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# Contrasting requests in Inner Circle Englishes: A study in variational pragmatics

*Anne Barron*

## 1. Introduction

Current descriptions and contrasts of the Englishes focus predominantly on the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels of language. In contrast, research on the conventions of polite language use in and across the Englishes is limited, as indeed reflected in recently published overviews of some of the varieties of English, none of which address pragmatic variation (e.g., Bauer 2002; Davies 2005; Hughes, Trudgill, and Watt 2005; Kortmann and Schneider 2005). Indeed, this general lack of attention to intra-lingual pragmatic research applies, with few exceptions, not only to the Englishes, but to the study of intra-lingual regional and social varieties in general.

This research desideratum in the study of pragmatic intra-lingual variation is, on the one hand, the result of limited attention paid to the effect of macro-social factors, such as region, ethnic background, age, social status and gender, on intra-lingual pragmatic conventions in the study of cross-cultural pragmatics (cf., e.g., Barron 2003: 266; Barron and Schneider 2005; Kasper 1989, 1995: 72–73; Schneider 2001). On the other hand, the pragmatic level has only also been considered to a very limited extent in dialectology (i.e. in traditional dialect geography and contemporary urban dialectology) despite the concern of this discipline with synchronic variation. The general lack of attention to intra-lingual research on language in (inter)action in both of these fields means that intra-lingual pragmatic variation still largely awaits systematic investigation (cf. Barron 2005a; Barron and Schneider 2005: 12; Schneider 2001; Schneider and Barron 2005, forthcoming).

Schneider and Barron (2005, forthcoming), among others (cf. below), have highlighted the need for research into the effect of macro-social factors on language in (inter)action. Indeed, they have proposed the establishment of *variational pragmatics* (VP), a sub-field of pragmatics, as a means of promoting such a systematic investigation of the effect of geographical and social factors on language in (inter)action (cf. also Barron 2005a; Barron

and Schneider 2005; Schneider and Barron forthcoming). VP is concerned with the investigation of possible correlations between macro-social factors and the use of language in action.

The present study, situated in the field of variational pragmatics, takes regional variation as its focus. Specifically, the paper investigates the realisation of requests by native speakers of two Inner Circle varieties of English, namely Irish English and English English.<sup>1</sup> The investigation focuses on the level of directness used in these varieties via an analysis of the head act strategies and of the amount and types of internal and external modification employed. Differences on the formal level are also addressed. The data for the study were elicited from 27 Irish and 27 English students using a production questionnaire (three situations). Findings are discussed as to their consequences for the study of intra-lingual pragmatic variation within the framework of variational pragmatics and also as to their implications – and the implications of the existence of intra-lingual regional variation in general – for the Inner and Expanding Circle classrooms. The investigation then, although it must be seen as a pilot study in variational pragmatics given the relatively small sample and number of situations analysed, nonetheless adds to the literature on variational pragmatics and also provides direction for future research in the area and also for the further development of the teaching of pragmatics in the classroom context.

The paper begins with an introduction to variational pragmatics and an overview of the levels of pragmatic variation found between regional varieties to date. Following this, the methodology underlying the present study is introduced, and the findings are presented and discussed against the background of previous research in variational pragmatics. Implications for the Inner and Expanding Circle classrooms are also discussed in some detail.

## **2. Variational pragmatics**

### **2.1. Where is intra-lingual variation in pragmatics and pragmatics in intra-lingual variation?**

Cross-cultural pragmatics is “... a field of inquiry which compares the ways in which two or more languages are used in communication” (House-Edmondson 1986: 282). Research in this area has shown rather conclusively that the pragmlinguistic and sociopragmatic conventions of language use may differ across languages (cf., e.g., Blum-Kulka, House, and

Kasper 1989a; Ochs 1996: 425–431). However, problematically, languages in cross-cultural pragmatics are often dealt with as homogeneous wholes.

Early cross-cultural research in the form of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP) did recognise that regional variation might influence language use conventions. This was apparent in the different intra-lingual varieties of English for which data were collected, i.e. Australian English (Blum-Kulka 1989; Blum-Kulka and House 1989; Olshtain 1989; Weizman 1989), American English (Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones 1989) and British English (House-Edmondson 1986; House and Kasper 1987).<sup>2</sup> However, regrettably, these different varieties of English were never compared in the CCSARP, at least not in a public forum. In other words, although there was a clear recognition in this project of the possible influence of regional variation across pluricentric languages, this aspect of variation was not investigated further within the framework of the project. Indeed, with the exception of a small – but, rather encouragingly, growing – number of recent studies into macro-social pragmatic variation, particularly in the area of the pragmatics of the regional varieties of Spanish (cf. Garcia forthcoming for an overview) (cf. 2.2), the investigation of macro-social variation has largely continued to take a back seat in pragmatic research. Differences based on region, age, social status, gender and ethnic identity have, for the most part, been either abstracted away or, at the very least, not systematically discussed, meaning that the study of intra-lingual variation on the pragmatic level has been generally limited to the situational level, i.e. to the study of “micro sociolinguistic factors”, in Kasper’s (1995: 72) terms.<sup>3</sup>

This research dearth into macro-social pragmatic variation has not gone unnoticed in pragmatics. Kasper (1995: 73), for instance, laments on the lack of investigation into the effect of region, age, social status, gender and ethnic identity on language use conventions, writing:

Der seiner makrosoziolinguistischen Merkmale entledigte Zielsprachenaktant ist damit ein beobachtungs- und beschreibungsunadäquates Konstrukt. Auch aus verschiedenen theoretischen Perspektiven der Soziolinguistik heraus ist der homogenisierte Zielsprachenaktant nicht zu begründen. Soziolinguistische Normmodelle haben seit jeher den Einfluss kontextexterner und kontextinterner Faktoren auf situiertes Verstehen und Sprechen hervorgehoben ...

‘The target language participant who is abstracted away from his macro-sociolinguistic characteristics is an inadequate construct from an observational and descriptive point of view. Neither can the homogenised target language participant be justified from the point of view of various theoretic-

cal sociolinguistic perspectives. Sociolinguistic norm models have always emphasised the influence of context-external and context-internal factors on situated understanding and speaking ...' (my translation).

Other researchers who have also highlighted the dearth of research on pragmatic variation according to region include Grzega (2000, 2005: 44, 46) who has noted the dearth for pluricentric varieties of German and English in particular, Márquez Reiter (2002, 2003) who has focused on the desideratum for research into the pragmatics of various regionally-defined varieties of Spanish, and more recently Clyne (2006), who, like Grzega, has focused above all on variation within the pluricentric varieties of English and German. Indeed, Clyne (2006: 97) succinctly comments "Very few studies so far have focused on pragmatic variation between different national varieties of a pluricentric language."

On the other hand, research in dialectology and variational sociolinguistics (urban dialectology) has long established that macro-social factors correlate with linguistic choices. Variational sociolinguistics has focused predominantly on the phonological level of language. However, a number of studies in this tradition have also revealed a correlation between higher-order social factors and other traditionally recognised system-based variables (cf. Apte 2001: 43–46).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the traditional form-based focus of dialect studies is clearly reflected in recent overviews of variation in regional dialectology, such as those by Bauer (2002) and Kortmann and Schneider (2005). Both of these works discuss variation only on the levels of phonology, morphology and syntax; pragmatic variation is not even mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Rickford (1996), a reader-friendly overview of some of the applications of sociolinguistic research on regional and social factors, concentrates on the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels of language variation. Macro-social variation in language use conventions is not discussed (cf. also Davies 2005; Hughes, Trudgill, and Watt 2005, both overviews of the varieties of English which also omit the pragmatic level of description).

Individual writers in dialectology have lamented this general lack of data on macro-social pragmatic variation. As early as 1978, Schlieben-Lange and Weydt made a plea for an extension of the scope of dialect studies to include a pragmatic perspective. Also, more recently, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006: 100–101), in the context of their account of dialects in American English, have remarked that: "The acknowledgment of language-use differences as a legitimate domain of dialect studies is relatively recent compared to the traditional focus on language form (i.e. lexical items, pronunciations, grammatical structures) ...". In other words, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes

recognise the fact that intra-lingual varieties may differ from each other, not only on the well-established phonological, grammatical and semantic levels, but also on the pragmatic level. Rather unusual for overviews of variation in dialectology, they devote a complete sub-section to differences in language-use conventions (2006: 93–101). Here, they give an overview of some studies which have revealed the macro-social factors, ethnic identity and gender, to correlate with intra-lingual pragmatic variation.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. Variational pragmatics: At the interface of pragmatics and modern dialectology

Schneider and Barron (2005) have suggested *variational pragmatics* (VP) as a term for research dedicated to investigating the effect of macro-social pragmatic variation on language in (inter)action (cf. also Barron 2005a; Schneider and Barron forthcoming). From a pragmatic perspective, VP aims at complementing the study of pragmatics with a focus on macro-social factors. From a dialectologist position, it aims at complementing the study of variation with a pragmatic component.

