

# Beyond politeness

## A corpus study of Spanish *por favor*

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Here we investigate the use of the politeness marker *por favor* ‘please’ in a corpus of contemporary Spanish dialogues from film scripts and literary dialogues. We argue that *por favor* is in fact only occasionally used as an expression of politeness. Apart from these uses, we distinguish between cases where *por favor* functions as a marker of illocutionary force and other discourse functions, that include the expression of impatience and disapproval. While the formulaic use of *por favor* is mainly limited to routine situations in the public sphere, the other functions are typical of private conversations. We argue that the ancient use of the expression can account for its contemporary non-polite uses.

**Keywords:** please, pragmatics, directive speech acts, requests, dialogues

### 1. Introduction

*Please* and its equivalents in many other languages are social formulae that are felt to be a basic part of everyday politeness (Heine 2023: 220). The sociocultural norm dictates that it is appropriate to say *please* when asking for something. Common idiomatic expressions like *What’s the magic word?* in English and *Las cosas se piden por favor* ‘Things are asked for with a please’ in Spanish invoke this norm of politeness. They are incentives typically used by adults who feel the need to control unruly behavior of children (Mills 2017). Scholars of politeness (notably, Watts 2003) have argued that this normative use of *please* is not a form of polite but rather politic behavior since it is the social context that forces speakers to adopt it.

However, the use of *please* in everyday language is more complex and varies across languages. It goes beyond the formulaic language that complies with social etiquette. In English it is used, for example, to attract someone’s attention or to indicate that you want someone to stop speaking (Sato 2008). Aijmer (2015) dis-

cusses cases in which *please* is used in contexts that are overtly impolite ('Can you fuck off please'). As for Spanish, *por favor* (hereafter PF) can express disagreement or annoyance (Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999). It is this varied use that motivated us to explore the use of Spanish PF.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses how PF is addressed in the literature. In Section 3, we present some formal and functional features discussed in corpus studies of English *please*, which we consider relevant for our study. Section 4 is dedicated to our corpus analysis. In Section 5, we provide a discussion of our findings. Section 6 concludes.

## 2. Studies on *por favor*

Researchers of Spanish pragmatics have analyzed PF from different points of view. Haverkate (1994: 200) defines it as the 'only interjection with a clear politeness profile,' while others (e.g. Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999: 4189) classify PF in the category of hearer-oriented discourse markers, highlighting that it is exclusively used with requests and proposals. Briz (2005) considers PF as one of many formulas of mitigation and argues that in certain situations, for example among friends, utterances with PF might be inappropriate.

In the fields of cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics it has been acknowledged (e.g. Hickey 1991; Díaz Pérez 2003) that Spanish society is more oriented towards positive politeness (*viz.* togetherness, solidarity), while Britain tends to be oriented towards negative politeness (*viz.* deference, non-imposition). The use of PF seems inconsistent with this view, since it is a typical marker of negative politeness (Haverkate 1994; Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999). However, it makes sense if we consider PF a form of formulaic politeness or, in terms of Watts (2003), politic behaviour. We will elaborate further on this in Section 5.

Several non-polite uses of PF have been referred to in the literature: it can convey disagreement, annoyance, irony, sarcasm or an absolute rejection of what the hearer has said or done (e.g. Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999; Márquez Reiter & Placencia 2005). Fuentes Rodríguez (2009) ranks all non-polite uses of PF as intensifiers of an emotion, the counterpart of its mitigating function with directive speech acts. It has been observed that non-polite PF always has a marked prosodic contour (Haverkate 1994; Fuentes Rodríguez 2009).

In this article we aim to provide an account of the contemporary usage and distribution of PF based on corpus evidence. To date, empirical studies on PF are scarce. In her corpus study of spontaneous language, Bernal (2006) found only nine instances of PF, most of them being non-polite uses. This outcome can be attributed to the limitations of the corpus, which contained only conversations

between relatives. As we will see below, our analysis supports Bernal's finding that polite PF is not common in private situations.

