the addressee clearly has the ability to comply with the speaker’s request.
- Those with **ambiguous requestive force**: clearly a request, but some uncertainty over the addressee’s ability to comply.

Table 6 shows the distribution of clear and ambiguous ability-CIRs across both corpora. The numbers are few, so *can you* and *could you* forms have been combined.

Table 6. Distribution of clear and ambiguous ability-CIRs: *can you* and *could you*

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Ability-CIRs with clear requestive force | 5 (0.1) | 13 (0.4) | 10 (0.3) | 28 (0.3) |
| Ability-CIRs with ambiguous requestive | 17 (0.5) | 22 (0.6) | 37 (1.0) | 76 (0.7) |

| | | | | |
|--------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| force | | | | |
| <i>Total</i> | 22 (0.6) | 35 (1.0) | 47 (1.3) | 104 (1.0) |

Contrary to what we anticipated, the ability-CIRs in Table 6 do not show a clear rise in the number with clear requestive force as the nineteenth century progresses. There is an increase between the early and middle periods, though not between the middle and later periods. The ambiguous ability-CIRs do increase steadily as the century progresses, however, but that may simply reflect the general increase in CIRs, not an increase in ambiguous cases. The figures are very low, and the results could be normal variation. Additionally, there was sometimes not enough information in the co-text to determine to what extent the addressee had the ability to comply. We erred on side of caution in judging the requestive force to be ambiguous if there was no definite evidence for the addressee's ability to comply, or that the addressee had taken it to be a request.

Examples (4) and (5) show ability-CIRs with a clear requestive force (as in previous examples, the head acts of the requests are underlined).

- (4) Can you remember to tell me by Monday whether I should return the originals to Redgrave (who will have left) or to Whymper.

(Letter from Sidney Webb to Beatrice Webb, 24th October 1891: *ACLMEP*, p. 315)

- (5) Then, too, could you lend me your small geological map? i.e. if you don't want it at all.

(Letter from J.R. Green to W. Boyd Dawkins, 24th September, 1862: *ACLMEP*, p. 105)

The writer and addressee in example (4) are a couple who regularly discuss business through their letters to one another, so it is reasonable to assume that Beatrice has the ability to comply with Sidney's request. There is no question mark, so the option of interpreting this as an interrogative rather than a request is less apparent, and the head act is not modified or mitigated in any way. This perhaps tells us something about the nature of Sidney and Beatrice's relationship, suggesting that Sidney feels entitled to make this request of Beatrice, and that she will be willing to comply. In example (5), it is clear that J.R. Green already believes W. Boyd Dawkins to be in possession of the map he wants to borrow (from the head act of the request) and therefore in a position to comply with his request. In this case, however, the writer does not simply assume the addressee's willingness to comply, but adds a post-support move acknowledging the owner's first claim to using the map. There is also a question mark, reducing the requestive force and opening up the possible interpretation of an enquiry about literal ability if the addressee wishes to decline.

The ability of the addressee to comply with the request is uncertain in example (6), however.

- (6) Can you dine with me somewhere on Thursday? Afterwards we might slack or break up early as I shall have had rather a plethora of Theatre

(Letter from Ernest Dowson to Arthur Moore, 8th April, 1890: *ACLMEP*, p. 147)

On one hand it could be considered an ability-CIR with requestive force (or perhaps an offer), in that the writer Ernest Dowson asks Arthur Moore to have dinner with him. On the other hand, some force of enquiry about literal ability is also clearly present, since Arthur Moore's availability to accept is unknown.

4.2.3 Genre differences

Ability-CIRs were found in the letters, courtroom trial proceedings, drama and fiction in our corpora, but none occurred in scientific writing, historical writing or parliamentary debates. This is not surprising as one might readily suppose that requests are rarer in the latter genres (parliamentary debates are often couched as summary report, making them less interactive than one might suppose). We excluded the 13 ability-CIRs in the *ACLMEP* corpus in this section, as that corpus contains only letters. The increase in these between the middle and later periods of the nineteenth century is already known from Table 3 above in section 4.2.1. The distribution of the 91 ability-CIRs in different genres in the one million word *CONCE* corpus is given in Table 7 below (*can* and *could* forms have been combined, as the numbers for *could* forms were too few to support even suggestive conclusions).