Variational pragmatics can be conceptualised as an area of research dedicated to systematically investigating the effect of macro-social factors on the use of language in (inter)action. Macro-social factors refer here to factors, such as region, gender, ethnic identity, socio-economic status and age. Similar to variational sociolinguistics, variational pragmatics is a top-down approach, with these macro-social factors viewed as stable social categories which nonetheless interact. Needless to say, such a conceptualization of social structures as stable is commonly criticised by constructivists who argue that social structures do not have a reality outside of local actions and practices. Rather, they believe that social class, gender, etc. are things that individuals do rather than things that they are or have (cf. Coupland 2001: 2; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999: 180). They argue, therefore, that, depending on the interaction, an individual may be more or less female, more or less middle-class, etc. in a particular context. However, our view here, and indeed, the view taken in variational sociolinguistics, is that social identities are never written on a *tabula rasa* in a socio-historical vacuum. In other words, individuals cannot but be influenced by the social environment in which they are brought up. Variational pragmatics, like variational sociolinguistics, investigates exactly such influences.

In an earlier paper, I reviewed some of the studies which have recently begun to concentrate on regional intra-lingual varieties. Based on this analysis, I was able to conclude that macro-social regional variation does indeed exist on a pragmatic level (cf. Barron 2005a). In addition, in this same paper, focusing on research on Inner Circle varieties of English and also on other pluricentric languages, I address the question as to the levels at which speech-act-based macro-social pragmatic variation occurs in particular in the area of regional variation. The results of this analysis showed that at this early stage of research, it can be suggested that intra-lingual pragmatic variation does not generally affect the inventory of strategies or the modification devices available for use. Instead, intra-lingual pragmatic variation is concentrated on the following levels:

a) *Differences found in the distribution of the strategies chosen in terms of relative frequency (differences on a subordinate level for offers and requests)*

The choices made from the inventory of strategies and the distribution of these strategies in terms of relative frequency may differ by variety. However, these differences appear to be at a more sub-ordinate level, at least for offers and requests, than is the case for inter-lingual variation (cf., e.g., Cenoz and Valencia 1996; Eslamirasekh 1993; House and Kasper 1987 on inter-lingual differences on the level of the strategy). Indeed, representative of variational pragmatic research to date is an intra-lingual study on offers in Irish English and English English (cf. Barron 2005b). In this study, an identical conventionally indirect super-strategy was found to be used by speakers of both varieties. Also, on a more subordinate level, the most frequently employed strategies were shared by both groups, namely the execution strategy state ability and the preference strategy question wish, and both strategies were similarly distributed across situations. However, differences were noted on a deeper level of analysis. Irish English speakers were found, for instance, to use a strategy of predication (*Will I take you to the hospital?*; *Will you have a cup of tea ...?*) extensively. This convention was only used to a limited extent in the counterpart English English data. Indeed, the convention of means employed in *Will I take you to the hospital?*, a question future act of speaker strategy, was not found in the English English data analysed at all. Similarly, Placencia (2005), in an intra-lingual study on product requests employed in corner store interactions in Quito (Ecuadorian Spanish) and Madrid (Peninsular Spain) finds no differences on the level of

the super-strategy. However, on a more subordinate level, Quito informants are found to clearly prefer imperatives while Madrid speakers opted for a wider variety of strategies, preferring quasi-imperatives (i.e., elliptical forms) (cf. also Márquez Reiter 2003; Márquez Reiter and Placencia 2004; Warga forthcoming for studies yielding similar findings).

*b) Differences found in the distribution of the modification chosen in terms of relative frequency*

The English and Irish offers mentioned above used external mitigation in the form of grounders and explicit conditionals (*if you want/ like*) (Baron 2005b). However, the Irish informants employed significantly more external modification than speakers of English English. Similarly, Schneider (2005) shows that speakers of Irish English, English English and American English made similar choices of external modifiers in minimising thanks. Schneider's Irish informants, however, engaged in a considerably higher level of external modification than speakers of either of these other varieties. Likewise, the Irish informants investigated were found to employ internal modification in their thanks minimisers to a greater extent in this study than either the English or American informants in the situations investigated. A study by Breuer and Geluykens 2007 should also be mentioned in this context. Breuer and Geluykens investigated requests realised by American English and British English native speakers using a production questionnaire. She found British speakers to employ both internal and external modification more frequently than American English speakers (cf. also Márquez Reiter 2002, 2003; Muhr 1994; Placencia 2005; Warga forthcoming for similar findings on different regional varieties).

*c) Differences in the range of modifiers employed in a particular situation*

The range of modifiers used may also vary. Placencia (2005), for instance, finds a larger level of variation in the internal modifiers used in requests for products in Quiteño Spanish relative to Madrileño Spanish. In addition, speakers of Quiteño Spanish were shown to use multiple downgraders in a single request.

*d) Differences in the particular linguistic forms used to realise an individual strategy or type of modification*

On the level of form, differences may be found on the level of the existence of a particular form, on the level of the relative preferences of use of a particular form, and finally, on the level of the relative range of



forms employed to realise a particular strategy or type of modification. Márquez Reiter (2003), for example, shows a higher degree of explicitness to characterise Uruguayan relative to Peninsular grounders. Also, differences are found in Barron (2005b) between the Irish English and English English offers, with the conventionalised explicit conditional form *if you like* used frequently by the Irish informants, but not at all by English informants. Finally, Terkourafi (1999) finds non-literal diminuation not to constitute a conventionalised means of expressing politeness in a range of speech acts in Cypriot Greek, the non-standard variety spoken in urban areas in Cyprus, relative to Standard Modern Greek, the standard variety spoken in urban areas of mainland Greece (cf. also studies by Márquez Reiter and Placencia 2004; Schneider 2005; Warga forthcoming).

As highlighted in Barron (2005a), however, it is important to caution that these generalizations represent a very early stage of research. Further speech-act-based data are required to investigate these and other parameters. In addition, as well as

a) *speech act realisations*,

other levels of analysis include:

b) *linguistic forms*

i.e. the analysis of linguistic forms, such as discourse markers, hedges, upgraders. The analysis of the distribution and use of the forms *I say* and *I mean* vs. *I'd say* and *you know* is one example (cf. Kallen 2005b). Cf. also Farr and O'Keeffe (2002), Kallen (2006) and Tottie (2002: 187–188).

c) *sequential patterns*

i.e. the analysis of, e.g., the sequences in which speech acts are embedded (cf., e.g., Placencia 2005; Schlieben-Lange and Weydt 1978: 262–263; Tottie 2002: 181–182).

d) *topic management*

i.e. the analysis of topics addressed in small talk, taboo topics, etc. (cf., e.g., Tottie 2002: 185–187; Wolfram and Schillig-Estes 2006: 98–99).

e) *discourse organisation*

i.e. the analysis of turn-taking phenomena, e.g. pauses, overlaps, interruptions, back-channelling (cf., e.g., McCarthy 2002; Tottie 1991, 2002: 185–187).

To this list, could also be added:

*f) genre conventions*

i.e. the analysis of macro-structure, such as the moves conventionally employed in book blurbs (cf. Kathpalia 1997). Cf. also Yajun and Chenggang (2006).

In the present paper, we concentrate, however, on the level of the speech act, and in particular on requests. It is requests to which we now turn.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection

Requests in Irish English and English English were elicited using a production questionnaire, specifically a discourse completion task (DCT).<sup>7</sup> A DCT is, in essence, a series of short written role-plays based on everyday situations which are designed to elicit a specific speech act by requiring informants to complete a turn of dialogue for each item. A short description of the scene before the interaction is usually included. Here, the general circumstances are set and the relevant situational parameters concerning social dominance, social distance and degree of imposition described (cf. Appendix for an example).

The DCT is, as Bardovi-Harlig (1999: 238) aptly summarises, “... at once the most celebrated and most maligned of all the methods used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research”. However, as she goes on to emphasise, no instrument can be said to be good or bad, but rather suitable or unsuitable to the question at hand. The DCT offered many advantages for the particular analysis at hand, that of requesting across cultures. Firstly, previous research has shown that the data elicited reflect the content of oral data despite its written form.<sup>8</sup> Ease of elicitation of comparable speech act realizations from large samples of informants quickly and efficiently and across cultures was also an important advantage, as was the ease of variability of contextual variables, such as social distance and social dominance, important constraints in determining the degree of directness chosen in a particular utterance. In addition, the DCT enables the elicitation of stereotypical interactions in the mind of the respondents and, as such, portrays the socially accepted use of language in a particular culture.

On the negative side, informants in a DCT task are forced to play the part of a person other than him/herself – suggesting possibly unreliable responses (cf. Rose 1992: 57; Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones 1989: 181). Also, the belief that contextual variables, such as social distance and social dominance, can be maintained stable in an interaction is an assumption inherent in the production questionnaire which is reductive as these factors are in fact continuously evolving. Furthermore, the situational descriptions provided are of necessity simplified, with the minimum of information given. As a result, respondents are forced to elaborate on the context themselves, which naturally reduces the degree of control as different people may imagine different details (cf. Bardovi-Harlig 1999: 242; Kasper 1998: 94).<sup>9</sup> There is also some evidence that the DCT elicits more direct strategies than would be found in naturally-occurring data.<sup>10</sup> In sum, then, although the DCT offered many advantages for the present study, it remains exploratory in nature, and should be supplemented in future investigations with triangulated data – ideally with naturally-occurring data.

The present study focuses on three request situations. Table 1 provides brief details of these (cf. Appendix for the actual DCT items employed in the study). All three of these situations were originally included on the CCSARP questionnaire. House (1989: 106) differentiates between standard and non-standard request situations – both opposing poles on a continuum. A relatively high obligation to comply with a request, a relatively low de-

Table 1. Requests – situational descriptions

Request Situation	Synopsis of Situation
Notes	Student requests notes from friend
Lift	Man requests colleague/neighbour for drive home
Police	Policeman requests woman to move car

gree of difficulty in performing the request and a high right to pose the particular request are features associated with standard situations. The opposite features describe non-standard situations although these descriptions are relative rather than absolute – representing a continuum. The lift situation in the present study is a non-standard situation (cf. House 1989: 109). The police situation, on the other hand, represents a standard situation. The notes situation is half way on the standard/ non-standard continuum – as House (1989: 107) remarks, this situation is “too low in obligation to be standard

and both too high in rights and low in difficulty to be included as nonstandard”.