### 3. Corpus studies on *please*

Over the last decades there have been a number of corpus studies on English *please*. They have revealed syntactic, pragmatic, prosodic as well contextual restrictions on its use in spoken English.

Corpus studies (e.g. Wichmann 2004; Sato 2008) have demonstrated correlations between the position in the utterance – initial, middle or final – and the meaning of *please*. For example, initial *please* typically expresses the speaker's active involvement (urgency, enthusiasm) and overtly marks the directive force of the utterance. On the other hand, final *please*, which is more common, often expresses politeness as part of socially expected, politic behavior.

With regard to sentence types, *please* can be inserted into declarative, interrogative, imperative as well elliptical sentences. Imperatives and interrogatives are the most common sentence types used with *please*. However, there are differences among the varieties of English. In the British English corpora used by Wichmann (2004) and Aijmer (2015), *please* is most frequently used in interrogatives, with *Can you*-type questions being the most common.

While *please* is syntactically flexible, its use strongly depends on the utterance's illocutionary force (House 1989; Woods 2021). As for Dutch, de Hoop et al. (2016) observed a strong correlation between *alsjeblieft* 'please' and requestive force. While English *please* is commonly used with offers and invitations like *Please have a cookie*, the Dutch translation (*Neem alsjeblieft een koekje*) is normally taken as a request, as if the intended action were in the speaker's instead of the hearer's interest.

In this respect, it should be noted that it is not always clear what is covered by the term *request* and what distinguishes requests from commands and other directive speech acts. Some authors do not differentiate between requests and other directives (e.g. Woods 2021: 123), while others (e.g. Aijmer 2015: 133) seem to equate commands (a speech act) and imperatives (a sentence type). Sato (2008), on the other hand, takes into account notions like demands, commands, and conventionally polite requests. She demonstrates that the distribution of types of directives depends on the position of *please*.

In our corpus study of PF, we avoid speech act labels such as requests and commands, because these are often difficult to distinguish from each other. Instead, we adopt more analytical criteria for distinguishing directives (Mulder 1998: 102–103). Directives can be optional (as in the case of requests) or coercive

(as in the case of orders), and they refer to actions that are in the interest of the speaker (as in the case of requests and orders) or of the hearer (as in the case of offers and recommendations).

Since *please* is ‘essentially interactive [and] largely restricted to spoken language’ (Sato 2008: 1252), a full account must include its sequential environments. Due to its co-occurrence with directives, utterances with *please* are expected to be followed by a verbal or non-verbal action on the part of the hearer. When used in the second parts of a sequential pair, *please* is used in positive responses to an offer or to a request for permission (Wichmann 2004: 1539); the same holds for PF (Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999: 4190).

Relevant aspects of the larger context of *please* include the situation in which the exchange takes place and the social relation between the interlocutors. House (1989), for example, found that *please* is used most often in standard situations like service encounters, in which the rights and obligations of the interlocutors are clear. It should be pointed out that British and American English differ in this respect. While British *please* is used more in routine, low-imposition requests, American *please* occurs in higher-imposition requests. American *please* is often perceived as a marker of power differentiation (Murphy & De Felice 2018). In her corpus study of *please*, Wichmann (2004) captures both the role of the situation and the social relations distinguishing between public versus private situations. She concludes that they affect *please*-utterances in different ways. For example, *please* in medial position occurs exclusively in public speech and exclusively in indirect requests (Wichmann 2004: 1535).

#### 4. A corpus-based study of *por favor*

We collected instances of PF in a corpus of 17 movie screenplays and literary dialogues from 7 novels released between 2002 and 2021, whose plots are situated between the late 20th century and 2021, thus reflecting modern uses of the language. A full list of the texts with references and all annotated corpus data are available in a repository.<sup>1</sup> We limit our study to Peninsular Spanish since the frequency and value of PF across varieties of Spanish differ (cf. Placencia 2008 on requests in Ecuadorian Spanish).