Table 7. Distribution of ability-CIRs by genre in the *CONCE* corpus: *can you* and *could you*

| | 1800-1830 | 1850-1870 | 1870-1900 | Total |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Letters | 4 (0.3) | 11 (0.8) | 2 (0.2) | 17 (0.5) |
| Courtroom trial proceedings | 16 (2.6) | 15 (2.5) | 30 (4.4) | 61 (3.2) |
| Drama | 2 (0.6) | 5 (1.7) | 3 (1.0) | 10 (1.1) |
| Fiction | - | 2 (0.5) | 1 (0.3) | 3 (0.3) |
| Other genres (see section 4.2) | - | - | - | - |
| <i>Total</i> | 22 (0.6) | 33 (1.0) | 36 (1.2) | 91 (0.9) |

As Table 7 shows, by far the greatest numbers of ability-CIRs are located in the courtroom trial proceedings in the *CONCE* corpus. Of a total of 61 instances, 59 are *can* forms. The ability-CIRs in this genre account for more than half those in the *CONCE* corpus, and nearly two-thirds of all the ability-CIRs in our data overall. Therefore, they merit further investigation.

We found that the ability-CIRs in the trial data were used by the examiners (lawyers and judges) to witnesses and defendants under cross-examination, signalling both a need for them to speak, and specifying the exact information required. They have context-specific characteristics of both ability and a request. The duality of purpose of the *can/could* strategies efficiently meets the contextual need to combine a request for the respondent to speak whilst allowing for the possibility that s/he may not be able to give the exact information required. This is a matter of practicality rather than politeness though. An ambiguous request is optimal because although the examinees are under a heavy legal and moral obligation to co-operate by providing information, there is a possibility that they may not have the literal ability to do so. Two examples follow, from the 1899 trial of Florence Maybrick, illustrating the possible interpretations of an ability-CIR in the courtroom context.

- (7) **Can you** suggest to us what it was? – No; I cannot.
 (Mr. Tidy's evidence, *The Maybrick Case*, 1899: *CONCE*, p. 240)

Charles Meymott Tidy, “Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery”, is an expert witness being cross-examined by Sir Charles Russell, whose question in example (7) is undoubtedly a request for information by virtue of their respective roles in court. The topic is the cause of death, apparently by poisoning, and Sir Charles wants to find out the type of poison used. Mr. Tidy’s interpretation of this as a request for specific information would be the preferred response here, but he evidently does not have the information or does not want to commit himself, and so chooses to interpret the question as one of literal ability. In example (8), however, from the same trial, another expert witness interprets a similar ability-CIR from Sir Charles Russell as a request:

- (8) The Judge ... **can you** tell me the last occasion when you saw him?
– It would be in December 1888 when I last saw him professionally.
(Dr. Hopper’s evidence, *The Maybrick Case*, 1899: *CONCE*, p. 56)

Despite the prevalence of the ambiguous ability-CIRs in the nineteenth-century courtroom trial data, it is perhaps unlikely that ability-CIRs became conventionalised there and spread to other contexts; courtroom conversation had very restricted access. This is, however, an interesting hybrid form of ability-CIR which is particular to the courtroom context, and seems to be a conventional questioning formula at that time.

It is worth noting that nearly all the ability-CIRs in courtroom trial data included a question mark, which we argued in section 3.1 would reduce the requestive force through implying an enquiry about ability rather than a request (cf. Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 864). However, in the trial data the presence or absence of a question mark reflects the transcriber’s interpretation of spoken data, which may not accurately show the level of requestive force intended by the speaker. More widely, it is of course possible that other texts may contain transcription errors, too. In one example of a letter in our data there is no punctuation at all to mark what appears to be a sentence boundary at the end of an ability-CIR. We could not therefore determine whether the original author used a question mark or simply a full stop in writing the request, or whether it was indeed unpunctuated (which would not be consistent with the rest of the letter).

Results in other genres are very few, as Table 7 shows. It is worth noting that the fewest ability-CIRs occur in nineteenth-century fiction, where there are none at all in the early part of the century. To widen our investigations in fiction slightly, we conducted a brief investigation of ability-CIRs in a corpus of novels by Charles Dickens (on Lancaster University’s *CQPweb* corpus resource), whose works span more than 40 years (1836 to 1870). In the corpus of 5,436,949 words we found only 46 ability-CIRs which, like the rest of our nineteenth-century data, included some with clear requestive force and some which were ambiguous. This added to the evidence that ability-CIRs are comparatively rare in Victorian fiction, although it represents only one authorial style. Nevertheless, the fact that we found some CIRs is a further small piece of evidence that ability-CIRs emerge first in the nineteenth century.