Finally, it should be noted that the request data were collected on a questionnaire which included a total of nine situations designed to elicit a range of requests (7) and responses to thanks (2) (cf. Schneider 2005). The inclusion of two speech acts served to increase the naturalness of informants’ behaviour in that it prevented skimming of situational descriptions (e.g., *Ah, they’re all requests anyhow*). The focus on the three request situations police, notes and lift was based on the continuum of standardness which they represent.

### 3.2. Participants

Production data were elicited from 27 females in a school in the South-East of Ireland and from 27 females in a school in Southern England.<sup>11</sup> This concentration on two areas only is necessarily reductive. Clearly, this project is only a step towards an analysis of Irish English and English English.<sup>12</sup> Further research is needed before generalisations can be made.

The average age of the Irish group was 16.2 years, that of the English informants 16.3 years. The group sizes were established on the basis of a recommendation by Kasper and Dahl (1991: 226) who found that responses of homogeneous groups elicited using a production questionnaire, the primary instrument employed in the present study, tend to concentrate around a few subcategories, thus rendering larger samples unnecessary. The concentration on females only was considered important given gender differences established in language use (cf., e.g., Fukushima 1990: 541 on gender differences in the choice of offer strategy in English).

In total, 81 English English requests and 80 Irish English requests were analysed. The difference in one is due to one item left uncompleted in the Irish data for the police situation. This was coded as a missing value.

### 3.3. Coding scheme

The coding scheme which first guided this study was that developed for the CCSARP by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989b), itself based on an earlier coding system by Edmondson (1981). It allows a request to be analysed according to the degree of directness and the type of modification em-

ployed.<sup>13</sup> This analysis was then complemented by an analysis of form, where relevant. Additional categories of analysis were added where necessary, cf., e.g., 4.3.

As in the CCSARP, the head act, i.e., the minimal unit which can realise a particular speech act (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989b: 275), is first isolated in the present study, and the strategy employed in the head act then established. Following this, modification, whether internal or external, is identified. An example of the coding serves to illustrate the scheme:

- (1) Lift, IrE: ... *I was just wondering if I could get a lift home with you as I've missed my bus and the next one is not due for an hour*

Head act strategy: *I was just wondering if I could get a lift home with you* = query preparatory.

Internal modification:

- Syntactic downgrading: *I was just wondering, if I could ...* = tense (*was*) & aspect (*wondering*) & conditional clause (*if*) & conditional (*could*)
- Lexical and phrasal downgrading: *just* = downtoner, *I was wondering* = subjectiviser

External modification:

- *I've missed my bus and the next one is not due for an hour* = 2 (post-) grounders

The CCSARP recognises nine distinct levels of directness in requesting (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989a: 17–19, 1989b: 278–281). Those relevant to the present study are detailed in the following.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Request head act

By far the most frequently employed of the nine request strategies identified in the CCSARP in both the English and Irish requests in the present data is the query preparatory strategy, a strategy in which the preparatory conditions of a request are thematised in a conventionalised manner. An example of a realisation of this strategy from the present data is the following request (cf. also example (1) above):

- (2) Police, EngE: ... *can you move your car to the next street.*

Here the preparatory condition for requests “H is able to perform x. S believes H is able to do x” (Searle 1969: 66) is queried in so conventional a manner that the speaker usually does not consider his/her ability to carry out the request, but rather simply decides to comply or not to comply.

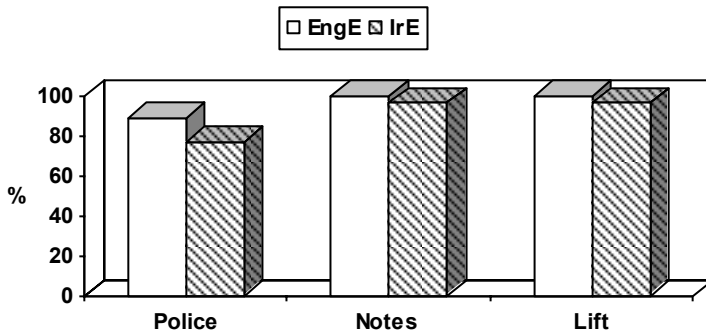


Figure 1. Distribution of query preparatory strategies in the request head act

The English English and Irish English data show no variation in the choice of head act strategy. Both speech communities clearly prefer a query preparatory request strategy in all three situations (Police: IrE: 76.9% [n=20] EngE 88.9% [n=24]; Notes: IrE: 96.3% [n=26], EngE: 100% [n=27]; Lift: IrE: 96.3% [n=26], EngE: 100% [n=27]). As in House (1989: 102), a somewhat lower use of query preparatories was recorded in both cultures in the standard police situation relative to the more non-standard situations (cf. Figure 1).

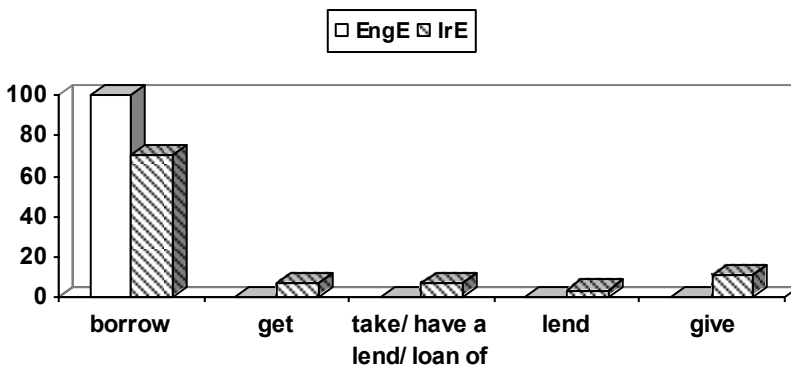


Figure 2. Lexical means used to refer to the requested act in the notes situation

Despite such broad similarities, there were, however, some interesting lexical differences found in the notes situation, differences which had repercussions for the relative politeness level of these utterances. In the EngE data, the action requested was always communicated via the verb *borrow*. Some examples serve to illustrate this unambiguous trend (cf. also Figure 2).

- (3) Notes, EngE: *Hi! I missed yesterday's lesson, **could I please borrow** your notes?*
- (4) Notes, EngE: ***Can I borrow** your notes for yesterday's class?*
- (5) Notes, EngE: *You know I missed that class yesterday? **Would it be OK to borrow** your notes to copy them up?*

In the Irish data, by contrast, speakers chose between a variety of options, namely between *get*, *lend*, *give* and *to take/ have a lend/ loan of something* to refer to the requested act, as seen in Figure 2 and in examples (6) to (9). Similar to the EngE data, the preferred option is to use *borrow*. However, only 70.4% (n= 19) of the Irish speakers do so compared to 100% (n=27) in the EngE data. This difference was statistically significant (p=0.004).

- (6) Notes, IrE: *Ciara, Is it alright **if I get** your notes from yesterday so I can see what I missed in class.*
- (7) Notes, IrE: *Ciara, I missed yesterday's class and I was wondering **could I have a lend of** your notes*
- (8) Notes, IrE: *Ciara **would you mind lending me** your notes from class yesterday. I was absent*
- (9) Notes, IrE: *Hello Ciara, I was wondering **if you could give me** the notes for yesterday's class please. I had to visit the dentist and I would like to catch up with the class.*

The preference for the verb *borrow* meant that the request perspective in the EngE data could only be either speaker-oriented, as in examples (3) and (4), or impersonal, as in example (5). Indeed, overall, the English informants preferred a speaker-orientation (cf. Figure 3). Specifically, 92.6% (n=25) of all EngE requests in the notes situation were speaker-oriented. The remaining 7.4% (n=2) were impersonal. In Irish English, on the other hand, use of the verbs *give* and *lend* meant that a hearer-perspective was possible, as seen in examples (8) and (9). However, Figure 3 shows that the Irish, similar to the English informants, also prefer a speaker-perspective (81.5% [n=22]). Nonetheless, 14.8% (n=4) of them formed their requests in

a hearer-oriented manner, and thus, brought the hearer's future action to the fore. In so doing, these four Irish informants were more direct than informants who employed a speaker-oriented request since speaker-oriented requests, given that they frequently appear as a request for permission, imply that the hearer or requestee has control over the speaker (the requester). They, therefore, avoid the appearance of trying to control or impose on the hearer and are, therefore, perceived as being relatively more polite (cf. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984). This difference in speaker/ hearer/ impersonal perspective in the Irish and English request data was, however, unlike the difference in lexical means, not statistically significant. Hence, we cannot conclude from this analysis that the Irish were more direct than the English informants.