Even though screenplays and novels are written and non-spontaneous registers of communication, they are stylistically close to spoken dialogues, often providing the reader with cues about enunciation and the emotional state of the characters. The main advantage is their versatility: they cover a wide range

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1. <https://do.org/10.34973/hge7-gh81>.

of situations with language users and a variety of social relations and emotions. Our sample includes a variety of genres (from comedy to drama), set in real locations and contexts (service encounters, family life, hospitals), and some based on real historical events.

We compiled a corpus of 265 PF-utterances, retrieved from digitized sources using the search function with the prompt *<por favor>*. Each PF-utterance was analyzed taking into consideration the entire film or literary text to fully understand the situational factors at play.

We excluded 51 items that were indirect speech, that were uttered by characters who were L2 speakers of Spanish, or that were part of fixed expressions such as *pedir por favor* ‘to ask with a please’. A final set of 214 items was considered for our analyses, performed in the statistical software package ‘R’, version 4.0.3 (R Core Team 2020).

For consistency purposes, a second annotator coded 10% of the items. A reliability test shows an inter-rater agreement of 88.92%.

Below, we provide a description of our corpus tokens.

#### 4.1 Sentence type

Items in our corpus appear in the three classic sentence types used for directives (imperative, declarative and interrogative), in elliptical clauses (including semi- and freestanding PF-utterances) and, in few cases, in exclamatives. An overview of the distribution of sentence types can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of sentence types with PF

Sentence type		Proportion (%)
Imperative	99	46.26
Elliptical	79	36.92
Declarative	21	9.81
Interrogative	13	6.07
Exclamative	2	0.93
<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100.00</b>

PF appears most often in imperative sentences (46.3%) across all speech situations (from intimate friends to strangers) and notably in almost a third of all routine exchanges, as in (1) below. The low rates of PF with questions clearly differ from the results of similar studies on English *please*. We will discuss these outcomes in Section 5. An example of a freestanding PF is shown in (2).

- (1) *Dame un vasito de agua, por favor.*  
 ‘Give me a (small) glass of water, please.’ [C.P.172]
- (2) R: *¿Me acompañas?*  
 G: *Tengo que grabar una entrevista.*  
 R: *Por favor.*  
 ‘Do you come with me?’/ ‘I have to interview someone’ / ‘Please.’ [C.PA.178]

In (1), a customer in a bar orders some water with an imperative (*dame* ‘give me’). The use of the diminutive *-ito* minimizes the imposition, as does PF.

In (2) the speaker (R) asks his partner (G) to accompany him to visit his daughter, to which G initially refuses with an excuse (*tengo que...* ‘I have to...’). R utters a freestanding PF in the next turn, seemingly to limit the choices (from optional to necessary compliance) of G, which results in G actually complying with R’s request.

#### 4.2 Position of PF

Table 2 shows an overview of the proportion of PF instances in each position within the utterance. This distribution may indicate that PF is syntactically less flexible than *please* (Wichmann 2004), and that its default position is final.

**Table 2.** Frequency and distribution of PF position

Position		Proportion (%)
Final	121	56.54
Initial	43	20.00
Medial	31	14.49
Freestanding	19	8.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Initial PF is most frequently used in highly emotional situations (threats, romance), with power differences between interlocutors, as well as by speakers calling the attention of the hearer. Final PF appears to be used quite often when speakers wish to reduce the optionality of their directive and is also found in contexts where the speaker has a negative attitude towards the hearer (conveying criticism, reproach). Example (3) shows PF in utterance-initial position in a phone conversation between two lovers. A insists on keeping their affair a secret by avoiding calls, while M is desperate to see and talk to A, a sentiment conveyed by PF in M’s pleading.