4.2.4 Outcomes from the analysis of ability-CIRs in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts

Our investigations into ability-CIRs in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts produced a fairly small number of results, and are suggestive of trends rather than strongly conclusive. The scant

late eighteenth-century data, although only from the genre of letters, suggested that ability-CIRs were not conventionalised at this time. Our nineteenth-century data showed increasing numbers of ability-CIRs as the century progressed (Table 3), though contrary to our expectations clearly conventionalised forms did not steadily increase in frequency any more than ambiguous forms (Table 6). It may well be that the most substantial rise in ability-CIRs between the eighteenth century and the present day took place after 1900, in light of Biber's (2004: 212) data showing the sharpest rise in *can* and *could* modal verbs to be post-1900 (mentioned in section 3.1). The prevalence of ability-CIRs in courtroom trial data accounts for many of our results; without them we would be dealing with very few indeed. However, we would echo Kohnen (2007: 157) in regarding this small-scale study of a particular speech act as "exploratory", in order to bring into focus some potentially important theoretical questions about what is as yet an under-researched historical period in English language pragmatics.

The fact that ability-CIRs arise in the nineteenth century is perhaps not surprising, given that CIRs are also emblematic of non-imposition negative politeness, something which we have argued arose in that century. But why ability-CIRs in particular? In our analyses of ability-CIRs, clues were lacking in the co-texts and genres. However, in a broader social perspective one can point to some changes that may have facilitated a focus on ability, although it must be stressed that we are not in a position to make strong causal connections. We have noted in section 2 that the status and nature of work changed. Its status was enhanced by the rise of Protestantism, and changed by industrialisation. Regarding the latter, we noted that the focus was on "usefulness, the use-value, of the workers' labour power, its capacity to produce" (Bellamy 1988: 53). For the mass of the population, people's individual abilities and their related values were in focus. One might speculate that ability-CIRs came to be more frequent because they oriented to what was becoming important in that period, just as volition requests (e.g. *will you ...*) or permission requests (e.g. *let me ...*) had been appropriate in earlier periods when hierarchical power structures, allotted at birth and underpinned by Christianity, were in focus.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the individualistic ethos associated with Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness, and more specifically, their notion of negative politeness and the role of CIRs, is not simply a synchronic characteristic of British politeness, but a diachronic British characteristic as well. We have pointed out, as indeed have others, that mediaeval society, and in particular its close linkage with the notion of the self, does not fit the Brown and Levinson model. A suite of social and cultural changes – secularisation, the rise of Protestantism, the development of the notion of an inner self, social and geographical mobility and industrialisation – combined with the rise of individualism as a positive ideology, and in particular the rise of self-help, created the conditions, notably in the nineteenth century, for the kind of politeness that Brown and Levinson talk about. As far as our pragmalinguistic work is concerned, we traced the start of the rise of ability-CIRs to the nineteenth century. CIRs are emblematic of negative politeness, and so their rise in the nineteenth century fits. What we did not find was the surge in use to their present-day popularity. This, we infer, must have taken place after the nineteenth century, perhaps fuelled by the enduring dominance of the Victorian ideology. As far as their orientation to ability in particular is concerned, we noted a consonant shift in thinking in nineteenth century Britain, partly as a consequence of industrialisation, whereby a person's individual abilities were the focus of value.

It should be noted that not all of the social and cultural changes we have discussed are exclusive to Britain. Many also took place, for example, in continental Europe. However, the rise of the ideology of individualism as something positive in the nineteenth century and in particular its popularisation, and also the extent of industrialisation and urbanisation are especially characteristic of Britain. Finally, we briefly note that the specific kind of individualistic politeness we have been discussing here with its roots in Victorian values has been losing much of its ascendancy in recent decades in Britain. But that is the subject of another paper.

Notes

¹ Culpeper and Archer (2008: 64) note Kohnen's (2004: 172) argument that *let*-requests function somewhat like *can you* or *could I* in orienting towards the approval of the addressee by appealing to her/his ability or volition.

² Perkins (1983: 118-119) argues that the quality of 'tentativeness' conveyed by *could* renders it more polite than *can*.

Acknowledgements

We thank David Denison for furnishing us with the *A Corpus of Late Modern English Prose* and *A Corpus of Late 18th Century Prose*. We are particularly indebted to Merja Kytö (Uppsala University) for providing results from the *CONCE* corpus for this study, using Scott's (1996-2010) *WordSmith Tools*.

Corpora and texts

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