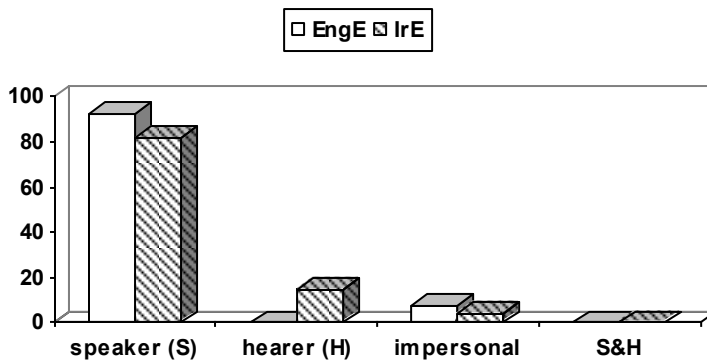


Figure 3. Request perspective in the notes situation

The following analysis concentrates exclusively on the query preparatory strategies identified here since any mitigation employed is often related to the underlying strategy. This approach to data analysis serves to increase the validity of the investigation (cf. Faerch and Kasper 1989: 222). An example may serve to illustrate this point: the politeness marker *please*, for instance, always acts as a downgrader when used with an imperative. However, when used with a query preparatory strategy, it may function either as an IFID or as a downgrader, depending on the nature of the situation (cf. House 1989).

#### 4.2. Internal modification

The analysis of internal modification investigates how the head act may be modified to aggravate or mitigate the requestive force. In the following we



look at the use of syntactic downgraders (SDn) and lexical and phrasal downgraders in the Irish English and English English requests at hand.

#### 4.2.1. Syntactic mitigation

The use of syntactic downgraders in a requestive head act reduces the impact of the request on the addressee. In increasing the level of indirectness, they provide the hearer with some freedom and in so doing, lessen any negative face-threat to the hearer in complying with the wishes of the speaker. The syntactic downgraders employed in the data are shown in Table 2. As mentioned above, the mitigators identified here were first established within the framework of the CCSARP (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989a, b). Importantly, the use of these forms must be optional for them to be coded as downgraders. The conditional form *could* in

(10) Police, EngE: *could you move your car please?*

can be replaced by an indicative form, i.e. *can*, in the present example. Hence *could* is mitigating (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989b: 283). Brown and Levinson (1987: 173) categorise such forms as a negative politeness strategy. They explain that by choosing *could* rather than *can* in the present example, the speaker is being pessimistic since it is assumed that the hypothetical world associated with such a request (e.g. *if I were to ask you*) is far away. In other words, the use of the conditional in such cases communicates a sense of remoteness of possibility. Of the variety of syntactic downgraders found in the data, the use of conditionals represents a rather simple form of downgrading with limited mitigating power. Combinations of syntactic downgraders, such as *I was wondering*, *if I could*, a combination of tense, aspect, conditional clause and conditional, are more highly mitigating since they include a range of negative politeness strategies (cf. also Barron 2003: 206–212). The use of *was* in such an utterance, for instance, represents the negative politeness strategy point-of-view distancing. That is, by using *was* the speaker distances him/ herself from the present moment and, thus, from the request (Brown and Levinson 1987: 205) (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989b and Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987 for further details).

Syntactic mitigation is used in all three situations in both speech communities. In the standard police situation, cultural differences are found neither in the frequency of syntactic downgrading employed (cf. Figure 4) nor in the

number of syntactic downgraders employed when syntactic downgrading was used (cf. Figure 5).

Table 2. Overview of syntactic downgraders employed with query preparatory head act strategies

	Description	Example (from the present data)
<b>Conditional</b>	Use of the conditional serves to distance the speaker from the reality of the situation and, thus, to decrease the face-threat to the speaker of a request should it be refused. It is coded only when optional and is, thus, downgrading.	<i>Could you?</i>
<b>Conditional clause</b>	The speaker, with the aid of a conditional clause, is able to distance the request in question from reality, and so decrease the positive face-threat to the speaker, should the request be refused. In addition, it decreases the imposition on the hearer and, thus, the associated negative face threat.	<i>...if you ...</i>
<b>Aspect</b>	Inclusion of types of aspect, such as the durative aspect marker. Usage is only regarded as mitigating, if it can be substituted by a simpler form.	<i>I was wondering if I ...</i>
<b>Tense</b>	Past tense forms are coded as downgrading only if they can be substituted with present tense forms without a change in semantic meaning.	<i>I <u>was</u> wondering, would I</i>
<b>Combinations of the above</b>		<i>I was wondering, if I could: tense, aspect, conditional clause, conditional</i>

In both of the more non-standard situations, by contrast, the Irish informants are found to be more indirect, using more syntactic downgrading than their English English counterparts. In the notes situation, for instance, syntactic mitigators are used to a larger extent by the Irish informants

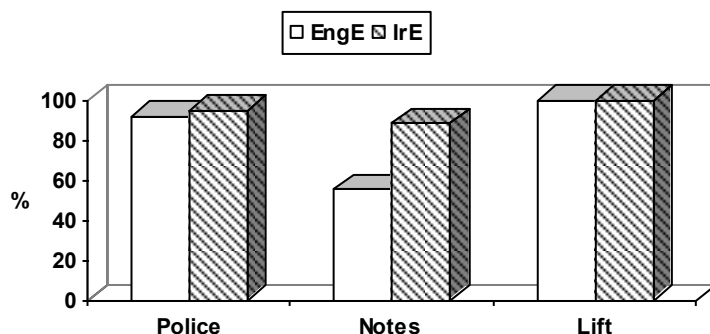


Figure 4. Syntactic mitigation employed in query preparatory head act strategies

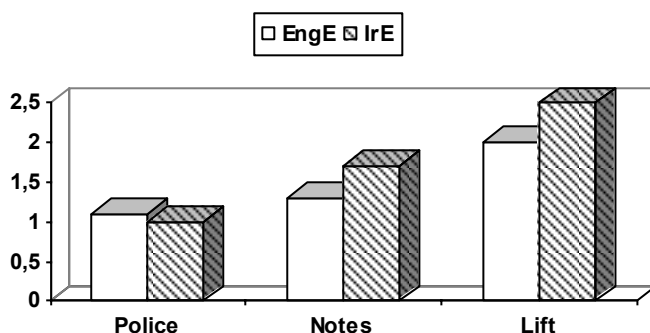


Figure 5. Average number of syntactic downgraders employed per informant where syntactic downgrading is used in query preparatory head act strategies

(88.5% [ $n=23$ ]) than by the English informants (55.6% [ $n=15$ ]), a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.007$ ) (cf. Figure 4). The higher number of syntactic downgraders employed in this same situation in the Irish data is also notable, despite not being statistically significant (cf. Figure 5). In the more highly non-standard lift situation, the higher level of indirectness in the Irish data is not apparent at first sight since levels of syntactic mitigation are equal at 100% (IrE:  $n=26$ , EngE:  $n=27$ ) (cf. Figure 4). However, the difference between the number of mitigators used per informant in this same situation is statistically significant when the average of two mitigators in the English data is compared to the average of 2.5 employed in the Irish data ( $p=0.035$ ) (cf. Figure 5). In other words, syntactic downgrading is employed

in all of the Irish English and English English lift requests. However, the Irish requests include more such downgraders.

*Table 3.* Use of conditionals and combinations of syntactic downgraders with aspect-tense in query preparatory head act strategies as a percentage of the syntactic downgraders used<sup>14</sup>

	Syntactic down- graders	Conditionals	Aspect-tense combinations
<b>Police</b>			
<b>EngE</b>	n=22	95.5% (n=21)	4.5% (n=1)
<b>IrE</b>	n=19	100% (n=19)	0 (n=0)
<b>Notes</b>			
<b>EngE</b>	n=15	73.3% (n=11)	0 (n=0)
<b>IrE</b>	n=23	52.2% (n=12)	30.4% (n=7)
<b>Lift</b>			
<b>EngE</b>	n=27	48.1% (n=13)	40.7% (n=11)
<b>IrE</b>	n=26	19.2% (n=5)	69.2% (n=18)

The analysis of the different types of syntactic downgraders employed is also insightful, pointing also to a higher level of indirectness in the Irish more non-standard requests. Here, we contrast the use of a conditional, the simplest form of syntactic downgrading in the data, with combinations of aspect and tense. Such combinations include aspect, tense, conditional and conditional clause, as in ... *I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes*, and aspect, tense and conditional combinations, as in *I was wondering could I borrow your notes*.

As above, there are no differences to be found in the police situation, both cultures preferring a simple conditional (cf. Table 3). However, similar to the preceding analysis, the Irish are again found to invest more in indirectness in the non-standard situations relative to their English counterparts. In the notes situation, downgrading in the form of conditionals was used most extensively in both data sets, and findings for the use of conditionals were not significant in this situation. However, clear cross-variatal differences were found in the use of the complex combination of aspect and tense with other syntactic downgraders ( $p=0.007$ ). This type of syntactic downgrading was namely not recorded at all in the English data for this situation. By contrast, combinations of aspect-tense were found in 30.4% ( $n=7$ ) of the Irish notes requests, making the head act of the Irish informants' requests

more indirect than those of the English informants (cf. Table 3). The following examples are taken from the Irish English data set:

- (11) IrE, Notes: *Ciara, I was wondering could I borrow your notes from yesterday's class because I missed it as I was sick*
- (12) IrE, Notes: *Ciara I was missing from class yesterday and I was just wondering if I could borrow your notes.*

This same trend towards a more indirect Irish request is also seen in the lift situation where the Irish informants use significantly less single conditionals (19.2%) compared to the English informants (48.1%) ( $p=0.026$ ), and significantly more syntactically complex and highly downgrading aspect and tense combinations (IrE: 69.2%; EngE 40.7%) ( $p=0.038$ ) (cf. Table 3).