- (3) A: *No compliquemos más las cosas, anda. Tengo que dejarte.*  
 M: *Te quiero, Alice. Por favor, llámame de vez en cuando.*  
 A: 'Let's not make things more complicated, ok? I have to hang up now.' / M:  
 'I love you, Alice. Please, call me from time to time.' [C.CS.235]

We found 31 cases of PF in utterance-medial position, all in familiar contexts. This is not in line with Haverkate (1994: 201), who states that PF cannot appear in medial position without a pause. A typical example is (4), where PF functions as a mitigator.

- (4) *Eduardo, ábreme por favor un momento.*  
 Eduardo, open [the door for] me please just a moment. [C.EM.186]

We examined the position of PF in connection to speech acts. While utterance-final is the most common position for PF in direct and conventionally indirect speech acts is utterance-final, PF in implicit directives (hints) usually appears in utterance-initial position. This trend suggests that PF signals that the upcoming message is a hint. In (5), a doctor tries to reduce tension when a relative of a deceased patient becomes aggressive towards him during the funeral. Instead of asking the hearer to lower their voice and stop arguing, the speaker utters:

- (5) *Por favor, éste no es el lugar...*  
 'Please, this is not the place...' [C.PH.259]

### 4.3 Directives

PF appears mostly in directives, as shown in Table 3. Direct speech acts are the most frequent directive realisation, used across all conversational situations. We found fewer conventionally indirect speech acts and hints, mostly restricted to situations with power differences between interlocutors, like work and service encounters. Example (6) shows a phone conversation between an agent (A) and a customer (C). A uses a *Can you*-type question followed by PF during a routine exchange.

- (6) C: *¿Una encuesta...? Qué bien: me encantan las encuestas.*  
 A: *Ah, ¿sí?, pues está de suerte... ¿Me podría decir su nombre, por favor?*  
 C: 'A survey? How nice: I love surveys.' A: 'Ah, really?, then you are in luck...  
 Could you tell me your name, please?' [C.MC.80]

Interestingly, 14.49% of our tokens are not directives (the speaker doesn't ask anything from the hearer nor do they require their compliance). Among these we found six instances of acceptance of an offer and one request for permission. However, consider the next examples:

**Table 3.** Frequency and distribution of directives with PF and types of directives (speech acts). NAs are directives that were not grammatically realized as speech acts (e.g. elliptical sentences)

Directive utterance?	Speech act type		Proportion (%)
No	–	31	14.49
Yes	direct	102	55.73
	conv. indirect	15	8.10
	indirect (hints)	8	4.37
	NA	58	31.69
<b>Total</b>		<b>214</b>	<b>100.00</b>

(7) S: *¿No os habláis?*

A: *¿Yo? ¿Con esa? ¿Por favor!*

S: 'Are you (both) not in speaking terms?' / A: 'Me? With that one? Please!'

[C.MC.80]

(8) V: *¿Tú qué te piensas, que la revolución sexual ya imperaba y existía la píldora? Por favor, el mundo no empezó a la vez que tú. Ha estado muy difícil echar un polvo en España.*

'Do you honestly imagine that the sexual revolution was up and running and the pill already existed? Please, the world did not begin when you did. It was tough to get laid in Spain.'

[C.EM.141]

In (7), A expresses disdain for a neighbour with whom she no longer talks. A then exclaims *¡por favor!*, which expresses indignation at the idea of being cordial to the said neighbour. In (8), an older man is explaining a younger one how different relationships used to be and seems annoyed at the naivety of the young man. PF is uttered in a reproachful, outraged way.

These functions of PF might be related to directives ('please, do not mention that'; 'please, think before you speak'). However, overall they express the speaker's attitude (outrage, indignation, disbelief) about the topic and the interlocutor, as well as disagreement with their beliefs or expectations: in (7) and (8), PF could be replaced with 'No way!' or, more informally, 'Fat chance!'