4.2.2. Lexical and phrasal downgrading

Like syntactic downgraders, lexical and phrasal downgraders serve to mitigate the illocutionary force of requests. The lexical and phrasal downgraders used in both cultures in the situations analysed are listed in Table 4. The mitigators identified here were first established within the framework of the CCSARP (cf. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989a, b).

Table 4. Overview of lexical and phrasal downgraders employed with query preparatory head act strategies<sup>15</sup>

	Description	Example(s) (from the present data)
Subjectivisers	Elements which express a speaker's subjective opinion with regard to the situation referred to in the proposition	<i>I wonder..., I don't suppose, ...</i>
Consultative devices	Elements chosen to involve the hearer directly in an effort to gain compliance	<i>Do you mind, if ...?</i>
Downtoners	Sentential or propositional modifiers employed to moderate the force of a request on the addressee	<i>possibly, maybe</i>
Politeness marker <i>please</i>	Downgrading function only in standard situations (cf. below)	<i>please</i>

Here it is important to note that *please* only functions as a downgrader of illocutionary force in standard situations (cf. House 1989: 106–118). In non-standard situations, it upgrades illocutionary force.<sup>16</sup> In the present data, *please* is thus coded as a lexical and phrasal downgrader in the police situa-

tion only.<sup>17</sup> Since the notes situation is between the standard and non-standard poles, it is difficult to interpret the status of *please* in this situation in either data set. As a result, House (1989) excludes this situation from her analysis. This is also the approach taken here. In other words, the notes situation is not analysed for lexical and phrasal downgrading. The analysis of the range of lexical and phrasal downgraders occurring concentrates, therefore, on the police situation (where *please* is coded as a downgrader) and on the lift situation (where *please* is not analysed as a lexical downgrader).

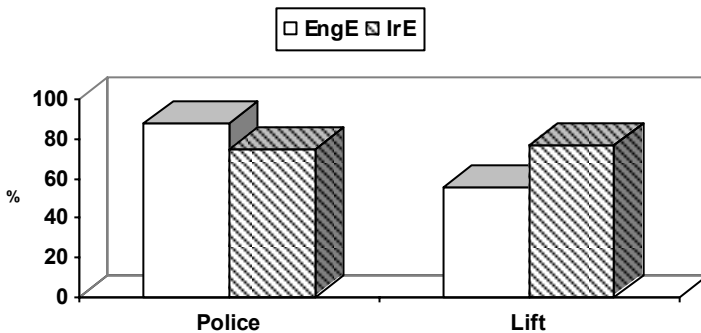


Figure 6. Lexical and phrasal downgraders distributed over query preparatory head act strategies

In the police situation, lexical and phrasal downgraders were employed by 75% (n=15) of the informants using a query preparatory strategy in the Irish data and by 87.5% (n=21) of those in the English data (cf. Figure 6). However, this difference was not statistically significant. A single lexical and phrasal downgrader was usual in both cultures, only 15% (n=3) of the Irish informants using a lexical and phrasal downgrader with a query preparation strategy and 9.5% (n=2) of the English informants using two such downgraders. Both speech communities showed a preference for an extensive use of *please* in this standard situation. Indeed, every time a lexical and phrasal downgrader was used in the Irish data, *please* was used (on occasion in combination). In the English data, *please* occurred in 76.2% (n=16) of requests. However, here too, these differences were not statistically significant (cf. Figure 7).

In the non-standard lift situation, 55.6% (n=15) of the English informants used a lexical and phrasal downgrader compared to 76.9% (n=20) of the Irish informants (cf. Figure 6). However, this difference was not statistically significant. In addition, similar to the police situation, a single lexical and

phrasal downgrader was usual, although proportionally more combinations of lexical and phrasal downgraders were employed than in the police situation, two downgraders being used by 35% (n=7) of the Irish informants

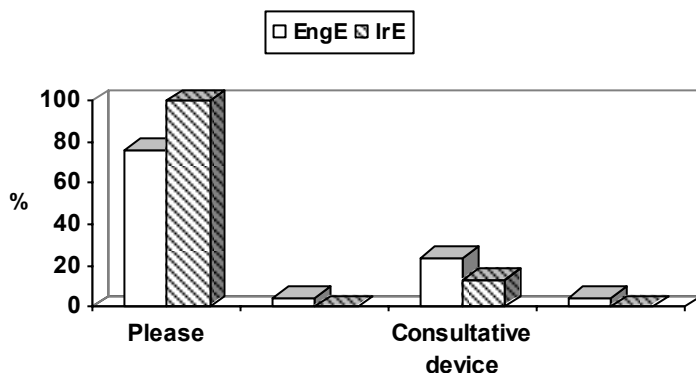


Figure 7. Police situation: Types of lexical and phrasal downgraders used in query preparatory head act strategies as a percentage of the lexical and phrasal downgraders used<sup>18</sup>

and 26.7% (n=4) of the English informants. An example of a request in which a combination of lexical and phrasal downgraders appeared is seen in the following. Here, we have a combination of a downgrader (*possibly*) and a subjectiviser *I wonder*, combined with aspect, tense, a conditional form and conditional clause:

- (13) IrE, Notes: *Hello, how do yee do today. **I was wondering** if it was o.k. with you could I **possibly** get a lift home.*<sup>19</sup>

Consultative devices were only used to a very narrow extent in both data sets here (EngE: 6.7% [n=1], IrE: 15% [n=3]). A request with a consultative device is seen in example (14). Here, the consultative device, *do you mind*, is combined with a conditional:

- (14) IrE, Notes: ***Would you mind** if I got a lift home in the car with you, I've just missed my bus.*

Subjectivisers, on the other hand, such as that seen in example (13), were employed to a large extent in both the English and the Irish data in the lift situation, as seen in Figure 8 (EngE: 80% [n=12], IrE: 95% [n=19]). Interestingly, on a formal level, the structure of requests involving the subject-

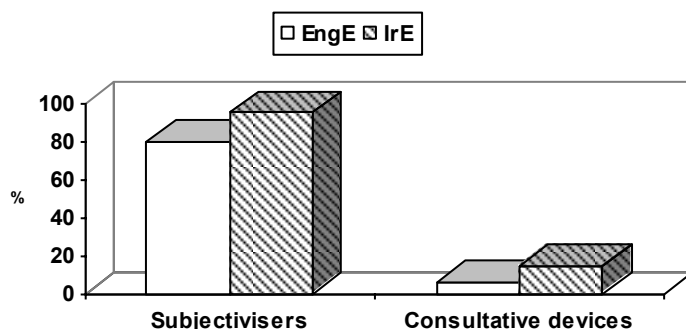


Figure 8. Lift situation: Subjectivisers and consultative devices distributed over query preparatory head act strategies as a percentage of the lexical and phrasal downgraders used

tiviser *wonder* differed in English English and Irish English. In the most non-standard situation, lift, use of *if* was the most popular option in both cultures. However, notably, 26.3% (n=5) of the total 19 Irish informants who used a subjectiviser omitted *if* or *whether* completely to form utterances, such as

(15) Lift, IrE: *I'm sorry to trouble you, but I've just missed my bus and I was wondering could you drop me off on your way home.*

or

(16) Lift, IrE: *Hi, how are ye! I was just wondering would there be any chance that I might be able to get a lift home off ye as the next bus isn't for an hour.*

The absence of *if* or *whether* is a frequent feature in the Irish data, not only in the lift situation discussed here, but also in the notes situation in which the subjectiviser *wonder* is recorded without either *if* or *whether* in 42.9% (n=3) of cases in which this subjectiviser occurs. Although not statistically significant, it is notable that either *if* or *whether* is always present in the English English requests of this form, not only in the lift situation, but also in the one English English request in the standard police situation which includes this subjectiviser. An interesting question which might be posed in this regard is whether we might be dealing here with two different argument structures for *wonder* in Irish English. In other words, the question might be posed as to what extent this difference is encoded in the grammar (i.e. two argument structures), and to what extent is it simply confined to request uses and,



hence, pragmatically licensed.<sup>20</sup> Overall then, the analysis of lexical and phrasal downgraders did not reveal any statistically significant differences in the requests of the Irish and English informants in either the police or the lift situation. Non-statistically significant differences on the level of form did, however, point to possible differences which might form the basis of future analysis.

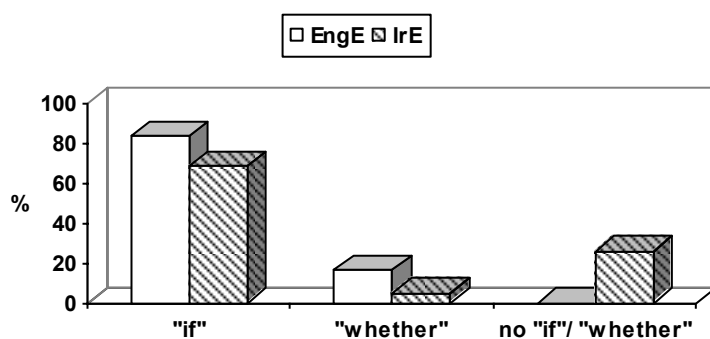


Figure 9. Lift situation: Use of *if/whether* with the subjectiviser *wonder* in query preparatory head act strategies as a percentage of the subjectivisers used

#### 4.3. External mitigation

External mitigators were used by both the Irish and English informants. Table 5 shows those mitigators found in the data. The category *apology for imposition* is not included in the CCSARP. The grounder is the most common external mitigator employed in all three situations, as will be seen below. One may differentiate between pre-grounders and post-grounders. Pre-grounders are situated before the head act, post-grounders follow the head act.

Cross-varietal differences, similar to those recorded in the analysis of syntactic mitigation for the more non-standard situations are also found in the standard police situation. In other words, the Irish informants are found to be more indirect, investing more effort in external downgrading than their English counterparts ( $p=0.000$ ). Specifically, 70% ( $n=14$ ) of the Irish informants used external mitigation in the standard police situation compared to only 33.3% ( $n=8$ ) of the English informants (cf. Table 6). The actual number of mitigators used was similar as seen in Figure 10.

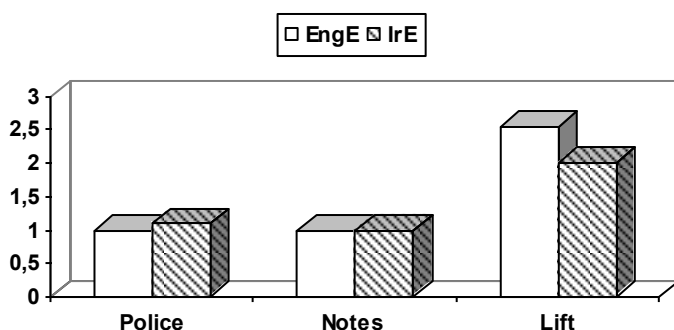
Table 5. Overview of external mitigators employed

	Description	Example
<b>Preparator</b>	The speaker prepares the hearer for the request which is to follow by enquiring about the hearer's availability to carry out the request or the hearer's permission to make the request. The exact nature of the request remains, however, unknown.	<i>Hi, I live in the same street as you and ...</i>
<b>Grounder</b>	The speaker provides reasons, explanations, or justifications for the preceding or ensuing request.	<i>I've just missed my bus, would you possibly be able to give me a lift?</i>
<b>Disarmer</b>	An attempt by the speaker to address, and, thus, weaken/ invalidate, any possible arguments the hearer might introduce in order to refuse the request.	<i>I know this is very rude to ask, but..., I know this is a bit forward, but ...</i>
<b>Imposition minimiser</b>	The speaker attempts to reduce the imposition which the request places on the hearer.	<i>... if it was o.k. with you could I ...</i>
<b>Apology for imposition</b>	The speaker apologises for any imposition the request may cause.	<i>I'm sorry to bother you but ...</i>

Table 6. Use of external mitigation (disarmers, grounders [pre-grounders]) in query preparatory head act strategies <sup>21</sup>

	Police		Notes		Lift	
	EngE	IrE	EngE	IrE	EngE	IrE
<i>Query pre-paratories</i>	88.9% (n=24)	76.9% (n=20)	100% (n=27)	96.3% (n=26)	100% (n=27)	96.3% (n=26)
<i>External mitigation</i>	33.3% (n=8)	70% (n=14)	70.4% (n=19)	88.5% (n=23)	100% (n=27)	100% (n=26)
<i>Disarmers</i>	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	22.2% (n=6)	0% (n=0)
<i>Grounders</i>	100% (n=8)	85.7% (n=12)	100% (n=19)	100% (n=23)	88.9% (n=24)	80.8% (n=21)
<i>Pre-grounders</i>	0% (n=0)	16.7% (n=2)	73.7% (n=14)	34.8% (n=8)	87.5% (n=21)	57.1% (n=12)

The grounder is the most common type of external downgrader employed in the police situation (IrE: 85.7% [n=12], EngE: 100% [n=8]). Post-grounders are preferred over pre-grounders in this standard situation in both cultures – a fact which points to the lower mitigating power of post-grounders relative to pre-grounders. Specifically, pre-grounders were only used in 16.7% (n=2) of the requests with grounders in the Irish data. Post-grounders were used in 83.3% (n=10) of cases in which grounders were employed. Pre-grounders were not used at all in the English data in this situation.



*Figure 10.* Average number of external mitigators used with query preparatory requests

In the more non-standard notes and lift situations, on the other hand, the levels of mitigation employed are rather different to those in the standard situation described here, and indeed also rather different to those higher levels of syntactic mitigation recorded in the Irish English data above. Specifically, it is the English rather than the Irish informants who invest more effort in externally mitigating their requests in these two non-standard notes and lift situations. Consequently, they are more – not less – indirect in their requesting behaviour than the Irish informants on this level. It was found, namely, that in the lift situation the English informants used an average of 2.5 external mitigators, while the Irish only used two mitigators on average – a statistically significant difference ( $p=0.014$ ) (cf. Figure 10). In addition, the analysis of the types of external mitigators used (cf. Table 6) shows the same pattern of a more highly direct Irish English request in the more non-standard situations. Grounders are used by both the Irish and English informants to a large extent in both non-standard situations (Notes: IrE: 100% [n=23], EngE: 100% [n=19]; Lift: IrE: 80.8% [n=21], EngE: 88.9%

[n=24]). There are no differences to be found in either situation in these levels of use by the two speech communities. Interestingly, however, pre-grounders are preferred over post-grounders in the English data in both situations to a statistically significant extent (lift:  $p=0.026$ , notes:  $p=0.030$ ). Pre-grounders, by acting to explain the reason for a particular request before realising the head act itself, are more strongly mitigating. Consequently, the Irish requests are more strongly direct in this aspect than the English requests.

The same higher degree of indirectness recorded in the use of pre-grounders rather than post-grounders in the English English data is seen in the use of disarmers in the most non-standard lift situation (cf. Table 6). Disarmers are highly mitigating, as seen by their absence in both cultures in the police situation, and also in their absence in the notes situation, a situation less non-standard than the lift situation. Notably, the disarmer is used by 22.2% of the English informants ( $n=6$ ) in the lift situation, but not at all by the Irish informants (statistically significant difference,  $p=0.011$ ). This finding underlines the higher level of investment in external mitigation in the English English data. Against this background, it is all the more interesting that the head acts employed in this situation were more direct in the English data on the level of internal modification (cf. 4.2.1).

## **5. Discussion: Implications for variational pragmatics**

The present analysis shows Irish English and English English requests to be remarkably similar on the level of the strategy chosen. In both the standard and non-standard situations analysed, the query preparatory strategy was the preferred strategy, although situational differences were found, with levels of conventional indirectness higher in the more non-standard notes and lift situations and lower in the most standard police situation – in line with previous research (cf. Blum-Kulka and House 1989; House 1989). Despite such broad similarities on the level of the strategy, differences were found to exist between English English and Irish English on the level of internal and external modification. These are summarised in the following and also in Tables 7, 8 and 9 below.

The standard police situation revealed a similar choice of strategies and of internal modification. The Irish informants, however, invested more in external mitigation, making their standard requests more highly indirect (cf. Table 7). In the non-standard situations analysed, on the other hand, the Irish

English head act requests are characterised by a higher level of internal mitigation than the English English head acts. The higher level of mitigation is seen in a significantly higher use of syntactic downgrading in the notes situation and in a significantly larger number of syntactic mitigators employed in the most non-standard lift situation. In addition, the use of relatively more complex syntactic downgraders is recorded in both situations (cf. Table 8). However, the same English English informants who were comparatively more direct in the use of internal mitigation in their head act requests were found to use a higher degree of external mitigation in these same non-standard situations relative to the Irish informants. This was seen in the larger number of external mitigators used in the most non-standard lift situation and in the more extensive use of more highly mitigating pre-grounders in both of the more non-standard situations. In addition, disarmers, mitigators with a high mitigating force which serves to weaken or invalidate any possible arguments which the hearer might introduce in order to refuse the request, were used in the lift situation in the English data only.

Table 7. Overview of the features of standard query preparatory requests in English English and Irish English

	EngE	IrE
Number of external mitigators		Higher

Table 8. Overview of the features of non-standard query preparatory requests in English English and Irish English

	EngE	IrE
Use of syntactic downgrading/ Number of syntactic downgraders employed		Higher
Conditionals (simple SDn)	Higher (lift)	
Aspect & tense (complex SDn)		Higher
Number of external mitigators	Higher (lift)	
Disarmers	Higher (lift)	
Pre-grounders (more highly mitigating)	Higher	
Post-grounders (less highly mitigating)		Higher

In summary then, the Irish English requests were more indirect than the English English requests in the standard situation and also in the requestive head act in the non-standard situations. However, given the higher degree of external modification found to characterise the English English requests, it

cannot simply be claimed that Irish English is more indirect than English English.

*Table 9.* Level of investment in politeness in English English and Irish English non-standard query preparatory requests

	<b>EngE</b>	<b>IrE</b>
Internal mitigation		Higher
External mitigation	Higher	

The current study on language use in Irish English and English English adds to the existing research in variational pragmatics. On a general level, the similar choice and distribution of request strategies in Irish English and English English standard and non-standard requests confirms previous research in variational pragmatics which suggests that, in contrast to inter-lingual variation, intra-lingual variation in the choice and distribution of strategy does not usually appear to occur on such a general level of description in realisations of requests (cf. 2.2).

In addition, in line with previous research in variational pragmatics, the choice of modifiers was broadly similar in both cultures. Grounders were, for instance, clearly the preferred external modifiers in both cultures. The differences found in the levels of internal and external modification employed by both cultures in the standard and non-standard situations were also in line with Barron's (2005a) finding that macro-social variation may be recorded in the levels of use of internal and external modification in intra-lingual analyses. However, a surprising finding in the light of previous research in VP was that the more highly mitigating internal modification used in the Irish English data was not accompanied by a more highly mitigating use of external mitigation, but rather by the use of less highly mitigating external mitigation relative to the English English data. This is an aspect which deserves further research.