#### 4.4 Adjacency pairs

PF has been found in the second term of sequential pairs as a direct reaction to the interlocutor's actions or words (only 14.9% of the total). Normally, second parts of adjacency pairs are formed by elliptical utterances, where a vocative



accompanies PF and, in some cases, an imperative. PF in a second part was used to accept offers (as in (9)), although much less frequently than English *please* (Wichmann 2004: 1539). More frequently, PF in a second term is neither an acceptance nor a permission but appears as a reaction of the speaker towards their interlocutor. (10) shows the reaction of a man after a caretaker makes a comment about the man's partner, who is in a coma after an accident. Here PF, which could be translated as 'come off', expresses irritation (as suggested by the script annotations). We will elaborate on these constructions in Section 5.

- (9) C: *¿Quieres que te sea sincero?*  
 L: *Por favor.*  
 C: 'Do you want me to be honest?'/ 'Please' [C.MC.58]
- (10) C: *Esta mujer no está bien.*  
 P: (Protesta, enérgico.) *Benigno. ¡Por favor!*  
 C: *Entiéndeme, (le toca el rostro.) ¡Tiene la piel sequita, la pobre.*  
 C: 'This woman is not well' / P: '(protesting energetically) Benigno. Please!' /  
 C: 'I mean (touching her face.) She has a super dry skin, poor her!' [C.HE.249]

#### 4.5 Speech situation and relation between interlocutors

Over half of our PF tokens occur in familiar situations (53.74% of the total), including exchanges between relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Contexts with clear power differences are present as well: service encounters (19.15%), work- (10.28%), and police-related situations (7.47%). First encounters (5.6%) are also represented. Finally, we have included some (life-) threatening situations (1.4%).

Within directives in familiar situations, PF does not seem to be used as a mitigator (see Examples (3) above and (11) below), whereas it does in directives in non-familiar, formulaic encounters and in situations with power differences (as in (1) and (5)).

#### 4.6 Power and pronouns of address

Power differences and the use of formal pronouns of address (*usted* 'you') in our tokens often appear hand in hand. Especially in these situations, for example in the communication between an employee and a superior, PF conveys politeness. Also when *usted* is used in first encounters, PF functions as a politeness marker. On the other hand, in horizontal relationships (familiar contexts), PF often seems to emphasize the force of the directive, as in (11). From the context it is clear that the speaker is not trying to be polite, but uses PF as a reinforcer.

- (11) *No me lo puedo creer. Te has escapado... No, dímelo. Por favor, dímelo ahora. Dime que te has escapado por la mierda del puto perro.*  
 ‘I can’t believe it. You ran away... No, do say it. Please, say it now. Say that you ran away because of the fucking stupid dog.’ [C.D.219]

## 5. Discussion

Based on the data we have examined, we can characterize PF as interactive in nature, in the sense that it is mainly restricted to and acquires its meaning in social interaction. PF is flexible in its position in the utterance and sequence, and versatile in its functions. We conclude that PF is neither an exclusive politeness marker nor an exclusive directive marker. We can roughly distinguish between three types of PF, according to their pragmatic functions: cases where the marking of politeness predominates, cases where the marking of the directive force of the utterance predominates, and other cases, where related discourse functions are expressed, such as reinforcement and attention seeking. While we can identify these categories fairly clearly on the basis of the annotated criteria, PF often fulfills dual functions: for example, it may express both politeness and a directive force, or it can be both a directive marker and a reinforcer.

As a politeness marker, PF is primarily a hearer-oriented expression: it shows deference to the other. Since directive PF is about the speaker’s attempt to get the hearer to do something, this use can be considered both speaker- and hearer-oriented. The last category includes functions that mainly express the speaker’s attitude and are, thus, more subjective. These three categories can also be distinguished according to their context-dependence. While PF as a politeness marker has a canonical referential meaning, as a reinforcer its meaning is more abstract and context-dependent.

When PF is exclusively used as a marker of politeness, it broadly breaks down into two categories: formulaic and mitigating PF. Example (12) is an instance of formulaic PF in a service encounter, and (13) of mitigating PF, expressed by a superior or authority in a work situation.