The formal level of analysis was only skimmed in the present study. On this level, and also in line with previous findings in VP, minor differences were found. Specifically, lexical differences were found to exist in the realisation of the query preparatory head act strategy, with a larger variety of realizations characterising the Irish English data. It was shown that such differences could potentially affect the speaker/ hearer-perspective of the head act strategy. However, such differences, while they occurred, and while they had the potential to cause meaningful differences on the pragmatic level, were not statistically significant. In addition, it was found that in Irish

English, yes-no questions embedded in an indirect question may be realised using two patterns. They may, as in Standard English, be introduced by *whether* or *if* with the verb-subject question order undone, as, for instance, where the direct yes-no question *could you help me?* is transformed into *I was wondering, if you could help me?* Alternatively, however, *whether* or *if* may simply be omitted and the verb-subject question order left untouched. That is, the same utterance would read *I was wondering could you help me?* in Irish English. This aspect of subordination has also been discussed by Asián and McCullough (1998: 49). In the present data, the structure *I was wondering could you ...* was not the usual case in Irish English. However, it was a frequent structure in the Irish English data and was not recorded in the English English data. An interesting point in this regard, and one suggested by Juliane House (personal communication), is that the omission of *if* or *whether* may cause a pause to be inserted before the request proper, i.e. before *could you help me?* in *I was wondering could you help me?* If so, this feature may also function to increase the indirectness of the request. On the other hand, the absence of a pause may well indicate the presence of a new IrE argument structure for *wonder* (cf. the brief discussion above on the question as to whether we have one or two argument structures here). Unfortunately, the present data do not give any information about such issues. However, these no doubt represent intriguing questions for further research.

Finally, the question might be posed as to how the differences established in the present data between requests in Irish English and English English may be explained. One possible explanation might be said to relate to different sociopragmatic assessments of the situational constellations of the three situations investigated, in line, for instance with research by Blum-Kulka and House (1989) who found assessments of a variety of situational factors to differ across culture (cf. also Barron 2005b). This is indeed a possibility and one which necessitates further research using, for instance, assessment questionnaires designed to yield such data. In the present study, it is notable, for instance, that, as mentioned above, disarmers are employed in the lift situation in the English data alone. In other words, utterances such as *I know this is very rude to ask, but ...*, are found in the English data in this situation but not in the Irish data. The situation would, therefore, appear to be highly face-threatening for the English. However, on the other hand, it is all the more noteworthy that the head acts employed even in this situation were more direct in the EngE data on the level of internal modification than those in the IrE data. In other words, the general trend towards a lower level of

internal modification in the English data relative to the Irish data appears rather stable irrespective of possible situational differences.

A further possible, and indeed, more likely explanation for the present results are possible differences in cultural values. This issue is discussed in detail in a further paper (Barron forthcoming) where extensive reference is made to previous findings on language use in Irish English and also to the findings of the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research project, an empirically-based, interdisciplinary project designed to examine culture and leadership in 61 nations, including Ireland and England, on the basis of nine dimensions of culture (cf. House et al. 2002; Javidan & House 2002; Martin, Donnelly-Cox, and Keating 1999). In brief, it is suggested in this paper that the strong tendency towards conventional indirectness in both the EngE and IreE request data points to a high level of autonomy in the Irish and English cultures, a characteristic which necessitates attention to the negative face of the hearer. On the other hand, however, the higher level of internal mitigation in the Irish non-standard situations and the higher levels of external mitigation in the standard situations appear to be in line with a slightly lower level of autonomy and a higher level of institutional (societal) collectivism and also family collectivism found in the GLOBE project to characterise Irish culture relative to English culture, particularly since communication patterns characteristic of collectivist cultures have been found to be generally more indirect due to a greater desire to save face relative to individualist cultures which are more concerned with self expression (cf. Gelfand et al. 2004: 452).<sup>22</sup> On a similar note, collectivist cultures have been found to be generally high context cultures (cf. Hofstede 1994; Triandis 1994). This would imply that Ireland is a high context culture (cf. also Scharf and Mac Mathúna 1998: 161), and as such that implicit knowledge plays an important role in communication in Hall's (1976) terms. In addition, these findings seem to tally with the lower level of assertiveness, i.e. "the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in social relationships" (cf. House et al. 2002: 5–6), which the GLOBE project also found to characterise Ireland relative to England (cf. also Kallen's 2005a concept of "silence"). In other words, Irish people are not particularly dominant in interpersonal relationships, tending not to deal with issues head-on. As in the case of collectivism, a low degree of assertiveness is also reminiscent of a high context culture (cf. Den Hartog 2004: 403–404; Keating and Martin 2007). Overall then, the findings of the present study would seem to be explained by slightly lower levels of autonomy, a higher level of collectivism



and a lower degree of assertiveness characteristic of the Irish people relative to speakers of English English. Indeed, this finding that Irish English is characterised by a higher level of indirectness also supports previous studies of language use in Ireland (cf., e.g., Farr and O’Keeffe 2002; Kallen 2005b, cf. Barron forthcoming for more details).

On the other hand, however, the analysis of the non-standard situations clearly reveals that it cannot be simply stated generally that Irish English is more indirect than English English since the analysis of the non-standard situations revealed that English informants prefer to invest in external rather than in internal modification while the Irish informants show a preference for internal modification. Rather, an assessment of the relative directness/indirectness of the externally and internally modified requests elicited would be necessary before such statements could be made. The analysis, thus, underlines the necessity of investigating language use at the level of the speech act rather than at the level of the linguistic form, and also cautions against generalised comparative statements of language use across cultures.

## **6. Variational pragmatics in Inner and Expanding Circle classrooms**

Even at this early point in VP research, it is clear that the findings of this study, of those studies of intra-lingual regional pragmatic variation discussed above, and also previous research on the relationship of language use conventions and other macro-social variables, indicate that pragmatic variation within language is not limited to situational and contextual variables. In addition, based on present and – let us be optimistic – future variational pragmatic research, increasingly more will be known about the systematic nature of intra-lingual variation. The question posed here is whether such findings on the pragmatic level should be addressed in classrooms in the Inner and the Expanding Circle (cf. also Barron 2006). Let us turn first to the Inner Circle.

Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006: 100) note that misunderstandings may arise due to pragmatic differences between groups who are close on a linguistic level. They write: “[c]ertainly, there are many shared language-use conventions across varieties of American English, but there are also important differences among groups that can lead to significant misunderstandings across regional and social dialects” (2006: 100). Indeed, it would seem that differences due to differing conventions of language use are all the more difficult to understand as being language-related when groups are linguisti-

cally-close. Consequently, it would appear that an increased awareness of differences in the conventions of language use has the potential to decrease potential misunderstandings between cultures sharing a single language and indeed between socially-based sub-groups within such cultures. This is not to suggest that Inner Circle speakers should strive for an in-depth competence in all possible varieties of English. Indeed, as Bardovi-Harlig et al. (1991: 5), writing on second language pragmatics accurately note: “It is impossible to prepare students for every context, or even all of the most common situations they will face in natural language settings”. That is, it is not possible to teach all the pragmatic conventions of one variety. Hence, it is all the more true that teaching students the pragmatic conventions of several varieties represents an unrealistic goal – for teachers, learners, and for researchers alike. It is, thus, an awareness of pragmatic issues which is to be striven for. In other words, it is recommended that a variational perspective be taken in the Inner Circle classroom context to promote an awareness of variation in the conventions of language use.

Turning to English in the Expanding Circle, one might question whether a variational perspective is not perhaps superfluous given firstly the overriding focus on British English and American English in the foreign language classroom and secondly given that most learners actually communicate with other non-native speakers in their use of English (cf. House 2002, 2003). These are indeed factors which have to be recognised and considered. However, despite these realities, it is suggested that a variational perspective can only benefit the foreign language classroom (cf. also Barron 2005a). Specifically, it is suggested that a variational perspective be taken in the classroom context to promote an awareness of the fact that variation exists in pragmatic conventions. One particular L2 model of language use may well be chosen for the classroom. However, learners can be made aware that the chosen variety is only one possibility and that macro-social factors will influence language use conventions. In this way, learners can be equipped with a sensitivity towards variation. They can be taught to assume an emic perspective and learn not to judge others’ language use using their own conventions. Indeed, given the well established fact that pragmatic failure is a prominent feature of intercultural communication, developing an awareness of different conventions of language use and a strategic competence to solve communication difficulties seems to be the only solution worthy of suggestion. Equipping learners with a recognition that variation exists within one language furnishes them with an appreciation of, an expectation of and an acceptance for differences in language use norms within cultures.

The students in classrooms in both the Inner and Expanding Circles can be made aware that the regional variety of English which they have acquired or learnt is only one possibility and that language use conventions will vary across the Englishes. In this way, they can be equipped with a sensitivity towards variation. One possible method of developing such a sensitivity is to transform learners into researchers and to ask them to research the pragmatic conventions which apply in different intra-lingual speech communities. This may be done by setting learners to collect intra-lingual data themselves. Inner Circle students might, for instance, be asked to collect data, whether naturally-occurring or elicited, in their own culture and in a neighbouring intra-lingual variety. Learners in the Expanding Circle, on the other hand, might be asked to collect data in two intra-lingual L2 varieties or alternatively in two intra-lingual varieties of their own language. It is suggested that the parameters of intra-lingual variation highlighted above may be used as a general guideline for such – and other – classroom tasks. Data gathered could be analysed for the type and frequencies of the strategies used or indeed the external or internal modification employed. Where the collection of L2 field notes or elicited data are not a practical possibility, recourse can be to film, television, radio, books or plays which represent spoken data in written form or indeed to written genres which may be more easily accessible.<sup>23</sup> Kachru and Nelson (1996: 97), for instance, give some examples of “hands-on experience” exercises focusing on written genres which transform learners into researchers, requiring them to examine variation in discourse patterns across region. They suggest tasks, such as the identification and discussion of conversational discourse markers in fiction or the comparison of obituary notices in American, British, and Outer Circle newspapers, and indeed, exercises of a similar nature could be given to learners based on a range of parallel texts. In addition, a further option in the present internet-era is the use of on-line speech corpora. Indeed, the International Corpus of English (ICE), an electronic corpus consisting of several comparably-structured components of intra-lingual regional varieties of English, is an excellent resource.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Limerick Corpus of Irish English (LCIE), a corpus which follows the design of the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English (CANCODE) (cf. Carter 1998), is also under construction. When it is finished, cross-varietal analyses using both the LCIE and the CANCODE will also be possible (cf., e.g., O’Keeffe and Adolphs forthcoming for an example).

To conclude, therefore, let us not blinker students into viewing language use as homogeneous but rather furnish them with an appreciation of, an

expectation of and an acceptance for differences in language use norms within cultures. In so doing we can extend their perspective to appreciate the many levels of pragmatic variation in both linguistically-close and linguistically-distant cultures.

## Appendix

### 1. IN THE STREET

Margaret is driving into town when she notices a house on fire in front of her. She pulls into the side and parks and is walking towards the house when a policeman comes up to her.

*Policeman:* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 We're expecting an ambulance to arrive any minute.  
*Margaret:* Sure, I'll move it straight away.

### 2. AT THE UNIVERSITY

Ann missed a class the day before and would like to borrow Jane's notes.

*Ann:* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
*Jane:* Sure, but let me have them back before the class next week.

### 3. AT A UNION MEETING

The meeting is over. Jack's bus has just left and the next one is not due for an hour. Jack knows that the couple next to him (who he knows by sight only) live in the same street as he does and that they have come by car.

*Jack:* \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
*Woman:* I'm sorry, but we're not going home straight away.

**Notes**

1. This categorisation of World Englishes into an Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle is taken from Kachru's (1985: 12) model. It reflects differences in the type of spread, the pattern of acquisition and also the function allocated to English in different cultures. Varieties in the Inner Circle are first language varieties, those in the Outer Circle second language varieties and those in the Expanding Circle foreign language varieties. This model, although very influential, is, however, not without criticism (cf. Bauer 2002: 22–25; Jenkins 2003: 17–18).
2. Not all pluricentric languages were differentiated regionally. Only German German data, for instance, were gathered. Muhr (1994), however, later collected counterpart Austrian German data.
3. Situational variability is a dimension of variability that has been firmly instituted in variational sociolinguistics since Labov (1972). The investigation of situational pragmatic variation has adopted concepts from researchers, such as Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). It has focused on the effect of social distance, social dominance and degree of imposition on language use conventions (cf., e.g., Blum-Kulka and House 1989; Kasper 1989).
4. Milroy and Milroy (1993) and Trudgill and Chambers (1991) focus, for instance, on the syntax of varieties of English.
5. Bauer (2002) also mentions variation in spelling and pronunciation.
6. Reference is also made very briefly to the level of language use in both Jenkins (2003) and Melchers and Shaw (2003). However, the pragmatic level is not included in their overviews of the various varieties of English.
7. The DCT was the first type of production questionnaire employed. In the meantime, however, several variations on it have been developed (cf. Kasper 2000 for an overview).
8. That this is the case was shown by Beebe and Cummings (1996) in a study which tested the validity of the production questionnaire. These researchers compared refusals gathered using telephone conversations and using a production questionnaire (a dialogue construction questionnaire), and confirmed that the productions elicited using the questionnaire accurately reflected the content expressed in real-life situations. This finding has also been reported by Margalef-Boada (1993: 155) who compared open role-play data with production questionnaire data. Similarly, Bodman and Eisenstein (1988) and Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) found that natural observation, written questionnaires, oral questionnaires and open role-plays revealed similar semantic strategies.
9. Indeed, even when a rather extensive situational description is given, the situation described does not necessarily reflect the complexity and ambiguity of natural data (cf. Billmyer and Varghese 2000: 545).

10. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1992), in their research into differences between rejections elicited using production questionnaires and naturally-occurring data gathered within the institutional context of academic advisory sessions, found evidence, for example, that respondents tend to employ more direct strategies in questionnaires. They explain this with reference to the lack of interaction in the DCT (cf. also Rintell and Mitchell 1989: 271 on this point).
11. I would like to thank Jolie Taublieb and Anne Tully for help in the data collection process.
12. Irish English is used here to refer to Southern Irish English. The origins of the English spoken in the North of Ireland, including parts of the Republic of Ireland, such as Donegal, are rather different. While also influenced by the English of England (although not very importantly), the Northern variety also bears traces of Ulster-Scots and Mid-Ulster English (cf. Adams 1977: 56–57; Trudgill and Hannah 2002: 99).
13. The CCSARP coding scheme is not without criticism. Van Mulken (1996) has, for instance, criticised the differentiation made between mitigation and indirectness and Hassall (1997: 190–191) takes issue with the criteria of selection for internal modifiers. Nonetheless, it is this coding scheme which has proven most popular in analysing requests to date, having been employed in a number of studies. As such, it facilitates the comparison of findings with previous research outcomes.
14. It should be noted that Table 3 focuses on those syntactic downgraders used most frequently in the data given. It does not, however, include, all instances of syntactic downgraders employed. Hence, the figures do not necessarily add up to 100%.
15. Other lexical and phrasal downgraders include understaters, hedges and cajolers, appealers. However, these were not used in the present data.
16. That *please* functions as a downgrader only in standard situations is explained in terms of the dual function of *please*, i.e. *please* can act as an illocutionary force indicating device and as a transparent mitigator (cf. Sadock 1974). According to findings by House (1989), the illocutionary indicating function of *please* is in harmony with the formal, clearly defined context characteristic of standard situations. It does not, thus, “drown” the downtoning qualities of the adverb whether it is used with a query preparatory strategy or with an imperative. Consequently, the adverb *please* acts as a lexical and phrasal downgrader when it is used in standard situations. On the other hand, when *please* is employed in non-standard request situations, such as in the lift situation in the present data, its illocutionary force indicating powers come to the fore, causing an increase in the directness of query preparatory head act strategies which tend to occur in such situations (cf. House 1989: 109). This happens because the query preparatory strategy is itself pragmatically somewhat ambiguous. The effect is to curtail any scope for negotiation

previously afforded. The utterance moves nearer the status of an imperative. House (1989: 113) argues, based on her findings, that the utterance, thus, becomes "... inappropriate" because direct request strategies do not usually occur in non-standard situations. In the present data, direct strategies were not a feature of the most non-standard situation, the lift situation, in either dataset (cf. Figure 1). Similarly, in the Irish data, there were no occurrences of *please* in this same situation. However, *please* does occur in the EngE data in 18.5%, i.e. in 5 of 27, of the lift requests. As noted in endnote 17, such occurrences are analysed as upgraders in Barron (forthcoming).

17. Barron (forthcoming) analyses occurrences of *please* in the non-standard lift situation as upgraders. The English English data are found to be more highly direct on this parameter, the Irish not using *please* at all in this situation. The differences found are statistically significant.
18. *Ye* or *yee* is the form often taken by the second personal plural personal pronoun in spoken Irish English. It corresponds to *you* in Standard English.
19. More than one lexical and phrasal downgrader was used in some replies. The figures in Figure 7 and 8 are, therefore, not calculated as a percentage of the total lexical and phrasal downgraders employed but rather reflect how often an informant who employed a lexical and phrasal downgrader employed a subjectiviser, for instance.
20. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
21. Here the external mitigators are given as a percentage of the overall number of query preparatory strategies employed in the particular situation. Similarly, the use of disarmers and the use of grounders are given as a percentage of the external mitigation employed and the pre-grounders as a percentage of the grounders employed. The use of preparators, imposition minimisers and apologies for imposition are not discussed in the present context due to space limitations. They did not, however, show any noteworthy cross-cultural differences.
22. Institutional collectivism was defined in the GLOBE project as "the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action" (House et al. 2002: 5), and family collectivism as "the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness in their organizations or families" (House et al. 2002: 5; cf. Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts, and Earnshaw 2002: 34, 37).
23. The validity of employing the language of films in teaching pragmatics has been investigated by Rose (2001) in a study contrasting compliments and compliment responses in film and naturally-occurring speech. In this study, validity was found to be higher on a pragmalinguistic than a sociopragmatic level. However, it remains a recommendable resource for purposes of awareness-raising.

24. The International Corpus of English (ICE) has been compiling a corpus of fifteen varieties of English since 1990. Each corpus, similar in structure, consists of one million words of spoken and written English produced in 1989 and after. The East African, Great Britain, Indian, New Zealand, Singapore, Philippine and Hong Kong corpora have already been completed (cf. The International Corpus of English [ICE]).

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