- (12) *Su carnet de identidad, por favor.*  
 ‘Your (formal) id card, please.’ [C.MC.73]
- (13) *Entre y cierre, por favor.*  
 ‘Come in (formal) and close (formal) the door, please.’ [C.HE.248]

Formulaic PF is typically accompanied by other social formulae and the formal pronoun of address *usted*. Since the use of formulaic PF is an unmarked, socioculturally determined and ritualistic expression of consideration, it is in fact a form of

politic rather than polite behavior (Watts 2003). PF has often been characterized as a marker of negative politeness (Haverkate 1994; Martín Zorraquino & Portolés 1999), but this hardly is the case in such formulaic uses. Clearer types of deference PF occur in situations of power differences (at work, for example in (13)). Here it is a mitigating device since it softens the coerciveness of a directive speech act. Both formulaic and mitigating PF have a specific position: our data demonstrate that utterance-final PF is strongly correlated with the expression of politeness.

In private situations or social activities that could not be classified as institutional, the use of PF as an expression of politeness is not expected. Here it functions as a plain directive marker or as a combined marker of politeness and directivity. Compared to polite PF, these uses are less tied to the final position, but also occur in initial and medial position.

Regarding the type of directive, PF is exclusively used when the result of the action described in the speech act is in the interest of the speaker, i.e. it does not occur in offers or recommendations. However, it combines with optional as well as coercive directives of different degrees, e.g. requests, commands and prohibitives. In this respect, PF doesn't correspond with English *please*, which is often defined as a requestive marker (Searle 1975:68; Sato 2008:1252).

PF preferably co-occurs with imperatives. This also indicates a difference between Spanish and (British) English, since the interrogative is the most common sentence type in which English *please* occurs (e.g. Wichmann 2004). In our view this difference reflects different usage conventions regarding the realisation of directives in the two languages. Mulder (1998) demonstrated that in Peninsular Spanish the imperative is by far the preferred sentence type for directives, while especially yes-no interrogatives with the modal verbs *querer* 'want' and *poder* 'can' were not very frequent (1998: 261). This is consistent with the data of our current study, where only a small number of tokens of PF were found in interrogatives.

However, the small number of interrogative and declarative sentences does not exclude the possibility that directives with PF function as indirect speech acts. Conventionally indirect speech acts occur both in formulaic ((6) above) as well as familiar contexts, as in (14).

(14) *¿Me dejas solo, por favor? Un minuto.*

'Will you leave me alone, please? Just a minute.'

[C.PA.177]

Our data suggest that in the private sphere PF seldom marks directive speech acts, but operates separately to support a directive issued in an earlier or later stage in the conversational turn. If PF follows a directive, it functions as a reinforcer. In many of these cases, speakers are impatient, outraged or desperate, and PF indicates that they completely disagree with their interlocutor. If PF followed by a pause precedes the directive, it typically functions as an attention getter.

PF also functions as (almost) an utterance on its own. A frequently occurring construction in our data was vocative + PF (for example *Estrella, por favor...*). This pattern can be considered a construction in the sense of Construction Grammar (for example Croft & Cruse 2004: 257 ff.). It has specific properties, both morphosyntactic (a simple vocative, usually a proper name, followed by PF) and phonological (with PF separated prosodically from the vocative, and the accented syllables *por* and *-vor* stressed), that are conventionally associated with specific discourse-functional properties. They are a response to a hearer's prior utterance or action. It is important to distinguish these elliptical utterances from examples like (11) above because the absence of a VP and NP here is not economically motivated but meaningful. This is a case of what Ephratt (2022) calls "verbal silence": with nothing else than an explicit reference to the hearer and the expression PF, this is "a physical and psychological *horror vacui* which demands the filling in of the void" (2022: 267). Since PF retains traces of its association with directive speech acts, the hearer is urged to reconsider their previous utterance or action and to refrain from saying or doing such things in the future.

The fact that PF is frequently used for coercive directives like urging and begging can be accounted for, we suggest, by the history of the expression. While *please* in languages like English, Dutch, French and Catalan originates in a conditional construction (*if you please* or *if it pleases you*), the origin of PF is less evident. It was a scarcely used construction until it exhibited a sudden increase around 1950 (Beinhauer 1958: 103; Lorenzo 1966: 73).<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo (1966) states that the Spanish dubbing of English films fueled the boom of PF, since it required the use of an equally short equivalent of *please* that also started with a bilabial. While we cannot confirm this specific argument, it seems true that "communicative practices imported via audio-visual media from cultures with a negative politeness orientation are spreading into the Spanish language/culture" (Lorenzo-Dus 2001: 122). According to Hickey (1991), *please* is an example of this: "For the ease of translation the general practice is to retain in the Spanish version expressions such as (...) *please* in contexts where most Spaniards would not use them" (1991: 4). A full account of the grammaticalisation pathway of PF is beyond the scope of this paper, but note that coercive PF was attested long before it was introduced as a politeness marker. Until the mid-20th century the compositional meaning of *por favor* was more prominent, with *por* as a preposition of means and *favor* meaning, according to the 19th century editions of the Spanish dictionary of

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2. This is corroborated by Google's Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), an online tool that visualizes usage frequency in Spanish books over time. Data from the diachronic corpus of the Real Academia (CORDE) demonstrate the same pattern.

the Real Academia, ‘mercy’ or ‘compassion.’ In (15), a person in a noisy café strains his voice to be heard. He bangs on the table:

- (15) *Señores... óiganme, por favor... En nombre de la patria, de la familia, del individuo, ¡ah!, les ruego que me oigan, porque si no me oyen reviento, como hay Dios...*

‘Gentlemen... listen to me, please... In the name of the fatherland, of the family, of the individual, aw, I beg you to hear me, because if you do not hear me I will burst, as there is God...’ (Pérez Galdós, *Bodas reales*, CORDE, 1900)

In novels and drama from the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century common expressions with *favor* used to issue a polite request are imperative structures like *Hágame el favor de...* (lit., ‘Do [formal] me the favor of...’) or interrogative structures like *¿Me haces el favor de...?* (lit., ‘Do you [informal] do me the favor of...?’). In these constructions the action the request refers to is expressed by an infinitive often in combination with a benefactive complement *me* ‘me.’<sup>3</sup>

While *please* is diachronically rooted in negative politeness – by saying *if you please* the speaker defers to the hearer’s wish (cf. Leech 2014: 75) – PF in its origin rather expresses persistence. We believe that the non-polite contemporary uses grew from these older examples. In the mid-20th century, negative politeness became the prominent meaning of PF. The folk notion that PF is a cornerstone of deference is corroborated by the shift in meaning of the expression *pedir por favor*: in today’s Spanish it means ‘to ask for politely’, having ousted the now obsolete meaning ‘to ask for pleadingly’, ‘to beg’.

## 6. Conclusion

Previous studies of *por favor* focused on its function as a politeness marker. We have widened the scope by analyzing its actual use in contemporary Spanish dialogues and considering different aspects of the cotext and context. We found that *por favor* is structurally flexible and functionally versatile. Its basic meaning as an expression of politeness towards the hearer is limited to specific situations in the public sphere, where it cannot generally be considered polite since it is socioculturally determined and ritualistic.

Other meanings of *por favor* are more frequent and go beyond politeness, from signaling the directive force of the utterance to more speaker-oriented functions such as attention seeking and reinforcement. Overall, many instances of *por favor* co-occur with coercive directives (urge, beg, supplicate) and express nega-

3. See Fedriani (2019) for a discussion on the Italian cognate *per favore*.

tive emotional states: speakers using *por favor* are impatient, desperate, outraged, or in danger.

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